



Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Wetland Habitat Protection Program – Phase 2

Laws of Minnesota 2016 Final Report

General Information

Date: 08/09/2025

Project Title: Wetland Habitat Protection Program – Phase 2

Funds Recommended: \$1,629,000

Legislative Citation: ML 2016, Ch. 172, Art. 1, Sec. 2, Subd. 4(d)

Appropriation Language: \$1,629,000 the second year is to the commissioner of natural resources for an agreement with Minnesota Land Trust to acquire permanent conservation easements in high-priority wetland habitat complexes in the prairie and forest/prairie transition regions. Of this amount, up to \$180,000 is to establish a monitoring and enforcement fund, as approved in the accomplishment plan and subject to Minnesota Statutes, section 97A.056, subdivision 17. A list of proposed easement acquisitions must be provided as part of the final report.

Manager Information

Manager's Name: Kris Larson

Title: Executive Director

Organization: Minnesota Land Trust

Address: 2356 University Ave. W., Suite 240

City: St. Paul, MN 55114

Email: klarson@mnland.org

Office Number: 651-647-9590

Mobile Number:

Fax Number:

Website: www.mnland.org

Location Information

County Location(s): Stearns, Otter Tail and Todd.

Eco regions in which work will take place:

Forest / Prairie Transition

Prairie

Activity types:

Protect in Easement

Priority resources addressed by activity:

Wetlands

Prairie

Habitat

Forest

Narrative

Summary of Accomplishments

Through its Wetland Habitat Protection and Restoration Program - Phase 2 grant, the Minnesota Land Trust protected 1,026 acres of high priority wetland habitat complexes in Minnesota's Prairie and Forest-Prairie Transition sections by securing permanent conservation easements within scientifically prioritized habitat complexes; this acre output was 137% above that proposed. The Land Trust used its market-based landowner bid model to maximize both conservation benefit and financial leverage in project selection; over the duration of the grant, landowners donated \$386,975 in easement value to the program (123% of that proposed).

Process & Methods

Minnesota Land Trust's Wetlands Habitat Protection Program area extends from Meeker northwest to Becker County, located along a vast glacial moraine system at the edge of the of western Minnesota. This prairie pothole country is the core of Minnesota's "duck factory" and is central to one of North America's most important flyways for migratory waterfowl. In this second phase of its Wetland Habitat Protection Program, the Land Trust focused its activities toward the protection of important wetland/upland complexes of habitat within the program area.

In Phase 2 of this program, the Land Trust protected 1,026 acres of high priority wetland and associated upland habitats and nearly 17.56 miles of shoreland along lakes, streams and rivers by acquiring conservation easements from willing landowners. This exceeded the proposed target output by 276 acres. The Land Trust accepted one fully donated easement, negotiated bargain sale purchases on an additional four easements, and purchased four at full appraised value. Total leverage from donated value of the easements is placed at \$386,975, in excess of that proposed. This value was substantiated in all nine easements through appraisals.

The success of the program in producing high levels of donated value was due in part to both the high levels of interest among landowners in participating in the program, and the use of a market-based approach to incentivize landowners to contribute in this fashion. The program targeted projects that helped fill gaps in existing public ownership, contained the highest-quality habitat, and provided the greatest leverage to the state. Landowners submitted applications to the program via a RFP process, whereby proposals were evaluated based on a combination ecological factors (size of the property, condition of wetland and associated upland habitat, proximity to other protected lands, and other factors); landowners were also asked to submit the level of funding necessary for them to participate in the program. Those properties with the best ratio of environmental benefits to easement cost became the highest priority for acquisition.

Nine properties were protected through this Phase 2 grant, including the following (each of which more thoroughly illustrated through a project summary sheet that is uploaded as part of this final report):

Cooks Lake (Vergas Trail Timberlands, LLC) - This 116-acre property builds on a large complex of private lands protected by conservation easements along the shore of Cooks Lake in Otter Tail County. The total complex now totals 760 acres. The property protects high quality mesic hardwood forests, wetlands, and 4,072 feet of shoreline

on Cooks Lake.

Little Crow Lake (Kluck) - This spectacular 263-acre property encompasses nearly the entirety (13,719 feet of shoreline) of Little Crow Lake in Otter Tail County. Mesic hardwood forest, wetlands and grasslands are draped across the rugged hills of the property, providing habitat for a variety of SGCN including common loon and trumpeter swan.

Little Pine Lake (Durrant) - Duel Creek, a designated trout stream, winds its way through this 164-acre forested property in Todd County. The property contains nearly all of the fishable reach (6,726 feet) of this trout stream, one of only four in Todd County. The property is dominated by hardwood forests on rugged, rolling terrain.

