



Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Grassland Conservation Partnership, Phase III

Laws of Minnesota 2018 Final Report

General Information

Date: 08/20/2025

Project Title: Grassland Conservation Partnership, Phase III

Funds Recommended: \$1,468,000

Legislative Citation: ML 2018, Ch. 208, Art. 1, Sec. 2, subd 2(k)

Appropriation Language: \$1,468,000 the second year is to the commissioner of natural resources for an agreement with The Conservation Fund, in cooperation with Minnesota Land Trust, to acquire permanent conservation easements and to restore and enhance high-priority grassland, prairie, and wetland habitats. Of this amount, \$69,000 is to The Conservation Fund and \$1,399,000 is to Minnesota Land Trust. Up to \$72,000 to Minnesota Land Trust is for establishing a monitoring and enforcement fund as approved in the accomplishment plan and subject to Minnesota Statutes, section 97A.056, subdivision 17. Subject to evaluation criteria in Minnesota Rules, part 6136.0900, priority must be given to acquiring lands that are eligible for the native prairie bank under Minnesota Statutes, section 84.96, or lands adjacent to protected native prairie. A list of proposed acquisitions must be provided as part of the required accomplishment plan, and the acquisitions must be consistent with the priorities in Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan.

Manager Information

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Title:

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Location Information

County Location(s): Morrison and Becker.

Eco regions in which work will take place:

Northern Forest

Forest / Prairie Transition

Prairie

Metro / Urban

Southeast Forest

Activity types:

Protect in Easement

Restore

Priority resources addressed by activity:

Wetlands

Prairie

Habitat

Narrative

Summary of Accomplishments

The Grassland Conservation Partnership Phase II grant resulted in the protection via conservation easement of 1,018 acres of ecologically significant habitat and 1.8 miles of shoreline through three working grasslands conservation easement projects. Land protected through conservation easement exceeded the proposed outputs for this grant by 270%. In addition, 54 acres of grassland habitat were restored through the grant.

Process & Methods

The Grasslands Conservation Partnership, Phase III project built upon the success The Conservation Fund (TCF) and Minnesota Land Trust (MLT) achieved during Phases I and II of the program, adding 1,018 acres of protection through conservation easement to the 2,000-acres of important wildlife habitat protected over those first two phases. As with prior phases, this Phase III program used innovative managed grazing and grassland management in combination with conservation easements as important conservation tools to protect grassland habitat in Minnesota. These previous projects were completed in the Prairie Region, and more opportunities exist in the central and southeastern parts of the state, where private grasslands complete connectivity between wildlife complexes.

Science has proven that proper application of haying and grazing techniques can be used to mimic natural processes necessary for healthy natural grassland communities. Our colleagues at The Nature Conservancy and the USFWS have proven these techniques successful in Minnesota over a significant period of time. Working with these partners, local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, DNR, Minnesota State Cattlemen's Association, McKnight Foundation, private agriculture corporations and co-ops, TCF and MLT expanded upon our previous efforts to achieve significant private lands grassland protection.

All conservation easements are held and monitored by MLT. TCF and MLT performed the initial landowner contact, with MLT leading negotiations and ultimately closing on the conservation easements.

Lands targeted for conservation easement protection met the following criteria:

1. Lands with significant existing prairie or grassland habitat.

2. Lands adjacent to or in close proximity to permanently protected land (e.g. WMA, WPA, CREP, TNC preserves, etc.).
3. Lands which helped establish connections to permanently protected land wherever possible and create larger habitat complexes.
4. Lands could include low-production cropland that could be converted back into grasslands, thereby increasing overall grassland habitat.

MLT and TCF used the above criteria to generate a systematic ranking system to vet potential projects and ensure maximum conservation values. We also screened producers with a proven ability to successfully implement best management practices for conservation grazing. Project priorities will be those that provide the greatest conservation benefits at the lowest cost.

How did the program address habitats of significant value for wildlife species of greatest conservation need, threatened or endangered species, and/or list targeted species?

Minnesota's Wildlife Action Plan 2015-2025, which directly addresses Species in Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN), lists conservation grazing as a recommended conservation approach in half of all identified Conservation Focus Areas as a means to protect prairie and wetland habitat degradation due to invasive species. Many grassland and migratory birds rely on varying heights of grassland vegetation for parts of their life cycle; conservation grazing is a recommended tool to achieve ideal habitat conditions for nesting and rearing chicks. Connecting fragmented landscapes is a priority in almost every conservation plan; increasing connectivity within habitat complexes was a goal for this program.

