



August 2, 2013

To: NRCS Area and Field Offices
Soil and Water Conservation Districts
Ducks Unlimited RIM-WRP Contractors
Farm Bill Assistance Partnership Employees
Pheasants Forever Farm Bill Biologists
BWSR Easement Section Staff
NRCS Easement Section Staff

The RIM-WRP partnership has been the premier wetlands restoration program in the country since 2008. To date 1000's of acres have been enrolled and will be protected into perpetuity by this unique partnership. Unfortunately our success has also created a significant backlog of projects and the time to complete projects has slipped to the point where it now takes 2-3 years from the time that an application is funded to the time that the easement is secured and the landowner receives the payment. We acknowledge that this problem needs to be fixed or there will be little interest from prospective landowners for the program. Furthermore, we acknowledge that this situation puts field staff in the difficult position of trying to market a program without full confidence in timely and valued results.

We also wish to state for the record that this situation is untenable and we are taking immediate steps to clear up the RIM-WRP backlog and dramatically decreasing the time that it takes to complete the RIM-WRP easement acquisition process moving forward. Our goal is to complete all 2009 to 2011 funded projects by December 31, 2013. Furthermore, starting with the 2013 sign-up, our goal is to close easements within 12 months of approving an application.

To address the backlog we have agreed to implement the following items immediately:

- 1) NRCS will hire two easement processors with financial assistance from BWSR. These new staff will focus on clearing up RIM-WRP backlog projects and expediting newly funded RIM-WRP applications.
- 2) BWSR staff will seek Board approval to offer current rates to landowners with unclosed applications as compensation for delayed closing. The NRCS WRP portion of the RIM-WRP easement payment will remain the same, but the RIM portion may be increased to reflect rising land values.
- 3) SWCD's will be encouraged to manage the easement process for 2013 RIM-WRP funded applications as they do for RIM. NRCS and BWSR are in the process of reviewing each funded application in the backlog to determine if they are still viable projects. Those that are not viable will be terminated. However, the goal is to close the easements on as many projects as possible and maximize on the ground conservation.
- 4) The work off-easement issue has been resolved. Starting with 2014, BWSR has agreed to pay for off-easement work necessary to complete a project. NRCS will remain a full partner for the on-easement portions of these projects.

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- 5) NRCS has also hired Caroline Clarin as the State Wetland Restoration Engineer to focus on the wetland restoration backlog, coordinate directly with BWSR to maximize the engineering resources of both agencies and address the opportunities in the Red River Basin for the WRP retention initiative.
- 6) NRCS is in the process of filling the State Wetland Restoration Biologist to focus on the biological needs for wetland restorations, provide leadership and coordination with BWSR and the partners concerning the evaluation and ranking of potential sites, and address the opportunities in the Red River Basin for the WRP retention initiative.

For 2013 applications and beyond we have agreed to the following:

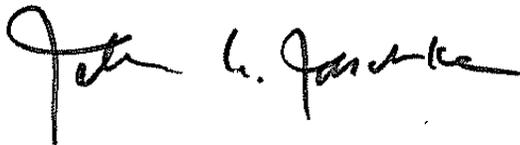
- 1) The goal of closing easements within 12 months of funding will continue.
- 2) Funded applications will be sorted by complexity. The simplest projects will be given priority to ensure rapid completion.
- 3) SWCD's will have the opportunity to manage the easement process for RIM-WRP as they do currently for RIM.
- 4) Additional training will be offered for new and existing employees on the Wetland Restoration Guide and RIM/WRP Administration. A clear understanding of these processes by field staff marketing RIM-WRP will help them to set realistic expectations for prospective landowners.

RIM-WRP has been a success because of our dedicated partners and local conservation staff working with landowners to enroll in the program. We have heard from many sources that the low interest in the 2013 sign-up is as much due to delays on our part as it is to high crop and land values. As you can see from the above actions, we are committed to turning this around and ask for your continued help and support in securing permanently protected grassland and wetland acres for future generations of Minnesotans.

Sincerely,



Don Baloun
State Conservationist
NRCS



John Jaschke
Executive Director
Board of Water and Soil Resources

From: [Bill Becker](#)
To: [Jaschke, John \(BWSR\)](#)
Subject: RIM/WRP Backlog
Date: Monday, August 19, 2013 2:58:37 PM
Attachments: [Baloun-Jaschke RIM-WRP letter \(4\) docx Final \(2\).pdf](#)

John,

BWSR and LSOHC staff have, in the past, discussed the extraordinarily long time it takes to close a BWSR RIM/WRP easement. The backlog is an area of common concern. It has been the subject of testimony before the Council. We have been assured BWSR is taking steps to solve the problem. I recently received a copy of the attached letter dated August 2, 2013, commenting on the gravity of the backlog in closing easements and laying out a plan to address it. The letter is signed by you and Mr. Baloun and addressed to your RIM/WRP partners. I regret you and Mr. Baloun did not send the letter directly to the Council or to the Council office for distribution. The Council has stood by your side for five years recommending funding for RIM/WRP. We should be notified when BWSR and NRCS make a major announcement like this one. At the same time I am pleased that BWSR and NRCS are taking steps to eliminate the backlog. I recognize the lion's share of the steps being taken address the NRCS role rather than the BWSR role. This is a reflection of the staffing and priority setting changes BWSR has already made to address this issue.

The letter doesn't reference whether the fiscal years referred to are state or federal. So, be reminded you that you have received appropriations from the State of Minnesota's Outdoor Heritage Fund in state fiscal years 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14. The five year total BWSR has received for the RIM/WRP program from the OHF is approximately \$44,000,000. You should have a joint BWSR/NRCS plan to work the unencumbered balance in these appropriations down to zero by June 30, 2014. LSOHC staff and concerned members will review your status reports due in August of 2014 for assurance you are meeting this schedule.

This announcement about the steps being taken to address the backlog comes at a fortunate time. LSOHC hearings on requests for funding through appropriations in the 2014 session are scheduled for the first week in September. At your hearing to discuss your current request you have the opportunity to address the issues in the letter. I expect you to have an explanation of the problems and the solution. Council members will be concerned and will need assurance that you have identified the problems, have a clear understanding of them, and have crafted a reasonable and likely successful solution.

Please contact us in the future with significant announcements about programs for which LSOHC has recommended funding.

Sincerely,

Bill Becker
Executive Director
Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council