



Camp Ripley's forestry partnerships



Natural Resources Conservation Service website: www.nrcs.usda.gov

VIDEO: Meet a landowner who tapped NRCS' previous RCPP to offset the cost of improving private forestland within the Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape.

NRCS' \$400,000 contribution agreement with Morrison SWCD and its \$2.7 million Regional Conservation Partnership Program renewal focus on the Sentinel Landscape, where management can improve habitat and protect the National Guard's mission

LITTLE FALLS — With an infusion of funds and a focus on forestry, the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service is making it easier and less costly for private landowners to manage their property within the Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape, a 10-mile buffer that simultaneously protects natural resources and the National Guard's training mission.

The Mississippi River runs through the 52,830-acre regional center, where about 30,000 military personnel and



Wettstein

civilians train every year. Forests lie to the north, farm fields to the south. Those lands buffer Camp Ripley from Brainerd area sprawl; harbor an array of wildlife; and put distance between residents and the

sometimes-loud operations that run 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

To date, the Morrison Soil & Water

From left: Camp Ripley Environmental Supervisor Josh Pennington; NRCS District Conservationist Team Lead Josh Hanson; Lt. Col. Steve Hall; Brig. Gen Lowell Kruse, senior commander at Camp Ripley; Morrison SWCD forester Lew Noska, SWCD Manager Shannon Wettstein; and Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape Coordinator Todd Holman discussed the forestry work within Camp Ripley's Sentinel Landscape made possible by a cooperative agreement between NRCS and the Morrison SWCD. **Photo Credits:** Ann Wessel, BWSR

Details and Definitions

CAMP RIPLEY SENTINEL

LANDSCAPE: One of 10 in the U.S., the [Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape](#) is an award-winning model of myriad partnerships working together to sustain compatible land use for military operations while providing conservation and working-lands benefits. It launched in 2015. ACUB now operates within the Sentinel Landscape.

SENTINEL LANDSCAPE

PARTNERS: Federal — U.S. Army National Guard; the USDA's Farm Service Agency, Forest Service, NRCS; the U.S. Department of Defense's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration; U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, National Park Service. State — Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, Department of Agriculture, Department of Military Affairs, Department of Natural Resources, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. Local — Mississippi Headwaters Board, Morrison SWCD, Crow Wing SWCD, the city of Baxter, Cass County's Sylvan Township. Private — Great River Greening, The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy, The Forest Stewards Guild.

ONE-SOURCE

RESOURCE: A new [interactive map](#), searchable by address, shows a database of all currently funded state and federal program opportunities available to landowners in the Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape.



Camp Ripley is 18 miles long and 8 miles wide, with 18 miles of undeveloped, undisturbed Mississippi River flowing through it. About 30,000 military personnel and civilians train at Camp Ripley every year.

Conservation District has worked with landowners to enroll 329 permanent easements totaling 33,126 acres within the tighter, 5-mile Army Compatible Use Buffer. Those working-lands easements restrict development and help wildlife — giving animals such as gray wolves and white-tailed deer enough room to roam, retaining niche habitats for species such as the federally threatened Northern long-eared bat.

“Landowners that have enrolled into these protection mechanisms are now looking at ways to improve management of the resources they have,” said Josh Pennington, environmental supervisor at Camp Ripley.

A new NRCS agreement and a renewed NRCS funding source offer technical and financial support.

A \$400,000, three-year contribution agreement between NRCS and the Morrison SWCD, which took effect in August 2021, is bringing forestry related training and technical assistance to the 805,000-

“ Any work that’s done outside of Camp Ripley helps support Camp Ripley’s mission as well. ”

— Josh Pennington,
Camp Ripley environmental supervisor



acre Sentinel Landscape. The agreement gave the SWCD the means to hire a forester, and to subcontract with the Forest Stewards Guild to train regional staff and landowners in prescribed burning.

“This agreement is really focused on long-term resiliency in the forested northern half of the Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape. This part of the state has large, intact habitat corridors that are almost entirely privately managed,” said Morrison SWCD Manager Shannon Wettstein.

Forestland makes up 35% of the Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape, primarily in Cass, Crow Wing, northern Morrison and part of Todd counties. All but 0.5% of those forests are privately owned.

“We’ve got a lot of invasive

species on the landscape, like buckthorn, that’s really changing the dynamics of forestry in the area. There’s other management practices, like forest thinnings and prescribed fire, that have been absent,” Pennington said.

Invasive species out-compete native plants and trees, resulting in degraded habitat. Unmanaged forests become less resilient.

“There’s a lot of work that could be done,” Wettstein said.

The \$2,760,280 in NRCS assistance tied to a five-year Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) renewal that took effect in July will make that work more affordable for landowners within the Sentinel Landscape. Landowners can receive a forestry management plan that considers their goals

Related Work

RESILIENCY RESEARCH:

Researcher Will Bartsch of the University of Minnesota Duluth’s Natural Resources Research Institute will analyze GIS and other data to produce a report that will help Morrison SWCD determine where and on what type of forestry practices it should focus to build resiliency on the landscape. The SWCD funded the \$150,000 study with part of the \$240,000 award it received from the National Association of Conservation Districts for winning a Department of Defense REPI challenge. It earmarked \$50,000 for the DNR to update LiDAR databases, and \$40,000 for SWCD staff time. The 15-month award runs through June 2023.

