

Easement site preserves family legacy, restores habitat



Six years after seeding, wildflowers and native grasses flourish on Paul Brutlag's family farm in Otter Tail County. A combination of state and federal funding made wetland and prairie restorations possible. **Photo Credit:** BWSR

Developers envisioned houses on Paul Brutlag's lake-view property in Otter Tail County.

But Brutlag chose instead to place 129 acres of his Eagle Lake Township farm into a perpetual easement through a state and federal partnership. Seven years later and six years after seeding, yellow, lavender and pink wildflowers bloom among native grasses in the restored wetland and prairie.

The project came about through the state's Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Reserve Program administered by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) and the federal Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) administered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

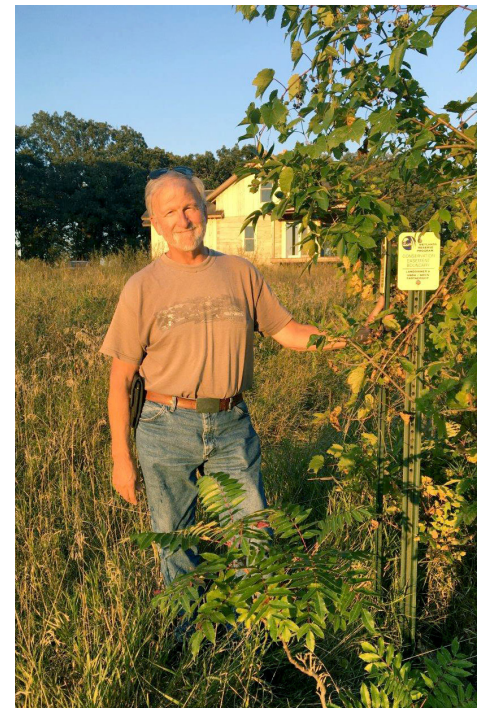
"This project was one of many wetland

restoration projects done under the RIM-WRP partnership," said BWSR Executive Director John Jaschke. "It brought the best of both programs to one place: It allowed us to achieve permanent wetland restoration and prairie with both state and federal funding."

Brutlag said the native plants that now flourish in the restored wetland and prairie help make the property look as he imagines it did when his family homesteaded the land in the 1860s.

"It was very fitting to convert this land back to its natural habitat," Brutlag said. "From a family perspective, we decided that was equally as important as using it for a developmental project."

After the easement was recorded, with Brutlag's strong support, the



Paul Brutlag stands near a sign marking the boundary of his conservation easement on his Eagle Lake Township farm in September.

Photo Credit: BWSR

RIM-WRP payments were used in fall 2011 to restore 13 previously drained wetland basins. BWSR staff designed the wetland restoration and helped with project oversight. An NRCS soil scientist completed soil borings in each basin to determine how much sediment had accumulated during years of farming in the steep land. Excess sediment was removed and deposited on the surrounding hills.

The wetland hydrology was restored by removing drainage tile, plugging ditches and constructing earthen embankments with spillways.

Removing washed-in sediment exposed the native seed bank, allowing several native wetland plants to grow. The RIM-WRP funding made it possible for Minnesota Native Landscapes to seed the area in 2012 with a mix of native plants.

Brutlag is no stranger to conservation. He served two terms as a citizen board member on BWSR's Board of Directors from 2004-2012 and was the first Chairperson of the RIM Reserve Committee. His family's farming operation still produces sugar beets, corn, soybeans and wheat.

"Paul was an exceptional landowner



Paul Brutlag stands among native grasses in September on the restored prairie on his property. The farm has been in Brutlag's family since they settled the land in the 1860s. **Photo Credit: BWSR**

to work with because he stayed involved in the process," said John Hansel, a Ducks Unlimited contractor who assisted with the application process and coordinated restoration plans. "He really sacrificed a lot of area with development potential to make this possible."

Brutlag said he pursued the easement to enhance the natural beauty of his family's property and to benefit

wildlife habitat. He also wanted to raise awareness for the RIM-WRP partnership, and show that wetland restorations could be successfully completed on hills.

"Part of the benefit and functionality and usage of RIM is to create a public awareness so people understand the value of preservation and restoration of certain types of land," Brutlag said.



Native wildflowers bloom in the restored prairie on Paul Brutlag's farm. The restoration was made possible after Brutlag enrolled 129 acres into a conservation easement through the Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Reserve Program administered by BWSR and the Wetlands Reserve Program administered by USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). **Photo Credit: BWSR**

