

RIM GRASSLANDS GUIDANCE



JANUARY 2026

INTRODUCTION

This guidance document outlines the enrollment criteria and conditions for landowner applications and sign-up for the Grasslands program on eligible lands. This guidance should be considered additive to existing RIM policy and procedure.

PROGRAM MANAGER

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FUNDING SOURCE AND AVAILABILITY (AS OF JANUARY 2026)

Outdoor Heritage Fund - **\$2.2 million is available**

PROGRAM PURPOSE

The goal of this program is to protect moderate quality remnant prairie or buffer remnant prairie within wildlife habitat complexes not covered by other conservation programs. This program aims to address the potential loss of grassland habitats from conversion to cropland and accelerate grassland protection efforts, focusing on landscapes identified in the [Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan](#). Each site is evaluated on its benefits to the surrounding landscape, ability to build upon existing corridors and complexes, and site-specific features that highlight the benefits for permanent protection, habitat, and associated environmental factors.

STATUTE REQUIREMENTS/PROGRAM POLICY

1. Easements will be acquired via the RIM Reserve Program (Minnesota Statute (MS) §[103F.501-103F.531](#)).
2. Eligible land must have been owned by the landowner, or a parent or other blood relative of the landowner, for at least one year before the date of application.
3. An eligible landowner is an individual or entity that is not prohibited from owning agricultural land under MS §[500.24](#) and either owns eligible land or is purchasing eligible land under a contract for deed. Farm corporations need to be certified (or exempt) by the [Minnesota Department of Agriculture](#) (MDA).

4. Additional RIM Reserve program general eligibility criteria are detailed within the *RIM Reserve Eligibility* and *Landowner Eligibility Types* sections of the [RIM Handbook](#).
5. For the purpose of this program, the definition of “remnant prairie” is taken from the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan.
6. RIM Grasslands is only available in the Prairie and Forest/Prairie Transition Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (LSOHC) Ecological Sections of Minnesota. A shapefile containing the boundaries of these sections can be found on the [Minnesota Geospatial Commons website](#).
7. Per MS §[103F.511](#), “lands with crop history” means land that has produced horticultural, row, or close-grown crops; or land that has been enrolled at a cropland rate in a federal or state conservation program for at least two of the five years preceding an application. If land is enrolled in any federal or state conservation program and is potentially eligible for the RIM cropland rate, SWCD staff should consult with BWSR before discussing payment rates with landowners.
8. A parcel **must** be compliant with MS §[103F.48](#) (Minnesota Buffer Law) to be eligible for a RIM easement.
 - a. Areas adjacent to public ditches (16.5 feet) subject to the Minnesota Buffer Law **must** be excluded from the easement and are not eligible to receive payment. Required buffers adjacent to other public waters are eligible for enrollment and payment.
9. Easement must be perpetual in length.
10. Food plots **may** be allowed on the **cropland** acres of easements enrolled, depending on location, and must be approved by BWSR prior to installation. Food plots **are not** allowed on remnant prairie acres. The use of insecticides is not allowed on food plots. [RIM Wildlife Food Plots Guidelines](#) must be followed.

SIGN-UP CRITERIA SUMMARY

1. Applications will be accepted continuously and reviewed for funding within the month following submission. SWCDs should work with Program Manager(s) before submittal to ensure the application will be considered for the program.
2. A minimum scoring threshold may be set based on applications received. BWSR will provide additional guidance on scoring thresholds as needed.
3. Applications must contain remnant prairie unless the application is providing a buffer of a permanently protected remnant prairie. In addition to remnant prairie, up to 20% cropland is allowed, unless waiver requirements are met. BWSR may deny waiver requests.
 - a. Whenever feasible, applications containing remnant prairie where the landowner also controls any immediately adjacent cropland are encouraged to include a minimum width 30-foot cropland buffer. The cropland buffer may be greater than 30-feet but cannot exceed 20% of the total remnant prairie acres.

While a buffer is not mandatory, Programs Manager(s) may, in limited circumstances, require a buffer based on unique site characteristics. SWCDs should work with the Program Manager(s) before application submittal to determine if a buffer may be required.
 - b. Applications that do not contain remnant prairie may be submitted if the resulting restored cropland will buffer high- to moderate-quality remnant prairie that is permanently protected. Buffers must be a minimum of 30-feet wide and may be up to 50-feet wide.