CULTURAL RESOURCES

INVENTORY: Cass County’s Sylvan Township received a \$129,980 Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund grant from the Minnesota Historical Society in 2020 for a Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape archaeological and comprehensive literature assessment. Work finished April 15, 2022. It’s a first step in protecting cultural resources.



Bob Perleberg walked down one of the trails that provides access to 480 acres of managed forestland punctuated by wildlife food plots and ponds. The Perlebergs have planted and harvested trees in an effort to maintain a thinned stand of multi-aged mixed hardwoods. Because their land lies within the Sentinel Landscape, which extends 10 miles from Camp Ripley, NRCS assistance was available to offset the cost of some management practices.

and resource concerns, and then pursue NRCS assistance to implement practices.

Todd Holman, Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape coordinator and Mississippi Headwaters program director for The Nature Conservancy, explained how the agreement and RCPP work together.

“Couple (the agreement) with the Regional Conservation Partnership Program and NRCS dollars to fund practices, and now all of a sudden we’ve got capacity to deliver, the money to do the work, and now it’s engaging with landowners,” Holman said.

Outreach is part of Morrison SWCD forester Lew Noska’s job.

Since he joined the Morrison SWCD in November, Noska has facilitated

“ The biggest obstacle is a pretty easy one: our own egos as landowners. We don’t want change. We don’t look forward. We don’t look at the health of the forest. We look at what we want, and we want big, fat over-mature trees. ”

— Bob Perleberg, landowner, private forestry consultant



Forest Stewards Guild prescribed burn trainings for landowners hosted by Camp Ripley. He meets with landowners to see their property, hear their goals, and then write a management plan that serves as the basis for RCPP assistance.

“A lot of my job is to guide people in the right direction,” Noska said. “I want to have the tools to offer landowners the best

possible (management) tools for their property, whether it be for wildlife, water or just species diversity and resiliency.”

Little Falls-based NRCS District Conservationist Josh Hanson said NRCS and the SWCD had worked with forestry before. The Sentinel Landscape program expanded and accelerated that work, giving landowners access to an array of state and federal programs.

Army Compatible Use Buffer Update

Working with willing private landowners, the Army Compatible Use Buffer has permanently protected habitat corridors by buffering public lands to prevent habitat conversion on adjacent lands. It’s preserved open spaces within the Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape, and allowed for practices that improve habitat heterogeneity, and soil and water quality via forest and agricultural enhancements, restoration and mitigation.

PROTECTION PROGRESS:

With 126,351 acres protected, Camp Ripley and the Morrison SWCD are halfway to meeting the goal of protecting 252,637 acres within the 5-mile ACUB radius. Nearly 34% was already protected — as existing public land or easements through the DNR’s Sustainable Forest Incentive Act.

EASEMENTS: As of July 2022, SWCD staff has worked with landowners to record 329 permanent Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) easements totaling 33,216 acres within the ACUB radius. ACUB aims to enroll 78,000 acres into permanent, voluntary conservation easements that purchase development rights. The SWCD is working from a database of 716 tracts. As funds become available, the SWCD will work through the remaining 387 tracts that landowners had expressed interest in enrolling. As of July 2022, available funding included \$3.7 million from the U.S. Department of Defense’s REPI program and \$4,026,000 in state Outdoor Heritage Funds.

“All of a sudden we have 30 different partners from different government units, NGOs (non-government organizations), just all kinds of different people,” Hanson said. “A lot of people have an idea what they want to do, but they don’t know how to get there. The big thing right now is the education of the customers — what they want to do out there, and how they want to meet that objective.”

Noska, who spends part of his time at Camp Ripley, can help landowners navigate the many options.

“Having this cooperation with NRCS and having a (Morrison SWCD) forester here gives us another opportunity to partnership, which is the heart of what we do with our environmental programs. We partnership with a lot of different agencies,” said Brig. Gen. Lowell Kruse, “all in an effort to keep the installation from having any kind of problems — problems with an inability for our soldiers to train and do what they want to because of an environmental concern, or actually creating environmental concerns with our training.”

Seven miles east of Camp Ripley, C-130 cargo planes graze the treetops on 480 acres Bob Perleberg and

“ We’re trying to create more opportunities for landowners to learn alongside of us, and bring in more dollars so they can do the management if they’re so inspired after they learn more about what they can do on their land. ”

— Josh Hanson, NRCS district conservationist



his wife, Donna, bought about 25 years ago. Today, the land is an example of a well-managed private forest within the Sentinel Landscape.

Perleberg tapped NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) assistance through the previous Sentinel Landscape RCPP to offset the expenses of combatting blister rust and invasive buckthorn, retaining snags and managing woody debris.

