



Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

Grassland Conservation Partnership Phase II

Laws of Minnesota 2016 Final Report

General Information

Date: 01/31/2024

Project Title: Grassland Conservation Partnership Phase II

Funds Recommended: \$1,475,000

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

Appropriation Language: \$1,475,000 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 restore high priority grassland, prairie, and wetland habitats as follows: \$64,000 to The Conservation Fund; and \$1,411,000 to Minnesota Land Trust, of which up to \$100,000 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 acquisition of 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 must be consistent with the priorities in the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan.

Manager Information

Manager's Name: Emilee Nelson

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Location Information

County Location(s): Kittson and Otter Tail.

Eco regions in which work will take place:

- Forest / Prairie Transition
- Prairie

Activity types:

- Protect in Easement
- Protect in Fee

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 1,778 acres of grassland habitat and 3 miles of shoreline associated with 2 working grasslands projects in western Minnesota. Land protected through conservation easement exceeded the proposed outputs for this grant by 445% (1,778 versus 400 proposed acres). In addition, 140 acres of grasslands habitat was enhanced through the grant.

Process & Methods

Native grasslands are the most threatened ecosystem in Minnesota and one of the most threatened in the world. The Prairie Section as defined by LSOHC has suffered the greatest habitat loss of any of the five sections examined by the Council. Furthermore, only a third of the remaining habitat in the Prairie Section is permanently protected. To compound the problem, significant amounts of Minnesota's conservation lands enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) have expired over the past half decade and have been removed from the program.

Science has proven that proper application of haying and grazing techniques can be used to mimic natural processes necessary for healthy grass natural communities. Our colleagues at The Nature Conservancy and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service have proven these techniques successful in Minnesota over a significant period of time. TCF performed the initial landowner outreach and identified potential projects; MLT negotiated the terms of the conservation easements with the landowners. All easements are held and monitored by MLT in perpetuity.

Lands targeted for conservation easement protection through this project met the following criteria:

1. Lands with significant existing prairie or grassland habitat
2. Lands near or within the Core Areas and Corridors identified in the Prairie Plan
3. Lands adjacent to or in close proximity to permanently protected land (e.g., WMAs, WPAs, CREP easements, TNC preserves, etc.)
4. Lands which will help establish connections between existing permanently protected lands, and those creating larger habitat complexes
5. Lands which may also include low production cropland that can be converted back into grasslands, thereby increasing overall grassland habitat

MLT and TCF used these criteria to systematically vet and rank potential projects to ensure projects selected possessed the maximum conservation value for the state's investment. Projects were also screened to identify producers with a proven ability to successfully implement the best management practices for conservation grazing. MLT used the proven "reverse-bid" model to incentivize landowners to donate a portion of easement value and allow for the most efficient use of conservation funds. This reverse bid model first ranks the projects according to

their habitat values and then ranks them according to the landowner's bid on what they are willing to get paid for the conservation easements. Projects selected provided the greatest conservation benefits at the lowest cost to the State.

Two conservation easement projects were completed through this grant, totaling 1,778 acres and protecting 3 miles of shoreline:

Caribou Parklands (Finney) - This massive 1,510-acre conservation easement embodies the innovative protection strategy championed by the Grasslands Conservation Partnership program. Located in Kittson County in Minnesota's unique Tallgrass Aspen Parklands biome, this property is part of a conservation grazing operation that is sustained by rotational grazing and selective haying. Strategically located in an approximately 10-square mile area of private land that is surrounded by three WMAs, this property provides a critical link between vast stretches of public lands. Ten native plant communities have been identified on the property, including rare prairie and wetland communities. Approximately 220 acres of native prairie is present. The property is home to numerous state-listed wildlife species, including moose, elk, and marbled godwit, as well as many other species that are considered Species in Greatest Conservation Need, such as sharptailed grouse and northern harrier.

Perch Lake (Samuelson) - Nearly two miles of shoreline on Perch Lake and an additional unnamed lake in Otter Tail County are protected through this impressive 267-acre conservation easement. Located six miles northwest of Parkers Prairie, this property is situated in the scenic Leaf Hills, a rugged glacial moraine that is part of the larger Alexandria Moraine. The property contains extensive rolling pasture, grazed through a Conservation Grazing Plan, as well as a narrow isthmus located between Perch Lake and an additional unnamed lake. The isthmus is pockmarked with wetland basins and contains large stands of Pin Oak – Bur Oak Woodland, a community that is considered “vulnerable to extirpation” in Minnesota. This portion of the property is also part of a Site of Moderate Biodiversity Significance and is located less than a mile west of Folden Woods Marsh Wildlife Management Area.

