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Forestland Protected Near Camp Ripley in Central Minnesota Benefits Communities and Environment

Private and public partners work together to support Camp Ripley's training mission while providing new public recreation access, educational opportunities and environmental conservation

CASS AND CROW WING COUNTIES — Today, several partners announced a large conservation milestone near the Camp Ripley Army National Guard Base, which will prevent incompatible development and support environmental, educational and recreational opportunities in central Minnesota. The Conservation Fund helped the City of Baxter and Sylvan Township acquire a total of 718 acres within the Camp Ripley Army Compatible Use Buffer (ACUB) priority area, which is a critical component of the larger Sentinel Landscape—a roughly 805,000-acre boundary around the installation deemed high priority for protection.

Camp Ripley is an important economic engine of central Minnesota, and its Sentinel Landscape is critical for providing both ecological conservation and public recreation opportunities. The forestlands within the Sentinel Landscape not only protect the headwaters and water quality for the Mississippi River, but allow Camp Ripley to complete training with few impediments. In recent years, this land has faced high risk of being sold and converted to private development, which impacts its ecological value and hinders the installation's mission to train soldiers. To avoid this outcome, the partners

supporting Camp Ripley, including the City of Baxter, Sylvan Township, The Conservation Fund and others have united to acquire and protect land in the Sentinel Landscape's borders. The partners have a near term goal of purchasing and conserving roughly 1,500 acres within and near the boundary from PotlatchDeltic Corporation across both Cass and Crow Wing counties.

"Our forests, grassland and waterways provide a practical benefit to Camp Ripley and our neighbors. By helping to hold back encroachment on the boundaries of our training area as well as the recreational surroundings we all enjoy as Minnesotans, we can work to ensure the readiness of our armed forces and the positive quality of everyone's precious free time for years to come," said Brigadier General Lowell Kruse, Camp Ripley Senior Commander.

With funding provided by the Department of Defense's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program and Minnesota Environmental and Natural Resources Trust Fund, the City of Baxter now owns 638 acres, and Sylvan Township owns 80 acres. The lands, which were acquired from PotlatchDeltic, will remain forested and be accessible to the community.

"This was a very rare opportunity for the City of Baxter to have such a large block of open space within city limits," said City of Baxter Mayor Darrel Olson. "The land preserved within Baxter includes forested property along the Mississippi River and Pike Creek and connects to Island Lake and to Sylvan Township. We were pleased for the opportunity to partner with Camp Ripley, The Conservation Fund, Brainerd Public Schools, and PotlatchDeltic. It is exciting that this land allows the School District the opportunity to expand their successful school forest program. We are also excited for all of the people that will be able to enjoy this unique amenity within the City of Baxter into the future."

"This effort is unlike anything the Minnesota community has tried before," said Kim M. Berns-Melhus, The Conservation Fund's Minnesota State Director. "The unique and cooperative way various partners—from PotlatchDeltic to the Department of Defense—came together to achieve a larger mission is truly remarkable. We would like to thank

U.S. Senators Amy Klobuchar and Tina Smith and U.S. Representative Pete Stauber for their support for the REPI program that made this project possible. This will certainly serve as a model for future conservation efforts across the state.”

“The addition of these open spaces to Sylvan Township’s public lands fits well with our Comprehensive Plan,” said Greg Booth, Chair of the Sylvan Town Board. “The Township is committed to preserving these important green spaces for the benefit of its residents, wildlife, water quality and native species. The acquisition of these parcels also fits well with our partnership with Camp Ripley in creating a buffer zone that is good for the camp, residents, visitors and the environment. Sylvan Township is pleased to add these acres to our established parks and green spaces for everyone to use and enjoy. We greatly appreciate the work of The Conservation Fund, which helped make this happen.”

“The outcome announced today provides wide ranging benefits for the residents of Minnesota. This was the result of a broadly shared vision from multiple stakeholders, and we are proud to be part of the team that made this happen,” said Bill DeReu, Vice President for Real Estate at PotlatchDeltic Corp.