Mineral Lake (Harris) - This 126-acre easement in Otter Tail County comprises much of a large, forested peninsula extending into Mineral Lake. Basswood-Bur Oak-(Green Ash) forests, wetlands, and 20,924 feet of shoreland are protected through this impressive property.

Sauk River (Dodge-Dunker) - This 71-acre easement is one of three contiguous properties along the Sauk River in Stearns County protected through this grant. The property is a mix of floodplain forests, marshland and dry savanna on the slopes of an esker, and includes 6,321 feet of shoreline along the Sauk River.

Sauk River (Klehr Trust & Klehr) - This 37-acre easement in Stearns County contains high quality floodplain forests located along nearly 2 miles of the Sauk River and its meandered channels and oxbows.

Sauk River (Klehr) - This 82-acre property in Stearns County contains extensive floodplain forests along three miles of the Sauk River. The property contains a mixture of floodplain forest, marshland and dry savanna.

Sauk River (Lindell) - This 77-acre easement protects nearly one-half mile of shoreline along the Sauk River and abuts the Cold Spring Heron Colony SNA in Stearns County. Restoration of a degraded fen is underway in a joint project between the Minnesota DNR, The Nature Conservancy, Minnesota Land Trust and Sauk River Watershed District.

Spitzer Lake (Burkett) - This 87-acre project located on the shores of Long Lake and Spitzer Lake in Otter Tail County is part of a complex of protected lands totaling over 3,000 acres. The property contains over 9,145 feet of shoreline, mesic hardwood forest and grasslands.

Landowner interest for the program has increased significantly over the course of this grant, with in excess of 50 landowners applying through our November 2018 RFP. Across Phases 1 and 2 of this program, the Land Trust has protected 2,990 acres of important wildlife habitat and 32.4 miles of shoreline, while leveraging \$1,596,680 in landowner donation of easement value.

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?

Of all of Minnesota's wildlife habitat types, wetlands and shallow lakes provide the essential backbone for the survival of waterfowl and other important wildlife species. In fact, more than 50% of the amphibians and birds listed in Minnesota's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy as Species in Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) use wetlands during their life cycle. Most of the plans developed to protect Minnesota's wildlife - including Minnesota's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy, the Statewide Conservation and Preservation Plan, and the Long Range Duck Recovery Plan - cite the protection and restoration of the state's remaining wetlands as one of the top priorities to achieve the State's conservation goals. Moreover, these plans cite the use of

conservation easements on private lands as one of the primary strategies to protect important wetland and shallow lake habitat.

As such, Minnesota's wetlands are essential to our wildlife health and diversity. This project directly benefits Species in Greatest Conservation Need and other important game and non-game wildlife species by protecting habitat, and otherwise reducing potential threats to their habitat brought about by detrimental agricultural practices, residential or commercial development or imprudent land management. The wetland habitat complexes targeted through the ranking system included a mosaic of wetlands, grasslands and woodlands. Projects were prioritized based on size and quality of habitat as identified in Minnesota Biological Survey data, and proximity to other protected lands. Projects of high quality habitat and large size situated within intact, protected landscapes tend to be highly resilient and offer SGCN and listed species (not to mention the numerous more common ones) the best chances for long-term viability.

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.

This Wetland Habitat Protection Program is focused on procuring easements within priority complexes of wetlands and associated upland habitats, as guided by the State Wildlife Action Plan, Duck Plan and Prairie Plan. Specific parcels proposed by landowners for conservation easements were reviewed and prioritized relative to one another. This relative ranking is based on three primary ecological factors (amount of habitat on the parcel (size) and abundance of SGCN; the quality or condition of habitat; and the parcel's context relative to other natural habitats and protected areas), and cost.

As such, Wetland Habitat Protection Program serves to build upon past conservation investments in the program area, facilitating the protection of habitat corridors and reducing the potential for fragmentation of existing habitats. Minnesota Biological Survey data continues to be a cornerstone to our evaluation of potential conservation easement acquisitions; we also conducted field visits to further identify and assess condition of habitats prior to easement acquisition, as many private lands were not formally surveyed by the Minnesota Biological Survey.

Explain Partners, Supporters, & Opposition

The Wetland Habitat Protection Program enjoys broad partnership and support from a variety of organizations and government agencies operating in the area, including local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, and others who assisted in conducting landowner outreach, identifying potential projects, and otherwise strategically assisting in the direction of the program. Conversations with the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service over the course of this grant led to successful follow-on proposals for the Program (Phases 3-5) that forged a strong working relationship with USFWS focused on habitat restoration and enhancement. The Land Trust encountered no opposition to the program, but rather a growing level of interest among landowners.

