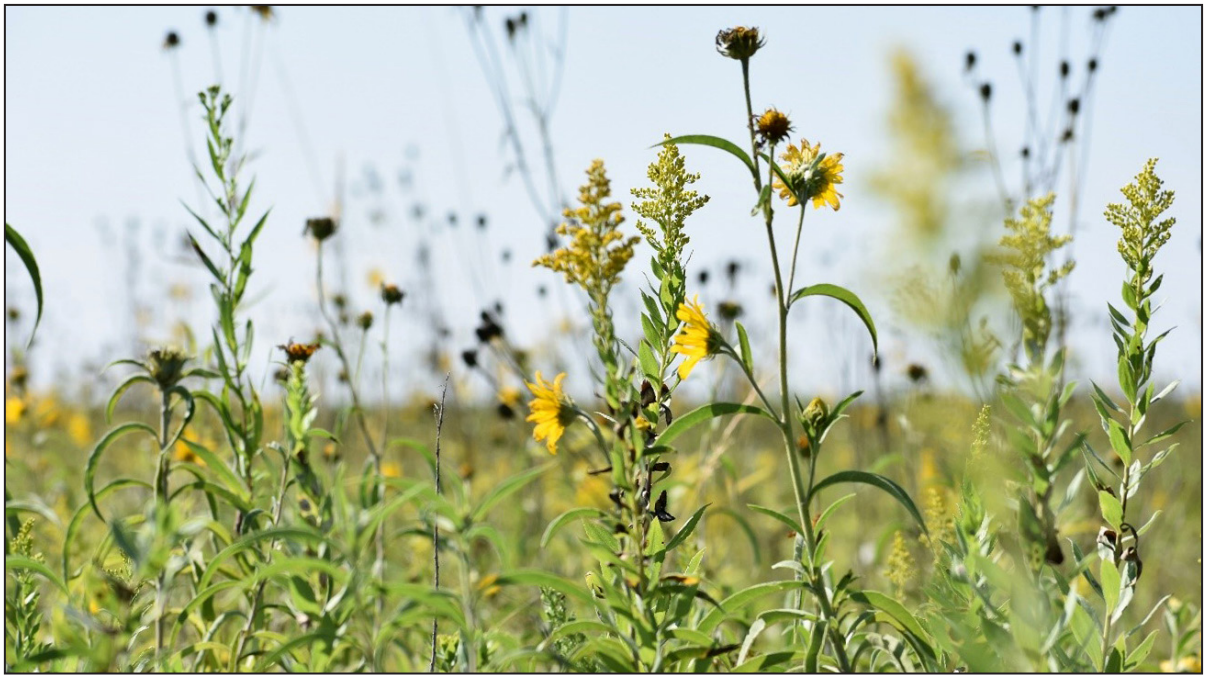
Funds available for landowners to diversify existing RIM easements



Native plants bloomed within a RIM Reserve easement in Yellow Medicine County in 2023. Funds now available for landowners to diversify existing easements were made available through a 2023 appropriation meant to bolster climate resiliency, adaptation and climate sequestration. **Contributed photos**

RIM easement landowners who are interested in pursuing enhancements should contact their local SWCD.

Landowners interested in adding species diversity to existing Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Reserve easements may be eligible to receive up to $600 an acre to cover site preparation, seed and planting costs. Applications opened Nov. 1.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) in July received $4 million in general funds to enhance existing RIM easements. The Minnesota Legislature's appropriation was meant to bolster climate resiliency, adaptation and carbon sequestration. BWSR dedicated $2 million of that appropriation to increasing biodiversity, which will mitigate the effects of rainfall and runoff events. (The remaining $2 million is earmarked for enhancing RIM wetlands easements, by increasing holding capacity or decreasing downstream flow.)