Targeted species for this program flourish with conservation grazing and include grasshopper sparrow, bobolink, eastern meadowlark, marbled godwit, burrowing owl, golden-winged warbler, northern pintail, northern harrier, greater prairie-chicken, sharp-tailed grouse, upland sandpiper, and loggerhead shrike; all are SGCN.

Three conservation easement projects totaling 1,018 acres and protecting 1.8 miles of shoreline were completed over the course of this grant:

1. Hungry Lake (Green) - this 190-acre property is dominated by forested rich peatland interspersed with open grasslands and limited hardwood forest. Much of the property is located within a Site of Moderate Biodiversity Significance ("Silver Leaf Game Refuge") as identified through the Minnesota Biological Survey ("MBS"). The property borders 40 acres of County-administered land, and a 120-acre State Forest management unit.
2. Rum River (American Bison Company) and 3. Rum River (Kremer) - these 552- and 276-acre properties are nestled within a large drumlin field that supports large areas of pastured grasslands and woodlands interspersed with hardwood forest and wet meadows. Tibbets Brook, an important warm-water fishery that feeds the Rum River, crosses the properties. These natural communities are key habitat for SGCN, including bobolink, Blanding's turtle, and American bittern. The two parcels are contiguous and managed as part of a working bison ranch.

MLT also restored native prairie species to 54 acres of oak savanna and prairie on the two adjacent Rum River properties permanently protected through this grant to improve the native grass and forb component of an active ranch to benefit grassland birds.

How did the program use science-based targeting that leveraged or expanded corridors and complexes, reduced fragmentation, or protected areas in the MN County Biological Survey.

The program used existing conservation plans, such as the Minnesota Prairie Plan, Minnesota State Wildlife Action Plan, and local conservation plans (e.g., One Watershed One Plan, and county water plans) to guide and inform our work. In past pilot phases, collaboration with DNR scientists who specialize in grassland game and nongame

species prior to project implementation has been instrumental in ensuring robust and resilient projects within larger complexes. Project staff have worked closely with members of the MN Prairie Plan Local Technical Teams and the MN County Biological Survey to construct restoration and enhancement practices that are complementary to adjacent grassland complexes to ensure longevity of the grassland system as a whole.

The program engaged conservation professionals from USFWS, DNR, Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, SWCDs and The Nature Conservancy to determine sites that complemented their ongoing efforts. In addition, potential projects were vetted through an assessment of Minnesota County Biological Survey data, which informed the evaluation and ranking of such projects. Finally, our scoring methodology prioritized projects that built upon existing investments by the State of Minnesota, federal government agencies, and other conservation partners. As needed, restoration and enhancement of properties protected through conservation easements was pursued.

Connecting fragmented landscapes is listed as a priority in almost every conservation plan. Increasing connectivity within habitat complexes for species that have limited dispersal ability, and among sites for species that require multiple habitats throughout their life history may increase opportunities for those species to adapt to stressors. As noted above, targeted species for this project - grasshopper sparrow, bobolink, eastern meadowlark, marbled godwit, burrowing owl, golden-winged warbler, northern pintail, northern harrier, greater prairie-chicken, sharp-tailed grouse, upland sandpiper, and loggerhead shrike, all of which are SGCN - have been shown to flourish with the use of conservation grazing. This program served to protect existing and restore degraded grassland habitat, thereby reducing fragmentation adjacent to areas of existing public investment - state forest lands and county-administered lands.

Explain Partners, Supporters, & Opposition

By this third phase of the pilot program, conservation grazing had become a welcomed tool for public grassland managers, and private grazers were eager to work with us to protect and restore their grasslands. There was no opposition during the grant.

Exceptional challenges, expectations, failures, opportunities, or unique aspects of program

Cattle and bison producers face ever-increasing pressure from the private real estate market to find enough grassland to stay in operation. The real estate market is driving high prices for development pressure for private estates which were once grasslands. This has led to an unfortunate decrease in grass-fed producers across the state. We were fortunate to work with conservation-minded ranchers to protect their grassland.

The Federal EQIP RCPP funding that TCF listed as leverage was a partnership grant led by National Ducks Unlimited. It was intended to be used in MN by NRCS on these projects. Over the course of the RCPP grant, the funding was shifted early on to the Dakotas and not used specifically on these projects. The multi-state grant was regionally accessible, and the demand and ranking process did not make it easy to be applied to these projects in a linear fashion as TCF planned.

What other dedicated funds may collaborate with or contribute to this program?