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

The Wetlands Habitat Protection Program - Phase 2 grant continued the success of the program set by the initial grant, in exceeding both the conservation goals (acres protected via conservation easement) and leverage (easement value donated by participating landowners) proposed for the grant. Nine high-quality projects were protected through this grant, protecting a diversity of wetland habitats and associated uplands. Landowner interest - both in terms of participating in the program and donating easement value as leverage into the program - exceeded expectations. A group of four projects completed in Stearns County was the antecedent to the OHF-funded Sauk River Watershed Habitat Protection and Restoration program.

Most importantly, landowner interest for the program is building. A Request for Proposals released during the course of this grant resulted in more than 50 applicants for conservation easements on their properties.

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?

Land protected through conservation easements will be sustained through state-of-the-art standards and practices for conservation easement stewardship. The Minnesota Land Trust 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. Funding for these easement stewardship activities was provided through this OHF grant.

In addition, the Land Trust assisted landowners in the development of comprehensive habitat management plans to help ensure that the land will be managed for its wildlife and water quality benefits. Depending upon the property, opportunities for restoration and enhancement in the future will be explored on a case-by-case basis. The Land Trust will assist landowners in procuring funding for these activities or otherwise connecting with appropriate agencies as such needs and opportunities arise.

Actions to Maintain Project Outcomes

Year	Source of Funds	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
2022 and beyond	MLT easement monitoring and enforcement fund	Conduct annual property monitoring, address landowner inquiries and maintain accurate stewardship records	Defend conservation easements as necessary	-

Budget

Totals

Item	Requested	AP Amount	Spent	Leverage	Received Leverage	Leverage Source	Original Total	Final Total
Personnel	\$190,000	\$179,400	\$177,400	-	-	-	\$190,000	\$177,400
Contracts	-	\$45,000	\$45,500	-	-	-	-	\$45,500
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	\$1,073,000	\$1,090,000	\$1,046,300	\$315,000	\$387,000	Landowner	\$1,388,000	\$1,433,300
Easement Stewardship	\$180,000	\$180,000	\$180,000	-	-	-	\$180,000	\$180,000
Travel	\$10,000	\$10,200	\$10,200	-	-	-	\$10,000	\$10,200
Professional Services	\$147,000	\$75,400	\$75,800	-	-	-	\$147,000	\$75,800
Direct Support Services	\$29,000	\$49,000	\$47,900	-	-	-	\$29,000	\$47,900
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Supplies/Materials	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$1,629,000	\$1,629,000	\$1,583,100	\$315,000	\$387,000	-	\$1,944,000	\$1,970,100

Personnel

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Amount Spent	Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
MLT Staff	0.47	4.0	\$177,400	-	-	\$177,400

Direct Support Services

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

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.

Explain any budget challenges or successes:

We encountered no budget challenges during the course of the grant, and significantly exceeded proposed deliverables with the resources provided.

Total Revenue: \$0

Revenue Spent: \$0

Revenue Balance: \$0

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

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	750	300	0	44	0	571	0	108	750	1,023
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	750	300	0	44	0	571	0	108	750	1,023

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	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	\$1,629,000	\$1,622,600	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$1,629,000	\$1,622,600
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	\$1,629,000	\$1,622,600	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$1,629,000	\$1,622,600

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	450	709	0	0	300	317	0	0	750	1,026
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	0	450	709	0	0	300	317	0	0	750	1,026

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	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee with State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Fee w/o State PILT Liability	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Protect in Easement	-	-	\$977,000	\$1,042,900	-	-	\$652,000	\$579,700	-	-	\$1,629,000	\$1,622,600
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	\$977,000	\$1,042,900	-	-	\$652,000	\$579,700	-	-	\$1,629,000	\$1,622,600

Target Lake/Stream/River Feet or Miles

17.56 Miles

Explain the success/shortage of acre goals

The Minnesota Land Trust exceeded its land protection goals by 137%. This success was due to the continued interest of private landowners to donate easement value as leverage to the State's investment, enabling our grant funding to achieve greater outputs.

Outcomes

Programs in forest-prairie transition region:

Protected, restored, and enhanced nesting and migratory habitat for waterfowl, upland birds, and species of greatest conservation need ~ *The primary evaluation method will be the quality and quantity of protected habitat. Through annual monitoring, the Land Trust will be able to assess the quality of the habitat and determine if there are any threats or violations to the easement. In addition, we will be working with landowners to maintain and/or improve the species diversity on the properties. Overall, we will be evaluating how the protection of an individual parcel contributes to a larger habitat matrix.*

Programs in prairie region:

Protected, restored, and enhanced shallow lakes and wetlands ~ *The primary evaluation method will be the quality and quantity of habitat that is protected. Through our annual monitoring we will be able to assess the quality of the habitat and determine if there are any threats or violations to the easement. In addition, through the habitat management plans, we will be working with landowners to maintain and/or improve the species diversity on the properties. Overall, we will be evaluating how the protection of an individual parcel contributes to a larger habitat matrix.*