Funding in part from the Department of Defense’s REPI program helped make these purchases possible. Authorized by Congress, REPI supports cost-sharing partnerships between military services, private conservation groups, and state and local governments to remove or avoid land-use conflicts near installations. REPI funding provides critical support for Camp Ripley’s ACUB program to avoid land use conflicts that could hinder installation training operations. The REPI program is annually funded by the U.S. Congress with strong support from the delegation representing the City of Baxter and Sylvan Township: U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar, U.S. Senator Tina Smith and U.S. Representative Pete Stauber.

“In Minnesota, we deeply value the outdoors—our lakes, rivers, and wetlands, our forests and prairies, our wildlife habitats, and our abundant farmland,” U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar said. “This program benefits both our military facilities and the environment. It’s critical that we protect the natural resources we enjoy while also ensuring that Camp Ripley has the training areas to maintain the National Guard’s preparedness.”

“This conservation effort is an example of the impressive work that public and private partners in Minnesota can achieve when we all work together,” said U.S. Senator Tina Smith. “Not only will this land help our servicemembers train and prepare, but it will offer recreational activities such as hiking and fishing, include an outdoor classroom for Baxter Schools and protect hundreds of acres of forestland. I look forward to following how this area is used and conserved.”

This acquisition helped establish a corridor of protected land in southwest Baxter, located along the Mississippi River. This area is also vital wildlife habitat for species such as the state-threatened Blanding’s turtle and Minnesota’s highest concentration of red-shouldered hawks. Some land will also be available for limited hunting and fishing. The acquisition will achieve park and trail goals within the City of Baxter’s Comprehensive Plan linking the Baxter park system, schools, and the Paul Bunyan State Trail. Roughly 200 acres will be added to the existing Baxter Overlook Park and will also be used as an outdoor forest classroom area for Baxter schools.

“We have one of the more utilized school forests in the State of Minnesota. Our outdoor classroom is an opportunity that helps make Forestview Middle School and Brainerd ISD 181 a special school system in which to study and learn. Access to this new forested land, wetlands, Pike Creek and the Mississippi River is an exciting opportunity as it provides access to new habitats and ecosystems for students to expand outdoor learning. The proximity of this property to the school forest will also help ensure the plant and animal diversity of natural areas we value so much for recreational, athletic extracurricular, and academic activities,” said Chris Hanson, Forestview Middle School Science Teacher.

This milestone was a major step in the ongoing efforts for Camp Ripley’s Sentinel Landscape, as well as for larger conservation efforts across central Minnesota. Through funding provided by the Minnesota Outdoor Heritage Fund, The Conservation Fund currently owns additional forestlands nearby that they will eventually convey to Cass and Crow Wing counties. The Fund is also working with private landowners, the Estrems, to acquire 60 acres that will add to the community open space plans for the future.

Phil and Rose Estrem said: “We were amazed how so many different organizations worked so well together to make something good for people now and in the future.”

About The Conservation Fund

At The Conservation Fund, we make conservation work for America. By creating solutions that make environmental and economic sense, we are redefining conservation to demonstrate its essential role in our future prosperity. Top-ranked for efficiency and effectiveness, we have worked in all 50 states since 1985 to protect more than eight million acres of land, including nearly 310,000 acres in Minnesota.

About Camp Ripley Army National Guard

Camp Ripley is a 53,000-acre regional training center hosting numerous ranges and state-of-the-art facilities to support the training requirements of military and civilian agencies. In addition to providing resources enabling customers to train in a realistic environment, CRTC remains committed to environmentally-sound stewardship throughout Central Minnesota to include its 18 miles of undeveloped Mississippi River shoreline.

About Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape

The Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape covers over 805,000 acres of land along the northern stretch of the Mississippi River. The sentinel landscape also encompasses 40 minor watersheds, 50 miles of the Mississippi River, 49,000 acres of water bodies, the Crane Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, and 42,000 acres of public land. Since 2015, partners have pursued innovative, grassroots projects that protect agricultural and recreational land around the installation. As a result, the sentinel landscape has improved the quality of water entering the Mississippi River, preserved critical habitat corridors, bolstered local agricultural economies, and enabled Camp Ripley to conduct year-round training activities with limited restrictions.

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Views from protected land along the Mississippi River. Photo courtesy of Josh Doty

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