N/A

What is the plan to sustain and/or maintain this work after the Outdoor Heritage Funds are expended?

MLT is a nationally accredited land trust with a very successful stewardship program that includes annual property monitoring, effective records management, addressing inquiries and interpretations, tracking changes in ownership, investigating potential violations and defending the easement in case of a true violation. The

conservation easements secured under this program will also require landowners to have robust habitat management plans to guide the ongoing management of the property.

The owner/operators of the Rum River properties are including the restored paddocks in the conservation oriented rotational grazing system developed for the bison ranch. The grazing plan includes numeric targets for grazing intensity and forage quality. The rest/rotation grazing system will provide moderate levels of disturbance that is expected to maintain and foster expansion of native prairie species.

Actions to Maintain Project Outcomes

Year	Source of Funds	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
2022 and in perpetuity	MLT Long-term Stewardship and Enforcement Fund	Annual monitoring for compliance with terms of conservation easements.	Defend easements as necessary.	-
2025 forward	Ranch operations	Rest-rotation grazing	Annual forage monitoring	Adjust grazing schedule

Budget

Grand Totals Across All Partnerships

Item	Requested	AP Amount	Spent	Leverage	Received Leverage	Leverage Source	Original Total	Final Total
Personnel	\$135,000	\$174,600	\$111,500	\$10,000	\$10,000	-, Private	\$145,000	\$121,500
Contracts	\$121,000	\$141,000	\$135,900	\$500,000	-	-, EQIP RCPP Award	\$621,000	\$135,900
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	\$1,043,200	\$935,000	\$932,600	-	-	-	\$1,043,200	\$932,600
Easement Stewardship	\$72,000	\$72,000	\$72,000	-	-	-	\$72,000	\$72,000
Travel	\$14,000	\$9,000	\$1,600	-	-	-	\$14,000	\$1,600
Professional Services	\$54,500	\$100,000	\$97,700	-	-	-	\$54,500	\$97,700
Direct Support Services	\$25,300	\$36,400	\$30,100	-	-	-	\$25,300	\$30,100
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	\$3,000	-	-	-	-	-	\$3,000	-
Supplies/Materials	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$1,468,000	\$1,468,000	\$1,381,400	\$510,000	\$10,000	-	\$1,978,000	\$1,391,400

Partner: MLT

Totals

Item	Requested	AP Amount	Spent	Leverage	Received Leverage	Leverage Source	Original Total	Final Total
Personnel	\$75,000	\$114,600	\$111,300	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$111,300
Contracts	\$121,000	\$141,000	\$135,900	-	-	-	\$121,000	\$135,900
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	\$1,043,200	\$935,000	\$932,600	-	-	-	\$1,043,200	\$932,600
Easement Stewardship	\$72,000	\$72,000	\$72,000	-	-	-	\$72,000	\$72,000
Travel	\$10,000	\$5,000	\$1,600	-	-	-	\$10,000	\$1,600
Professional Services	\$54,500	\$100,000	\$97,700	-	-	-	\$54,500	\$97,700
Direct Support Services	\$20,300	\$31,400	\$30,100	-	-	-	\$20,300	\$30,100
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	\$3,000	-	-	-	-	-	\$3,000	-
Supplies/Materials	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$1,399,000	\$1,399,000	\$1,381,200	-	-	-	\$1,399,000	\$1,381,200

Personnel

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Amount Spent	Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
MLT Restoration Staff	0.02	3.0	\$5,500	-	-	\$5,500
MLT Protection Staff	0.35	3.0	\$105,800	-	-	\$105,800

Partner: TCF

Totals

Item	Requested	AP Amount	Spent	Leverage	Received Leverage	Leverage Source	Original Total	Final Total
Personnel	\$60,000	\$60,000	\$200	\$10,000	\$10,000	Private	\$70,000	\$10,200
Contracts	-	-	-	\$500,000	-	EQUIP RCPP Award	\$500,000	-
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Stewardship	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Travel	\$4,000	\$4,000	-	-	-	-	\$4,000	-
Professional Services	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Direct Support Services	\$5,000	\$5,000	-	-	-	-	\$5,000	-
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Supplies/Materials	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$69,000	\$69,000	\$200	\$510,000	\$10,000	-	\$579,000	\$10,200

Personnel

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Amount Spent	Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Conservation Associate	0.2	3.0	\$200	\$10,000	Private	\$10,200

Direct Support Services

How did you determine which portions of the Direct Support Services of your shared support services is direct to this program?

