40 Years of RIM: Minnesota's perpetual conservation legacy















Conservation implementation in Minnesota is rarely predictable. Budgets fluctuate, programs and policies shift, and priorities vary with changes in state and local leadership.

In this constantly evolving landscape, the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) conservation easement program offers something extraordinary: permanence.

RIM compensates landowners who retire marginal, flood-prone or environmentally sensitive private land to create permanent conservation easements. Program goals include improving surface water quality, reducing groundwater contamination, curbing erosion, protecting fish and wildlife habitat and

Left to right, top to bottom: *Examples of Minnesota's 8,000-plus Reinvest in Minnesota conservation easements include restorations in the following counties: Kittson, Freeborn , Otter Tail and Carver.* **Photo Credits:** BWSR. **Bottom right:** *A shoreline restoration in Crow Wing County provides recreation for paddlers.* **Photo Credit:** Crow Wing SWCD



A 157-acre MN CREP easement and wetland restoration in Rice County were established in fall 2022 to reduce flooding risks, improve habitat and create a legacy for the landowner. All MN CREP easements include enrollment in RIM. **Photo Credit:** Siri Kubesh, BWSR

enhancing biodiversity. RIM is available to landowners in all 87 Minnesota counties.

For 40 years, RIM has helped Minnesota landowners turn their commitment to land stewardship into a legacy.

"RIM is the largest state-run private lands permanent protection program in the nation," said BWSR Executive Director John Jaschke. "It's one of Minnesota's greatest conservation success stories. At BWSR, we consider it a privilege and a key responsibility to improve and maintain this vital protection program."

Since RIM began in 1986, the state has invested more than $567 million to permanently protect more than 361,300 acres of wildlife habitat via 8,000 plus easements throughout Minnesota.

"Minnesotans have a strong outdoor ethic," said John Voz, BWSR easement programs coordinator, who has spent more than three decades helping landowners enroll in RIM. "Some folks don't want their land to be developed when they're gone — they want to leave a legacy. They want their children and grandchildren to have opportunities to enjoy that land as they did."

CLEAN WATER LAND & LEGACY AMENDMENT

RIM is funded by state sources including the Clean Water Fund and the Outdoor Heritage Fund. Both funds are supported by the Clean Water Land & Legacy Amendment.

ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES TRUST FUND

Created at the directive of Gov. Rudy Perpich to fulfill recommendations made by a citizens' commission on hunting and fishing in Minnesota, RIM began before BWSR officially became a state agency.

A 19-acre enrollment recorded in fall 1986 in Clay County marked RIM's first easement. By the end of that year, BWSR had received more than 841 applications from interested landowners.

"The demand was there, waiting for a solution," said Sharon Doucette, BWSR conservation easement section manager. "The federal CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) wasn't going to do everything we needed it to do. We needed something at the state level."

Funding for RIM is not guaranteed and must be secured each state budget year. Prior to the passage of the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment in 2008, capital investment (bonding) dollars were RIM's primary funding source. Today, RIM is funded by a combination of state sources including the Clean Water Fund, the Outdoor Heritage Fund, the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund and the general fund.

"Legacy funding provided a huge boost for RIM," Doucette said.

About 10 years after the program began, the first RIM subprogram emerged. The RIM Wetland Reserve Protection (RIM-WRP) initiative began in 1996, combining state and federal easement opportunities to give landowners a competitive rate to restore wetlands. The program operated in two phases, the first between 1996 and 2000 and the second between 2007 and 2013.

In 1998, another state-federal partnership launched BWSR's Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP). MN CREP, which continues today, is a voluntary program that permanently protects environmentally sensitive land within 66 targeted counties. Participating landowners enroll in both RIM and the USDA-Farm Service Agency-administered CRP, which combines a 14- to 15-year contract with the permanent RIM easement.

In 2006, RIM was integrated into the existing federal Army Compatible Use Buffer



This prairie in Yellow Medicine County was restored via the RIM Drinking Water subprogram. **Photo Credit:** Sara Reagan, BWSR

(ACUB) program at Camp Ripley, a regional military training facility that spans 53,000 acres in Morrison and Crow Wing counties. ACUB minimizes infringement within a 3-mile radius of Camp Ripley by purchasing development rights through permanent easements. Landowners receive a per-acre sum and retain the right to continue current land-use.

Over the decades, more than a dozen RIM subprograms were created to address specific resource concerns or regional-specific challenges. RIM subprograms focus on areas including wetlands, grasslands, peatlands, grazing, critical shorelands, wild rice shoreland protection and protecting the Mississippi River.

"RIM can be applied very broadly, or targeted to specific issues," Doucette said. "There's a lot of flexibility with RIM."

One example of targeted success can be found in Mower County, where a concerted effort to cluster RIM easements along the Cedar River contributed to the removal in 2022 of a segment of Robert Creek from the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's Impaired Waters List.

"There's not much any of us can do in life to make a permanent impact. It's something we can do to make a forever change."



— James Fett, watershed technician, Mower SWCD

"Our priority is to address the impairments in streams that are tributaries to the Cedar River," said James Fett, watershed technician for Mower Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD). "We have a lot of flooding issues that these shoreline easements can help out with. Anything we can do close to those streams helps dramatically with water quality."

Fett said RIM has been essential to creating new wildlife habitat in Mower County — where approximately 90% of private land is in row crops.

"We really do have a shortage of wildlife habitat here, so it's incredibly important to build those corridors," Fett said.

On a broader regional scale, RIM easements can help local governments meet their watershed goals for water quality and other resource concerns. One example can be found in northern Minnesota, where RIM is helping local partners meet the forest protection goals identified as a priority in local watershed management plans.

Crow Wing County is in the Top 5 counties for enrolled RIM acres in the state, with more than 10,200 acres enrolled.

"We look at the risk of converting forestland for housing, agriculture and other uses, which could increase runoff into waterbodies and eventually tip the scales, so those waterbodies become impaired," said Melissa Barrick, Crow Wing SWCD manager. "We're trying to protect those key forestlands and keep them intact as much as possible to help meet our watershed goals. The primary way we've been able to increase that protection status is through acquisition, through conservation easements."

RIM easements can vary greatly in size: the smallest RIM easements are less than 1 acre, while the largest encompasses 1,700 acres on a single Mahnomen County property.

But the most common reason for signing up remains constant, no matter the acreage.

"We've had a connection to this land for a long time," said Craig Swaggert, a Crow Wing County landowner who with his wife, Tanna Moore, enrolled 98 acres into RIM in winter 2026. "This is a wildlife haven, and we want to keep it that way."

Conservation professionals are equally passionate about RIM and its widespread benefits.

"Working with RIM is my favorite thing to do, it's my favorite job duty," Fett said. "There's not much any of us can do in life to make a permanent impact. It's something we can do to make a forever change."

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