4. The application must be at least 8-acres in size, unless waiver requirements are met. BWSR may deny waiver requests.

Additional details on sign-up criteria are provided on the following pages.

DETERMINING IF LAND IS REMNANT PRAIRIE

For the purpose of this program, the definitions of remnant prairie are taken from the [Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan](#). Types of remnant prairies that may be eligible for RIM Grasslands are described below.

1. Unplowed plant communities originating on site and dominated by grass and sedge species, with a rich mix of broad-leaved herbs and a few low shrub species.
2. Remnant prairies that have been modified by spraying with broad-leaf herbicides and/or over-seeded with cool-season grasses to increase the pasture value for grazing. These activities result in floristically impoverished grasslands dominated by a few species of grass.
3. Remnant prairies that have been heavily over-grazed, destroying native species and resulting in only a few hardy native plant species and non-native invasive plants.
4. “Go back” prairies, which were plowed to grow row crops for only a few years, then allowed to “go back” to perennial pastures. These prairies would have regenerated via the surviving seed bank after several decades, with native plant species surviving. These regenerated prairies are very similar to native prairie that has experienced heavy use and degradation.

Many factors can be used to determine if a site would be classified as remnant prairie.

Historical imagery may be available and should be reviewed as far back as possible. [Minnesota Historical Aerial Photographs Online](#) can be used to review aerial imagery from past decades. Past aerial imagery may also be available locally. These past images should be provided as a part of the application, with the year and location of site indicated on the map.

Landowner discussions can also be valuable tools when determining if a site is a remnant prairie. Any information of note from landowners should be included with the application.

Site characteristics can also be used. The presence of some vegetative species can be a strong indicator of a remnant prairie. Pages 161 to 165 of the [Prairies of Minnesota Landowner Handbook](#) lists the prairie plants rarely found outside remnant native prairie. The presence of rock outcrops or shallow bedrock can also indicate remnant prairie.

Finally, the [Potentially Undisturbed Land layer](#) contains polygons representing undisturbed land over the entire Prairie Coteau and Lac qui Parle landscapes in southwestern Minnesota and can be accessed using GIS. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources’ (DNR) [Native Plant Communities layer](#) and [Native Prairies layer](#) can also provide insight into remnant prairie locations. These details and any other indicators of note should be provided with the application.

EASEMENT PAYMENT RATES

Land type	Payment rate
Remnant prairie	RIM Non-Cropland rate
Cropland	RIM Cropland rate

WAIVERS

Requests for waivers **must** be discussed in advance with the Program Manager and **must** be approved by BWSR prior to submittal of an application. Waivers may be used to address minimum size requirements or cropland in excess of the limits listed above. Waiver requests for additional cropland must clearly demonstrate the benefits and need for enrolling the additional acres.

In the absence of an approved waiver, the enrollment of acres exceeding the limits may be enrolled in the easement but will not receive easement payment (see **Additional Lands Not Eligible For Payment** below).

MINNESOTA BUFFER LAW

Land subject to MS §[103F.48](#) is eligible to receive an easement payment if adjacent to a public water. Land adjacent to a public drainage system should be excluded from the easement to avoid overlap with drainage authority rights-of-way/easements and to avoid future maintenance conflicts/disturbance. If the landowner is using an alternative practice and has a 16.5-foot buffer along a public water, the additional 35-feet is eligible to receive conservation practice payments to bring cover up to specifications.

ADDITIONAL LANDS NOT ELIGIBLE FOR PAYMENT

There may be situations where enrollment of land that is ineligible for easement payment is desirable or necessary. These areas will be accepted as part of the RIM easement but will not be monetarily compensated for. For example, RIM policy states that all Public Waters and Public Waters Wetlands are eligible for enrollment but shall not receive payment.

SUBSURFACE DRAINAGE TILE

Easement lands containing subsurface drainage tile are eligible for easement enrollment and payment in accordance with previously discussed eligibility and enrollment criteria. The installation of new subsurface drainage tile is not allowed. When functioning drainage systems are located within the boundaries of a RIM easement, the easement allows the landowner or other appropriate parties to perform necessary, continued maintenance and repairs to the drainage system. The landowner shall be responsible for the restoration of the Easement Area to the condition described in the Conservation Plan after any alteration or maintenance to an existing drainage system. For additional information, see BWSR's [Conservation Easement Drainage Systems Maintenance Administrative Policy](#) document. Any known locations of existing drainage tile on site **must** be documented as part of the application.

ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS SCORESHEET

Instructions for completing the RIM Grasslands Environmental Scoresheet are listed below.

1. Prairie Plan Priority Areas can be found via the [MN Prairie Plan Core and Corridor shapefile](#). This GIS layer can be used to determine if the site is located within the Prairie Core, Prairie Corridor, or Strategic Habitat Complex. If applicable, a map of the site within the Core, Corridor, or Habitat Complex must be attached to the application.
2. Risk of conversion of remnant: High, Moderate, or Low.
 - a. Sites that are at a **high** risk of conversion are relatively flat, well-drained, and/or easily accessible to farming equipment. These sites may also be subject to urban development pressure. There is minimal or no existing land protection.
 - b. Sites that are at a **moderate** risk of conversion are moderately flat, have mesic soils, and/or could be accessible to farming equipment.

- c. Sites that are at a **low** risk of conversion are steep, poorly drained, rocky, and/or difficult to access with farming equipment. There also may be some level of moderate or high protection already in place, such as a CRP contract or USFWS Wetland easement.

3. Proximity to permanently protected grassland complexes over 160 acres within Prairie Core, Prairie Corridor, or Strategic Habitat Complex. The grassland complexes are contiguous. The grassland complexes are **permanently** protected and at least 160 acres of the complex are within a Prairie Core, Corridor, or Strategic Habitat Complex. The protection can be through federal, state, or local ownership, or through private ownership of perpetual easements. CRP contracts are not considered permanent protection. These grassland complexes do not need to be publically accessible to be considered. A map of this complex must be identified and attached to the application.

4. Site characteristics (all site characteristics that receive credit in the scoresheet must be identified on a map and submitted with the application):

- a. Wetland or potential for wetland restoration: A wetland exists on site, or a wetland has restoration potential and is part of the application.
- b. Adjacent to a public water, including drainage systems that are public waters: The application is immediately adjacent to natural water bodies.
- c. Threatened and Endangered species within ½ mile: Federally or State-listed Threatened or Endangered species are documented within ½ mile of the site.

5. Vegetative diversity: The [RIM Plant Inventory](#) should be submitted as part of the application. The number of native plant species will result in varying points awarded. Sites that are degraded and would require restoration work, invasive species control, or woody removal are penalized. If support is needed, Program Managers can assist in on-site inventory or reach out to partners for assistance.

6. Easement size: The acres in the application results in varying points.

7. Remnant prairie buffer:

- a. The offer contains a minimum average buffer of 30-feet, or a 30-foot buffer is already in place. The buffer can be cropland or non-cropland.
- b. The offer does not contain a buffer.

8. Unique features (optional): List unique features on site that warrant additional consideration for protection but are not recognized elsewhere in the Scoresheet. These may be ecological, geological, archeological, historical, etc. The narrative should clearly state the value of protecting these unique features. This section can be left blank. This section will be scored by Program Manager(s). Any points given are considered additive to the total score. SWCDs should reach out to Program Manager(s) for assistance, if needed.

HAYING AND GRAZING

Light, conservation-focused haying and grazing are encouraged for habitat management purposes. Both can be approved via the standard [RIM Haying and Grazing Agreement](#) process. If needed, SWCDs are encouraged to work with Easement staff or grazing specialists at partner agencies to develop habitat-focused grazing plans.

Lands acquired with money appropriated from the Outdoor Heritage Fund may not be used for emergency haying and grazing in response to federal disaster declarations. Conservation grazing that has been

approved under a RIM Grazing Agreement that is being implemented prior to the emergency declaration may continue.

RIM CONSERVATION PLAN

A conservation plan is required for all RIM easements. For land under an existing CRP contract, no changes in vegetative cover will be required. However, vegetative diversity of the area should be reviewed and increased if necessary and possible.

RIM conservation plans use practice codes that identify the type of practice to be established or that exist within the easement. Practice codes that include restoration (vegetative or hydrologic) have an associated per acre maximum reimbursement.