A large 140-acre enhancement project also occurred on the Perch Lake (Samuelson) property after the easement closed. Portions of this easement had a long history of grazing and the Land Trust worked with the landowners to develop a rotational grazing system to improve and maintain the important habitats found on this portion of the property. The Land Trust also installed fencing to operationalize the rotational grazing system. These initial investments will allow for season-long habitat across the property, providing varied grass heights, and allowing for grassland plant species to complete their lifecycles on portions of the property every year. This will, in turn, provide valuable foraging and nesting habitat for grasslands birds, as well as floral resources and shelter for prairie pollinators.

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?

This project protected 1,778 acres of grassland, wetland, and prairie habitat as identified as a priority in the Outdoor Heritage Fund's 25-Year Framework, and more specifically identified in the Prairie Plan. This project focused on lands identified by DNR, USFWS, and our partners as necessary for the conservation of habitat for wildlife and Species in Greatest Conservation Need. Minnesota County Biological Survey data as well as USFWS data were used to identify and prioritize sites of highest value for grassland birds and other prairie species such as the Dakota skipper and Poweshiek skipperling, both recently listed as threatened by USFWS. Because the majority of prairie and grassland habitat is found on private lands, this project helped protect those habitats and establish important connections to other protected lands, thereby creating larger complexes of protected grassland habitats.

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 Prairie Plan and Minnesota Wildlife Action Plan, along with assessment of 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.

Explain Partners, Supporters, & Opposition

Many of the initial landowner contacts for the program came from Local Technical Teams working to implement the Prairie Plan. The Minnesota Cattleman's Association was also an integral connection for landowner outreach and a supporter of the program. It is likely due to the multiple benefits of the program (wildlife habitat, healthy grasslands, continuing rural ranching way of life) that there were no opponents of the work.

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

Depending on the region of Minnesota, valuations for working grassland easements in the program varied greatly, which made negotiations challenging given the lower easement values in certain markets. Easements appraised lower than anticipated, and the program was able to secure more acres than planned, resulting in leftover funding. The partners pursued multiple easement opportunities to spend remaining funds and were not successful. Another challenge was finding contractors to write grazing and habitat plans, as this type of work is unique and few there are limited private contractors in Minnesota.

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.

Actions to Maintain Project Outcomes

Year	Source of Funds	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Ongoing	MLT Stewardship & Enforcement Fund	Annual monitoring of completed easements	Enforcement of easement terms, as needed	-

Budget

Grand Totals Across All Partnerships

Item	Requested	AP Amount	Spent	Leverage	Received Leverage	Leverage Source	Original Total	Final Total
Personnel	\$130,000	\$238,700	\$163,600	\$10,000	\$10,000	-, Private	\$140,000	\$173,600
Contracts	-	\$301,100	\$13,800	-	-	-	-	\$13,800
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	\$1,160,000	\$691,900	\$691,800	\$40,000	\$23,200	Private-landowner donations	\$1,200,000	\$715,000
Easement Stewardship	\$100,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	-	-	-	\$100,000	\$75,000
Travel	\$9,000	\$15,000	\$8,500	-	-	-	\$9,000	\$8,500
Professional Services	\$60,000	\$88,000	\$88,000	-	-	-	\$60,000	\$88,000
Direct Support Services	\$16,000	\$45,300	\$29,500	-	-	-	\$16,000	\$29,500
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Supplies/Materials	-	\$20,000	\$200	-	-	-	-	\$200
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$1,475,000	\$1,475,000	\$1,070,400	\$50,000	\$33,200	-	\$1,525,000	\$1,103,600