His definition of a well-managed central Minnesota forest: an ungrazed, thinned stand of multi-aged mixed hardwoods with a well-established, naturally regenerating understory.

“The biggest obstacle is a pretty easy one: our own egos as landowners,” said Perleberg, who has written stewardship plans for

others within the Sentinel Landscape in his role as a private forestry consultant. “We don’t want change. We don’t look forward. We don’t look at the health of the forest. We look at what we want, and we want big, fat over-mature trees.”

A mature stand of oaks extends a graceful canopy over one of Perleberg’s trails. But he’s more enthusiastic about the stand of birch, and about the far less parklike regeneration that followed a successful timber sale.

“You have to look past what you want and say, ‘What does the forest want?’ The decisions you make and the decisions you don’t make are going to impact that piece of woods for hundreds of years,” Perleberg said. “When you walk through the woods you should say, ‘What do I want here in 200 years?’ Because these decisions we’re making now with oak in central Minnesota are

going to be impacting us in 200 years.”

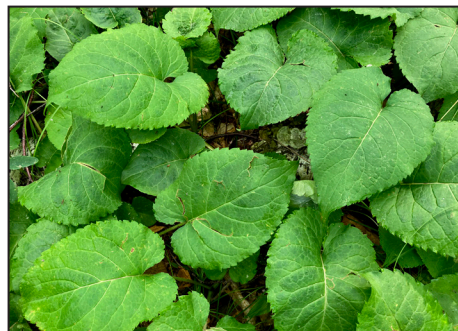
Over two decades, the Perlebergs have harvested timber, planted trees, added wildlife food plots and ponds, and maintained 9 miles of trails that extend to a small lake on the edge of the property. Timber wolves, bears and, more recently, fishers, show up on their trail cameras. Deer favor the diverse habitat.

What benefits wildlife within the Sentinel Landscape benefits Camp Ripley, too.

“Camp Ripley cannot provide the habitat needs for a lot of these species in a vacuum. It really takes a lot of management and protection on private lands surrounding Camp Ripley to really benefit the needs of these species and protect their habitat,” Pennington said. “As habitat fragmentation occurs outside of Camp Ripley, those animals move on to Camp Ripley.”

That can pit environmental stewardship and natural resources management against the need for military training.

“Camp Ripley cannot manage resources in a silo. It takes a larger landscape, and private lands surrounding Camp Ripley are critical,” Pennington said.



Bob and Donna Perleberg have planted trees, encouraged an understory of native plants and left downed timber as habitat on their 480-acre property. Today, it’s an example of a well-managed private forest within the Sentinel Landscape. The Perlebergs tapped NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Conservation Stewardship Program assistance through a previous Regional Conservation Partnership Program award centered on the Sentinel Landscape.

Meet Morrison SWCD's new forester

NRCS-backed position expands ability to work with private landowners

When the Morrison Soil & Water Conservation District hired forester Lew Noska, it expanded the capacity to provide expertise — and one more point of contact — for landowners throughout Morrison County and the Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape.

“There is a large chunk of Morrison County that is forested,” said Morrison SWCD Manager Shannon Wettstein. “To have someone that can specifically help landowners with their questions and how to manage lands is priceless.”

Noska earned a biology degree from Minnesota State University Moorhead in 2006, and then worked for an uncle's Browerville-based heating, ventilation and air conditioning business for 12 years. Most recently, he worked for five years as Todd County SWCD's wetland coordinator and buffer specialist. Noska joined the Morrison SWCD staff in November 2021. He remains a certified wetland delineator, and is the Walk-In Access coordinator for that DNR program in Morrison, Cass and Crow Wing counties.

Wettstein said Noska will be one more person



“A lot of my job is to guide people in the right direction,” said Morrison SWCD forester Lew Noska, who spends part of his time at Camp Ripley. “I want to have the tools to offer landowners the best possible (management) tools for their property, whether it be for wildlife, water or just species diversity and resiliency.”

landowners can get to know, trust and work with directly. The three-year NRCS contribution agreement requires Noska to complete 45 field visits with landowners and write 30 management plans. Most of the Sentinel Landscape's forestlands lie in Cass, Crow Wing, northern Morrison and part of Todd counties.

“It's just getting them that first initial contact where they can take that first step and get comfortable working with us, and then we can direct them in the right direction for what their objectives are, be it wildlife habitat, be it timber management — even if they

want to harvest timber,” Noska said.

Management plans that identify resource concerns are the basis for landowners to apply for assistance through NRCS' Regional Conservation Partnership Program.

Noska spends some of his time at Camp Ripley, where he earned a firefighter certification that allows him to work on its prescribed burn crew, and where he is working toward NRCS job approval authority. He facilitates Camp Ripley-hosted events for landowners and conservation professionals — including Forest Stewards

Guild learn-and-burn workshops, and a planned Oct. 1 forestry field day.

“We're trying to create more opportunities for landowners to learn alongside of us, and bring in more dollars so they can do the management if they're so inspired after they learn more about what they can do on their land,” said NRCS District Conservationist Josh Hanson.



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