RIM Reserve, which started in 1986, was meant to restore certain marginal and environmentally sensitive agricultural land to protect soil and water quality and support fish and wildlife habitat. It involves acquiring limited land-use rights for conservation purposes. Landowners establish habitat restoration practices by planting native grasses, forbs, and trees, as well as restoring wetlands.

To date, about 7,760 recorded RIM Reserve easements cover about 340,600 acres in Minnesota.

"In the last few years, there has been

> **"This funding will allow for a fresh start to create high-diversity stands with forbs and native grasses."**
>
> — Brayden Anderson, Yellow Medicine SWCD

a significant increase in requests for funds from RIM landowners looking for options to maximize diversity," said Brayden Anderson, Yellow Medicine Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) director.

"Some of these easements are changing ownership for the first time since enrollment, and the new landowners have the intention of creating the best and most diverse habitat for hunting. Others just enjoy seeing the dozens of species of forbs and grasses, benefiting all wildlife," Anderson said.

Prior to 2014, the standard for seed mix diversity was fairly low, especially compared with today's standards.

Many sites were seeded with fewer than five species, mostly composed of native grasses. Some sites may have been seeded to monocultures. Sites lower in species diversity are far more susceptible to woody or herbaceous weed invasion. When diverse, native vegetation actively grows throughout the season, it leaves little to no room for invasive species to take hold.

Ideally, grassland restorations include warm- and cool-season grasses, sedges, rushes, legumes and non-legume plants. Many seed mixes feature a species array that will bloom and feed pollinators throughout the growing season.

"There are many easements in Yellow Medicine

A bobolink appeared in a RIM Reserve easement in Lac Qui Parle County. BWSR dedicated half of a $4 million general fund appropriation to enhance existing RIM easements to increase biodiversity.

"Permanently protected land with high vegetative diversity can help climate resiliency, adaptation and carbon sequestration with (plants') extensive root systems and ability to withstand weed pressure."

— Brayden Anderson, Yellow Medicine SWCD

County that have minimal diversity or are completely dominated by smooth brome — some from poor management and others from low-diversity seed mixes at the time of restoration. This funding will allow for a fresh start to create high-diversity stands with forbs and native grasses," Anderson said.

Increasing species diversity could be accomplished by re-seeding existing stands; establishing high-diversity pollinator plots; inter-seeding stands to provide blooms throughout the growing season; and/or inter-seeding sites that lack categories of plants such as warm-season grasses, cool-season grasses, sedges, rushes, legumes or non-legume plants.

Sites with 20 or fewer species, and those where landowners opt for custom seed mixes tailored to the location will be prioritized. Other factors will include the age of the easement, composition of the plant community, and noxious weed pressure. A landowner contribution is not required, but sites where landowners provide a cash or in-kind match will be ranked more highly.

Diverse, native grassland restorations play a large role in sequestering carbon and resisting weed pressure.

"Permanently protected land with high vegetative diversity can help climate resiliency, adaptation and carbon sequestration with (plants') extensive root systems and ability to withstand weed pressure," Anderson said.

Those extensive root systems are among the most notable characteristics of native grasslands.

While the above-ground vegetation of some species can grow taller than 7 feet, most of the plants' biomass lies in the roots — which are excellent at sequestering carbon in the soil. That's especially true compared with introduced monocultures such as Kentucky bluegrass and smooth brome. Native plants' root systems also are better at absorbing rainfall and preventing runoff. And native grasses provide habitat for myriad species, including insects and birds.

RIM easement landowners interested in enhancement should contact their local SWCD.

The first step will be to work with SWCD staff to complete an application. Applications are expected to be available on BWSR's website starting Nov. 1. A survey will determine if the landowner is eligible to receive cost-share, and if the site is a suitable candidate. If a site has enhancement potential, SWCD staff will proceed with a capacity survey. That survey will focus on site-specific factors — such as land history, past management, plant composition and soil characteristics — that might inform enhancement options.

Funds will be available until they are spent. BWSR staff will continue to seek out other funding sources.