Only restoration work that is completed after the RIM easement agreement has been fully executed can be reimbursed, therefore seed purchase and restoration work should not be done until the agreement has been executed. Requests for reimbursement can only be made after the easement has been recorded and final legal review has been completed. BWSR will not reimburse for restoration costs incurred if the easement is not recorded and approved. Common RIM practices on easements are listed below along with maximum state reimbursement.

Maximum Reimbursement Amount per Acre by Conservation Practice

Practice Code/Description	Cost-Share Per Acre
RR-2a Native Grasses to be Established	\$450/acre
RR-2PP Pollinator Planting to be Established	\$600/acre
RR-8 Wetland Restoration	\$1200/acre
RR-FP Wildlife Food Plot	\$0

RR-2a (Native Grasses to be Established) should be used when restoring cropland into grassland habitat. See the Seed Mix and Seeding Standards section below. RR-2a should also be used on the existing remnant prairie when additional restoration work is needed at time of enrollment. These activities may include prescribed fire, woody removal, and/or interseeding. When planning these activities on existing remnant prairie, landowners should be advised on best management practices for minimal disturbance to the land. Hand-cutting is strongly preferred and may be required when woody removal is necessary. Large equipment should be brought on site only after all other options have been pursued. When large equipment must be brought on site for restoration purposes, it should be done when soil is frozen to minimize damages. Brush piles for burning should not take place on the remnant, as intense heat can sterilize the soil and permanently damage existing vegetation and promote weed pressure.

RR-3a (Tree and/or Shrub Planting to be Established) is not eligible for cost-share and will not be approved on remnant prairie acres, or immediately adjacent to remnant prairie.

RR-FP (Wildlife Food Plot) *may* be an eligible practice for easements enrolled under this sign-up. Food Plots will not be approved on remnant prairie. A 30-foot buffer is required between Food Plots on restored cropland acres and remnant prairie. See the [RIM Wildlife Food Plot Guidelines](#) document for criteria on planning food plots.

For additional information on conservation plans, refer to the following sections in the [RIM Handbook](#):

- *Conservation Plan Development* for RIM conservation plan development
- *Practice Specifications* for information on practices and eligible costs
- *Conservation Plan Implementation* for installation periods and reimbursement process

SEED MIX AND SEEDING STANDARDS

When converting cropland into grassland habitat, the goal of this program is to use locally-sourced seed from existing remnant prairie, whenever feasible. Seed should be selected that match site conditions (soils, hydrology, precipitation, elevation, drainage, the angle of slopes, sun/shade, and climate). The preference is to use seed harvested from the adjacent remnant prairie that is being protected. If that is infeasible, seed from remnant prairie that originates as close to the project site as possible is preferred, within a maximum distance of 200-miles of the restoration site. Collection sites to the south of projects should be utilized when possible due to climate change concerns. If no remnants are available for harvest, or if the amount of seed available is insufficient, the typical sources for RIM grassland restorations can be utilized.

There may be situations where the vegetative diversity of the remnant could be improved via inter-seeding. When this is applicable and feasible, the preferences for seed sources listed above should be followed.

Additional planning will be needed in scenarios where local harvest is possible. When feasible, SWCD staff will be asked to work closely with Program Managers on how to complete these activities. Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and other partner agencies may be asked to assist in planning.

FORMS AND ITEMS NEEDED TO COMPLETE THE RIM APPLICATION MATERIALS

RIM Grasslands does not use a batching period system to review applications. Applications will be reviewed monthly for accuracy and relevancy to sign-up goals. Because of this, SWCDs must contact the Program Manager(s) before submitting a formal application. Program Managers can assist in verifying the accuracy of remnant prairie, as well as consult with other local, state, and federal partners on any site-related details.

A complete application package containing all the items listed in the document titled [RIM Application Guidance](#), including a GIS shapefile of the proposed easement boundary, should be prepared and submitted. RIM application materials can now be uploaded securely online through SharePoint. If you do not already have a SharePoint account set up with BWSR Easements, email bwsr.rim@state.mn.us.

Program and policy questions can be directed to John Voz (john.voz@state.mn.us) or Sara Reagan (sara.reagan@state.mn.us), and easement processing questions can be directed to Lucy Dahl (lucy.dahl@state.mn.us).