Partner: Minnesota Land Trust

Totals

Item	Requested	AP Amount	Spent	Leverage	Received Leverage	Leverage Source	Original Total	Final Total
Personnel	\$75,000	\$183,700	\$131,600	-	-	-	\$75,000	\$131,600
Contracts	-	\$301,100	\$13,800	-	-	-	-	\$13,800
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	\$1,160,000	\$691,900	\$691,800	\$40,000	\$23,200	Private-landowner donations	\$1,200,000	\$715,000
Easement Stewardship	\$100,000	\$75,000	\$75,000	-	-	-	\$100,000	\$75,000
Travel	\$5,000	\$11,000	\$6,600	-	-	-	\$5,000	\$6,600
Professional Services	\$60,000	\$88,000	\$88,000	-	-	-	\$60,000	\$88,000
Direct Support Services	\$11,000	\$40,300	\$26,200	-	-	-	\$11,000	\$26,200
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Supplies/Materials	-	\$20,000	\$200	-	-	-	-	\$200
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$1,411,000	\$1,411,000	\$1,033,200	\$40,000	\$23,200	-	\$1,451,000	\$1,056,400

Personnel

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Amount Spent	Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Conservation Staff, Project management & legal	0.36	3.0	\$131,600	-	-	\$131,600

Partner: The Conservation Fund

Totals

Item	Requested	AP Amount	Spent	Leverage	Received Leverage	Leverage Source	Original Total	Final Total
Personnel	\$55,000	\$55,000	\$32,000	\$10,000	\$10,000	Private	\$65,000	\$42,000
Contracts	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/ PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fee Acquisition w/o PILT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Acquisition	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Easement Stewardship	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Travel	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$1,900	-	-	-	\$4,000	\$1,900
Professional Services	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Direct Support Services	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$3,300	-	-	-	\$5,000	\$3,300
DNR Land Acquisition Costs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Capital Equipment	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Equipment/Tools	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Supplies/Materials	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
DNR IDP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grand Total	\$64,000	\$64,000	\$37,200	\$10,000	\$10,000	-	\$74,000	\$47,200

Personnel

Position	Annual FTE	Years Working	Amount Spent	Leverage	Leverage Source	Total
Conservation Associate	0.3	3.0	\$32,000	\$10,000	Private	\$42,000

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 MNDNR 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 applied this DNR-approved rate only to personnel expenses to determine the total amount of direct support services.

TCF - DSS was calculated from past projects to capture direct support costs to complete land protection projects as a percentage of staff time spent per project, and the method was approved by MNDNR in 2022.

Explain any budget challenges or successes:

Although two conservation easement projects were completed during the course of this grant, achieving 445% of proposed grant deliverables, we were unable to identify a third project to close under this grant. As such, remaining funds were devoted to restoration/enhancement work at the Perch Lake (Samuelson) property. Despite this, we had \$405,000 in remaining funding that is being returned unspent.

Total Revenue: \$0

Revenue Spent: \$0

Revenue Balance: \$0

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	0	400	1,778	0	0	0	0	400	1,778
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	0	400	1,778	0	0	0	0	400	1,778

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	30	220
Enhance	0	0
Total	30	220

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	-	-	\$1,475,000	\$1,070,000	-	-	-	-	\$1,475,000	\$1,070,000
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	\$1,475,000	\$1,070,000	-	-	-	-	\$1,475,000	\$1,070,000

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	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Fee w/o State PILT Liability												
Protect in Easement	0	0	0	0	0	0	400	1,778	0	0	400	1,778
Enhance	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	0	0	0	0	0	400	1,778	0	0	400	1,778

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	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$1,475,000	\$1,070,000	-	-	\$1,475,000	\$1,070,000
Enhance	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	-	-	-	-	\$1,475,000	\$1,070,000	-	-	\$1,475,000	\$1,070,000

Target Lake/Stream/River Feet or Miles

3.0 miles

Explain the success/shortage of acre goals

Minnesota Land Trust purchased a conservation easement over a large working grasslands property in Kittson County, where land prices were deflated relative to other areas of the program area proposed for this grant. As a result, we were able to achieve 445% of our stated acreage goals for the grant.

