

State and federal funding advances Minnesota peatlands restoration efforts



Restoration work on an 18-acre peatland site in Morrison County finished in fall 2025. The project involved removing invasive cattails, filling several small private ditches, and constructing berms to maintain saturated conditions. The Morrison Soil & Water Conservation District managed the project under an agreement with BWSR and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

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State and federal investments are accelerating efforts to restore and protect a unique and abundant state resource: peatlands.

Minnesota contains nearly 7 million acres of peatlands, more than any other state in the continental U.S. A peatland is a type of carbon-rich wetland dominated by organic soils, known as histosols, or peat or muck soils, built up over time by decaying plant materials in a waterlogged environment.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) is working with local, state, federal and Tribal partners to restore peatlands drained for agricultural purposes, urban development or transportation infrastructure. A [Potentially Restorable Peatlands](#) web-based mapping tool, which can help identify potential restoration areas, was developed to

What are peatlands?

A peatland is a type of carbon-rich wetland dominated by organic soils, known as histosols, or peat or muck soils, built up over time by decaying plant materials in a waterlogged environment. While peatlands cover only 3% of the Earth's land surface, they store up to 30% of the world's soil carbon. Minnesota has nearly 7 million acres of peatlands, the largest peatlands acreage of any state outside of Alaska.

These lands hold some of Minnesota's largest carbon reserves but can emit large quantities of carbon when ditched and drained. Drained peatlands lose significant amounts of carbon as they decompose due to exposure to oxygen and microbial decomposition, but they also provide opportunities to sequester carbon after restoration as peat layers regenerate. Most restoration projects involve blocking ditches and drain tile, and revegetation with appropriate native plants. [Learn more about peatland ecology.](#)

support the work.

BWSR peatland restoration easements

BWSR's approach to restoring peatlands includes two separate but closely related initiatives: restorations completed through conservation easements on private lands via the

Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) program, and restorations completed through agreements with other agencies and organizations.

"The primary goal of this work is to restore peatland hydrology to a continuously saturated and stable condition, so that these ecosystems can begin sequestering carbon again,"

said Suzanne Rhees, BWSR special projects coordinator, who helps manage peatland initiatives for the agency.



Rhees

Eligible sites must contain drained or otherwise altered wetlands that are determined to be restorable. Over 50% of the proposed restorable wetland area must be located on histosol (or peatland) soils. Restoration must aim to re-saturate as much of the impacted peat as possible, and result in stable hydrologic conditions. Projects primarily restoring shallow, deep-marsh, or open-water wetlands with limited fringe areas containing histosols are not eligible.

BWSR accepts RIM applications for peatland restorations continuously. Peatland restoration applications are typically submitted by soil and water conservation districts. Applications can be processed via the RIM Wetlands, Working Lands, and Riparian and Floodplain sub-programs, or other BWSR programs that involve RIM — such as the Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP).

As of January 2026, 13 peatland easements were being processed. Four more restorations were being designed on previously recorded

easements. Projects extend from Freeborn and Steele counties in the south to Todd and Otter Tail counties in central Minnesota, encompassing about 2,000 acres, of which over 600 acres are considered restorable peatlands.

Two pilot project restorations supported by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's [Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program](#) are also underway; these projects establish 10-year agreements with landowners for voluntary wetland restoration.

Partners' related work

The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe staff have created a Tribal Peatland Working Group with participation from several of the 11 federally recognized tribes in Minnesota to improve collective knowledge about peatland restoration practices, research and funding.

The Minnesota DNR is continuing to implement a demonstration project at the Winter Road Lake Peatland Scientific and Natural Area in Lake of the Woods County, identifying ditches that are good candidates for restoration. DNR staff members are also monitoring peatland water levels and sampling upstream mercury concentrations at the Red Lake Wildlife Management Area and Beltrami Island State Forest.

The University of Minnesota is conducting an ongoing research project investigating the impacts of hydrologic restoration of drained peatlands at restored, ditched and natural sites, using stationary flux towers and water sampling; research will continue through 2026. This project is funded by the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF).

The PeatRestore group, a collaborative of Upper Midwest university researchers, The Nature Conservancy, and the USDA's Forest Service is developing protocols for monitoring and adaptive management of peatland restorations.

Funding sources

Both state and federal funding support peatlands restoration efforts in Minnesota.

In 2023, the state Legislature allocated \$9 million in general funds to BWSR to acquire conservation easements for peatland restoration.

Federal funding is available as part of the \$200 million [Climate-Smart Food Systems](#) (CSFS) initiative the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency awarded to the state of Minnesota in 2024 through the federal Climate

Pollution Reduction Grants Program. The CSFS initiative, led by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency in collaboration with other state agencies, local governments, and Tribal Nations, spans a wide range of activities, including investments in cleaner refrigerants, prevention of wasted food and organics management, and climate-friendly agricultural practices.

BWSR and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) have received a total of \$20 million in CSFS dollars to sustain carbon sinks and culturally significant food sources, such as fish and wild rice. Of that amount, BWSR received \$8 million to restore private and local government-held lands. The DNR received \$8 million to restore degraded peatlands on state-managed lands, and Tribal Nations became eligible to access \$4 million for peatland-related initiatives overseen by the DNR.

"Peatlands restoration work in Minnesota is being pursued by a broad coalition of partners at all levels of government, nonprofits and research organizations," Rhees said. "We're excited to see such strong engagement and support to protect this valuable resource."

BWSR staff members write and produce Snapshots, a monthly newsletter highlighting the work of the agency and its partners.