



In Otter Tail County, easement protects wild rice, fish, wildlife



DENT — A wild rice Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) easement in Otter Tail County will permanently protect 1.5 miles of shoreline from future development on a shallow bay of Star Lake where wild rice flourishes, migrating diver ducks fuel up, and anglers pursue panfish. The 61-acre easement was recorded in 2023.

Since 2012, the Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council has allocated nearly

\$11.8 million in Outdoor Heritage Funds to the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) for its Wild Rice Shoreland Protection Program.

The program protects wild rice lakes and shorelines through permanent conservation easements on privately owned lands within Minnesota's Northern Forest Region and is available in 14 counties: Aitkin, Becker, Beltrami, Carlton, Cass, Clearwater, Crow Wing, Hubbard,

Top: A wild rice RIM easement on Star Lake in Otter Tail County includes 1.5 miles of shoreline. The property supports eagles, deer and wild turkeys. The shallow bay provides quality waterfowl habitat. Steve Slatten, **right,** is among the owners of Eagle Point Properties LLC. **Photos Courtesy of Steve Slatten**

Bottom: SWCD staff will monitor the easement on Star Lake, seen here in May, once a year for the first three years, and then once every five years. BWSR has received nine rounds of Outdoor Heritage Funds, generated by the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, to support its Wild Rice Shoreland Protection Program. **Photo Credit:** John Voz, BWSR

Itasca, Otter Tail, St. Louis, Stearns, Todd and Wadena.

Through RIM wild rice easements, the program has permanently protected 10,834 acres — including recorded easements and those in the process of being recorded.

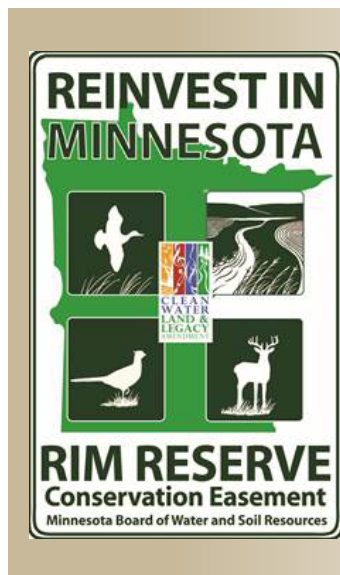
“It’s a multi-layered program that rings all the bells: Water quality. Habitat. Wild rice. Wild rice in itself grows in a very fragile ecosystem,” said John Voz, BWSR RIM easement and working lands specialist. “If wild rice is present, it’s a sign that there’s good water quality, and therefore it’s important to maintain.”

The most recent Outdoor Heritage Fund appropriation — \$2 million — will become available July 1, 2024. The Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment generates Outdoor Heritage Fund revenue.

BWSR holds RIM easements, which remain privately owned, on the tax rolls and closed to public hunting.

The Star Lake easement is owned by Eagle Point Properties LLC — named for the point that extends into the southwest bay — and overseen by Steve Slatten, who spoke on owners’ behalf.

“To maintain the excellent water quality and angling that this lake has to offer, it is imperative to preserve the quality of the aquatic habitat. We all recognize that we have



ELIGIBILITY: RIM wild rice easements are available within the 14-county Northern Forest Region, on Minnesota Department of Natural Resources [wild rice lakes](#). Sites are chosen through a ranking that includes development risk, surrounding land use and habitat value. The easements are protection easements, so wild rice is not planted.

PAYMENTS: Onetime payments are made when easements are recorded. The amount is based on township land values. The rate is 90% of cropland value and 60% of non-cropland value. Additional conservation practice payments reimburse for things such as establishing native plants.

a special piece of property here, and our goal is to protect it as best we can,” Slatten said.

Lakeshore development — with its potential to cause runoff that negatively affects wild rice production — is among the biggest threats to Star Lake and other wild-rice-producing lakes in the state.

The plants grow in shallow water along lakeshores and along the banks of slow-flowing streams. Often, only the flowering head of wild rice rises above the water. Wild rice can only travel about 30 inches away from a parent plant. If pollen does not land on a receptive female flower within that distance, no seeds are produced.

Emergent plants such as wild rice provide spawning areas for Northern pike, largemouth bass and panfish. They are important nursery

areas for all species of fish.

Star Lake, in north-central Otter Tail County, is named for its shape — circular, with three arms resembling the points of a star. Unlike most Minnesota lakes, which were created by glaciers, Star Lake is believed to be the result of an impact from a meteor or other space debris. The 4,721-acre lake reaches a maximum depth of 94 feet just off of its eastern shore. The bay on which the easement is located is about 5 feet deep.

“In 1998, lake levels were very high and there was no rice growing anywhere near our shoreline. As water levels dropped over several years, the bay literally exploded in a lush crop of wild rice. Instead of seeing sky-blue water off our shoreline, we were seeing a sea of green,” Slatten said.

Some landowners prefer a

“tidy” shoreline. But Slatten recognized the value of the wild rice.

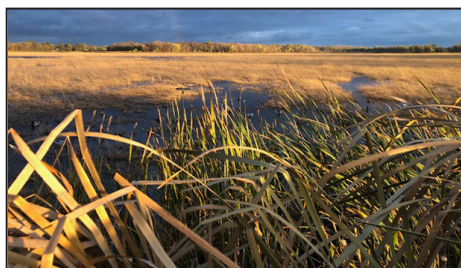
“We started seeing more wildlife, including numerous species of waterfowl as well as other birds and mammals. The main reason for permanently protecting wild rice lands is that it benefits the whole wetland environment: birds, animals and plants.”

East Otter Tail Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) conservation technician Tanner Schmitz worked with the landowners to survey and assess the site, and then apply for the RIM easement.

One of the larger wild-rice-producing lakes in the region, Star Lake — and the southeast bay in particular — had seen increasing development pressure in the past five to 10 years. The sheer length of shoreline being protected made this easement unique.

Landowners had planted native grasses and wildflowers, and had worked with foresters on forest-stand improvement — including harvesting mature trees and planting bur oaks. Schmitz said the property includes pockets of aspen, 32 acres of mixed hardwoods, 14 acres of wetlands and 11 acres of upland grasses.

“It benefits pretty much everything. That’s the management strategy they’ve taken on this property, was to benefit all wildlife,” Schmitz said.



The 61-acre easement on Star Lake includes a natural shoreline. Wild rice flourishes in the shallow bay. The easement includes pockets of aspen, 32 acres of mixed hardwoods, 14 acres of wetlands and 11 acres of upland grasses. Photos Courtesy of Steve Slatten