MLT: In a process that was approved by the DNR on March 17, 2017, Minnesota Land Trust determined our direct support services rate to include all of the allowable direct and necessary expenditures that are not captured in other line items in the budget, which is similar to the Land Trust's proposed federal indirect rate. We will apply this DNR-approved rate only to personnel expenses to determine the total amount of direct support services.

TCF: Our real estate support staff keeps hourly time sheets to track direct time spent on projects by grant source. We have used those past metrics to estimate the costs for this grant.

Explain any budget challenges or successes:

Program partners encountered no budget challenges during the course of the grant.

Total Revenue: -

Revenue Spent: -

Revenue Balance: -

Of the money disclosed above, what are the appropriate uses of the money:

E. This is not applicable as there was no revenue generated.

Output Tables

Acres by Resource Type (Table 1)

Type	Wetland (AP)	Wetland (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	Forest (AP)	Forest (Final)	Habitat (AP)	Habitat (Final)	Total Acres (AP)	Total Acres (Final)
Restore	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Easement	0	190	80	828	0	0	302	0	382	1,018
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	190	80	828	0	0	302	0	382	1,018

How many of these Prairie acres are Native Prairie? (Table 1b)

Type	Native Prairie (AP)	Native Prairie (Final)
Restore	0	0
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	0	0
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	0	0
Protect in Easement	5	0
Enhance	0	0
Total	5	0

Total Requested Funding by Resource Type (Table 2)

Type	Wetland (AP)	Wetland (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	Forest (AP)	Forest (Final)	Habitat (AP)	Habitat (Final)	Total Funding (AP)	Total Funding (Final)
Restore	-	-	-	\$106,100	-	-	-	-	-	\$106,100
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	\$300,300	\$500,000	\$975,000	-	-	\$968,000	-	\$1,468,000	\$1,275,300
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	\$300,300	\$500,000	\$1,081,100	-	-	\$968,000	-	\$1,468,000	\$1,381,400

Acres within each Ecological Section (Table 3)

Type	Metro / Urban (AP)	Metro / Urban (Final)	Forest / Prairie (AP)	Forest / Prairie (Final)	SE Forest (AP)	SE Forest (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	N. Forest (AP)	N. Forest (Final)	Total (AP)	Total (Final)
Restore	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Protect in Easement	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	0	282	1,018	382	1,018
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	0	282	1,018	382	1,018

Total Requested Funding within each Ecological Section (Table 4)

Type	Metro / Urban (AP)	Metro / Urban (Final)	Forest / Prairie (AP)	Forest / Prairie (Final)	SE Forest (AP)	SE Forest (Final)	Prairie (AP)	Prairie (Final)	N. Forest (AP)	N. Forest (Final)	Total (AP)	Total (Final)
Restore	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$106,100	-	\$106,100
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	-	\$15,600	-	-	\$600,000	-	\$868,000	\$1,259,700	\$1,468,000	\$1,275,300
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	-	\$15,600	-	-	\$600,000	-	\$868,000	\$1,365,800	\$1,468,000	\$1,381,400

Target Lake/Stream/River Feet or Miles

1.8 miles

Explain the success/shortage of acre goals

The Land Trust was able to identify three properties for protection under this grant, exceeding in total the proposed grant deliverables.

Outcomes

Programs in forest-prairie transition region:

Improved aquatic habitat indicators ~ *No conservation easement or R/E projects were completed in the Forest-Prairie Transition Region under this grant.*

Wetland and upland complexes will consist of native prairies, restored prairies, quality grasslands, and restored shallow lakes and wetlands ~ *No conservation easement or R/E projects were completed in the Forest-Prairie Transition Region under this grant.*

Programs in metropolitan urbanizing region:

A network of natural land and riparian habitats will connect corridors for wildlife and species in greatest conservation need ~ *No conservation easements or R/E projects were completed in the Metropolitan Urbanizing Area through this grant.*

Programs in the northern forest region:

Increased availability and improved condition of riparian forests and other habitat corridors ~ *Measure: Acres protected; Acres Restored/Enhanced. Three conservation easement projects totaling 1018 acres were completed in the Northern Forest Region under this grant; 54 acres of enhancement were completed on one of the properties protected through this grant.*

Programs in prairie region:

Key core parcels are protected for fish, game and other wildlife ~ *No conservation easement or R/E projects were completed within the Prairie Region.*

Programs in southeast forest region:

Rivers, streams, and surrounding vegetation provide corridors of habitat ~ *No conservation easement or R/E projects were completed within the Southeast Forest Region.*

