

# Native Prairie Bank Easements



## Related Facts

About half of Minnesota's remaining native prairie is unprotected (~126,000 acres).

In Minnesota, 244 rare species are associated with native prairie ecosystems.

More than 15,000 acres are protected via Native Prairie Bank easements.

Native Prairie Bank easements protect more native prairie than any other private lands program in Minnesota.



## Summary

Prairies are recognized as one of the most threatened ecosystems in North America and temperate grasslands as one of the most endangered in the world. Tallgrass prairie, savanna and barren communities have declined by more than 98% nationwide. Prairies once covered about one third of Minnesota's land area, yet today, only 1-2% (~250,000 acres) of Minnesota's original native prairie still exists. Prairies also serve as critical habitat for a disproportionate number of rare species. In Minnesota, 41% of the state's rare species are associated with native prairie, even though native prairie comprises less than 0.5% of the land area. Although protection of native prairie has been a conservation priority for decades, nearly half of Minnesota's native prairie remains unprotected, with the vast majority occurring on privately-owned land.

Native Prairie Bank easements were authorized by the Minnesota legislature in 1987 to protect and manage native prairies while allowing the land to remain in private ownership. The Native Prairie Bank program prioritizes protection of the highest quality native prairies in the most strategic locations identified in the Minnesota Prairie Conservation Plan. Additionally, the long-term management support provided to Native Prairie Bank easement lands is unrivaled by any other easement program in the state. To date, 15,350 acres are protected via Native Prairie Bank easements across 177 sites.



## Proposal

This proposal serves to strengthen the Native Prairie Bank program and to better protect vulnerable native prairie lands in Minnesota by addressing the following problems:



### **Increase Native Prairie Bank easement payment rates to ensure rates are commensurate with the level of protection offered by the program.**

Currently, Native Prairie Bank easement payment rates are lower than other state and federal grassland easement programs that offer less protection. This discourages landowner enrollment in the program or drives landowners to programs not designed to protect native prairie. A 2019 analysis determined that less restrictive easements designed for lower quality grasslands frequently pay higher rates. Specifically, Native Prairie Bank rates have been 35% lower than Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) Re-Invest in Minnesota (RIM) grassland easements since 2016. Also, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service grassland easement payment rates are higher than Native Prairie Bank rates 50% of the time. For example, in Norway Township, Kittson County, the 2018 Native Prairie Bank rate was \$330.72/acre, while the 2018 RIM grassland easement rate was \$508.80/acre. Unfortunately, easement

programs targeting lower quality grasslands frequently lack the staff, funding and equipment needed to provide for the long-term management of high-quality native prairies. The current payment environment incentivizes landowners to pursue easements with lower protection standards through programs that have less capacity to meet the high level of management prairies require.

This proposal aims to define the Native Prairie Bank easement payment calculation as 10% above the BWSR non-cropland easement payment rate for the township in which the land is located. This change will ensure Native Prairie Bank payment rates are proportionate to the higher level of protection that is offered by the program. This change also ensures landowners with high-quality native prairies are attracted to the program that is best positioned to protect and manage these rare native prairies. Additionally, this proposal seeks to authorize the commissioner to pay up to 25% above the BWSR non-cropland easement payment rate for fee title acquisitions of native prairie. This change would eliminate potential payment conflicts between easements and fee title purchases of native prairie lands.



### **Allow Native Prairie Bank easements to be placed on School Trust Lands.**

Approximately 5% (7,025 acres) of Minnesota's remaining unprotected native prairie occurs on School Trust Lands—public lands set aside for the specific purpose of providing a continual source

of funding for public education. At present, the existing statute does not allow Native Prairie Bank easements to be placed on School Trust Lands. This restriction eliminates the state’s ability to utilize one of its best prairie protection and management tools on a significant amount of unprotected native prairie. By allowing Native Prairie Bank conservation easements to be placed on School Trust Lands, the state would be providing an opportunity to protect and manage these rare resources while providing an additional revenue source for the Permanent School Fund. This initiative is supported by the Office of School Trust Lands.

**Update the definition of Native Prairie to align with current DNR definitions.**

The existing definition of native prairie in Minnesota Statute 84.96 is outdated and does not align well with the native plant community classification system and current DNR prairie definitions. Knowledge of the types of prairies that occur in Minnesota has greatly expanded since this statute was written. For example, tree cover in unmanaged prairies frequently exceeds 10% before management intervention and tree cover in savannas is naturally between 25 and 50%. This proposal seeks to update the definition of native prairie in Minnesota Statute 84.96 to better reflect current scientific knowledge of prairie communities.



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