Outcomes

Programs in forest-prairie transition region:

- Protected, restored, and enhanced aspen parklands and riparian areas ~ *This program permanently protected 1,777 acres of prairie, grasslands, oak savanna, wetlands and woodlands, and enhanced 140 acres of working grasslands in the forest-prairie transition region. In total, 220 acres of native prairie was protected. Measure: Acres protected; acres restored/enhanced.*

Programs in prairie region:

- Remnant native prairies are part of large complexes of restored prairies, grasslands, and large and small wetlands ~ *No projects were completed within the Prairie Region of Minnesota through this grant.*

Parcels

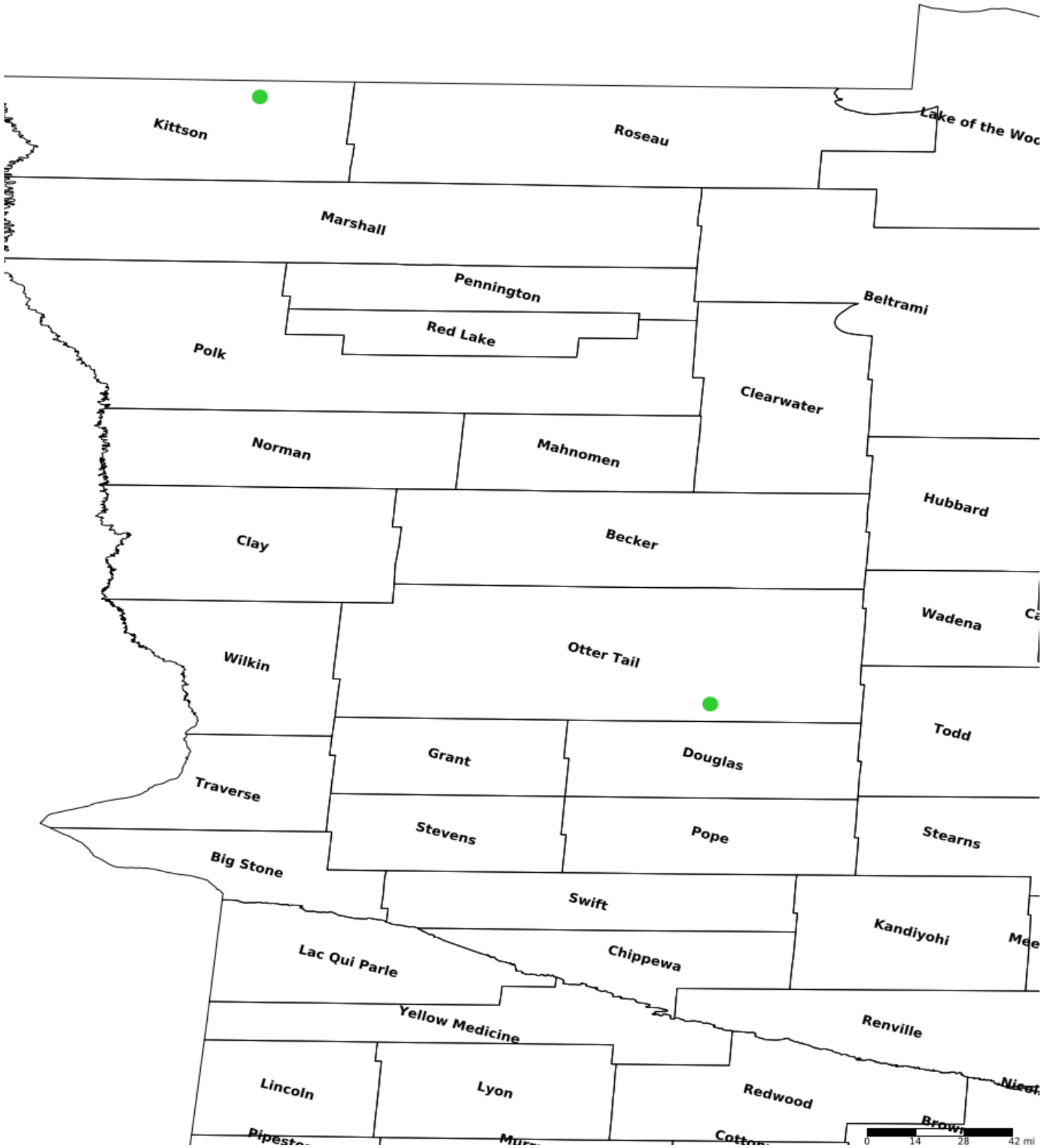
Sign-up Criteria?

No

Easement Parcels

Name	County	TRDS	Acres	Est Cost	Existing Protection
Caribou Parklands (Finney)	Kittson	16346221	1,510	\$352,000	No
Perch Lake (Samuelson)	Otter Tail	13138204	267	\$340,000	No

Parcel Map



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