Parcels

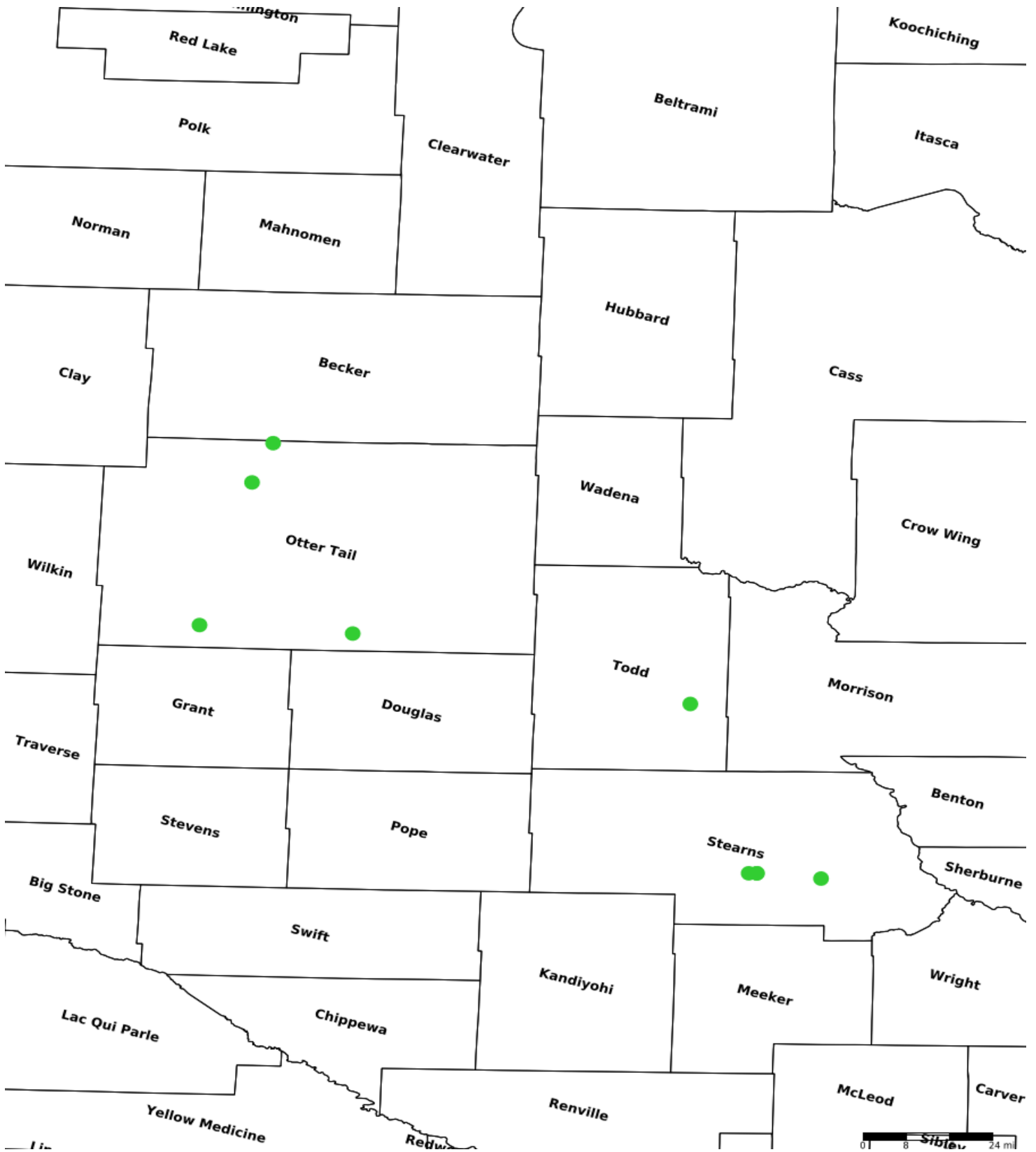
Sign-up Criteria?

No

Easement Parcels

Name	County	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection
Cooks Lake (Vergas Trail Timberlands LLC)	Otter Tail	13741203	116	\$141,500	No
Little Crow Lake (Kluck)	Otter Tail	13641218	263	\$349,300	No
Mineral Lake (Harris)	Otter Tail	13142207	126	\$63,000	No
Spitzer Lake (Burkett)	Otter Tail	13139217	87	\$128,200	No
Sauk River (Dodge-Dunker)	Stearns	12331210	71	\$104,000	No
Sauk River (Klehr Trust & Klehr)	Stearns	12331210	37	\$30,400	No
Sauk River (Klehr Trust)	Stearns	12331209	82	\$116,000	No
Sauk River (Lindell)	Stearns	12330213	77	\$114,000	No
Little Pine Lake (Durrant)	Todd	12932220	164	\$0	No

Parcel Map



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