Parcels

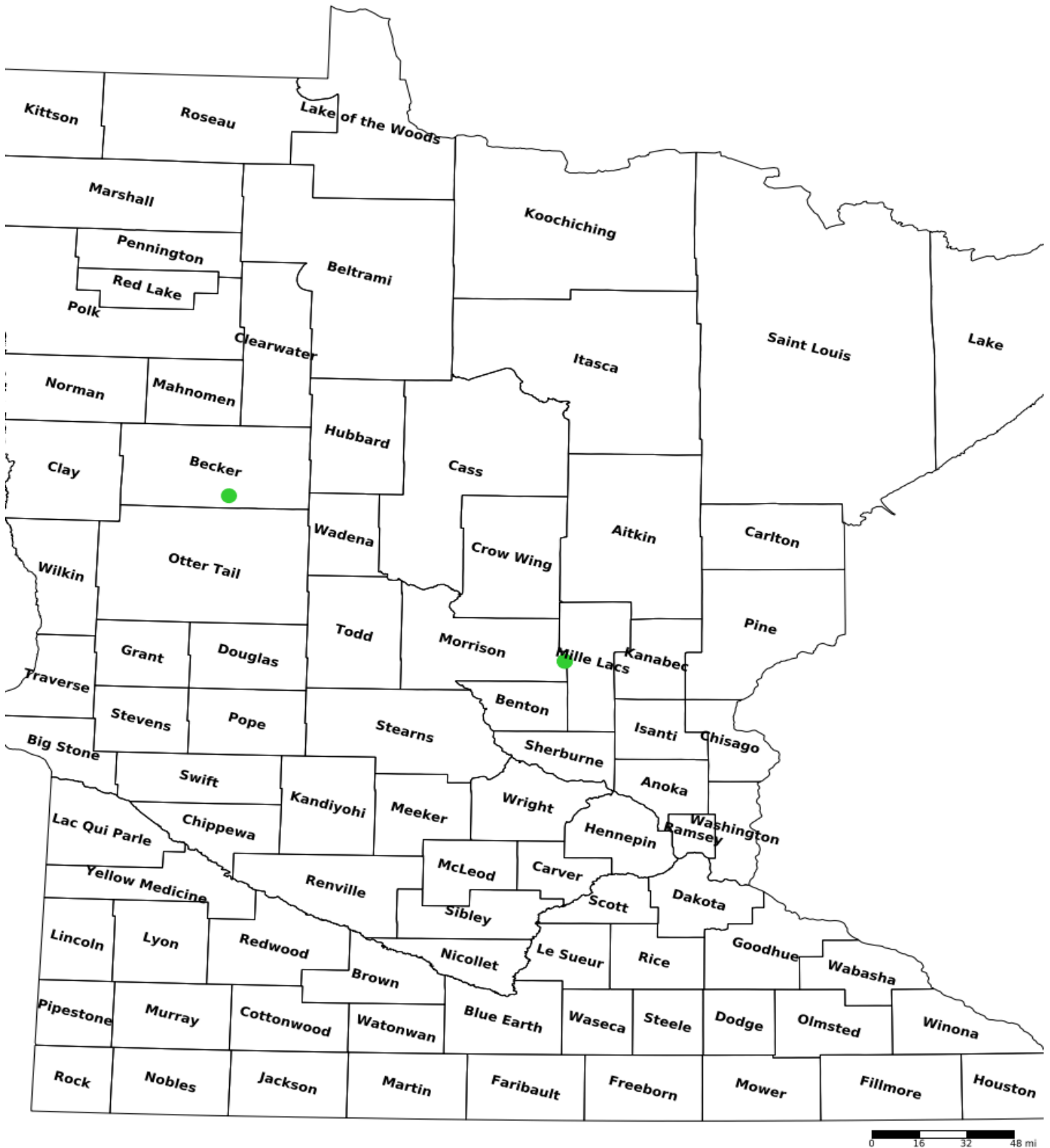
Sign-up Criteria?

[Yes - Sign up criteria is attached](#)

Easement Parcels

Name	County	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection
Hungry Lake (Green)	Becker	13839210	190	\$190,700	No
Rum River (American Bison Company)	Morrison	04028225	552	\$493,000	No
Rum River (Kremer)	Morrison	04028225	276	\$249,000	No

Parcel Map



- Protect in Easement
- ▲ Protect in Fee with PILT
- Protect in Fee W/O PILT
- ★ Restore
- ✕ Enhance
- ✚ Other