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# Forestry partnerships focus on land surrounding Camp Ripley

A \$400,000 contribution renews focus on the Sentinel Landscape, where private lands' forest management can improve resiliency and habitat, protect the National Guard's mission.



Assembling July 7 to discuss forestry work within Camp Ripley's Sentinel Landscape are Camp Ripley Environmental Supervisor Josh Pennington, left; Natural Resources Conservation Service District Conservationist Josh Hanson; Lt. Col. Steve Hall; Brig. Gen. Lowell Kruse, senior commander at Camp Ripley; Morrison SWCD forester Lew Noska; Morrison Soil and Water Conservation District Manager Shannon Wettstein; and Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape Coordinator Todd Holman, who also serves as The Nature Conservancy's Mississippi Headwaters program director. A \$400,000 Natural Resources Conservation Service District infusion will expand partners' capacity to deliver forestry practices within the Sentinel Landscape.

Ann Wessel / Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources

By [Dispatch staff report](#)

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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 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 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-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 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.

“A lot of my job is to guide people in the right direction,” said Morrison Soil and Water Conservation District 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.”  
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Since he joined the Morrison SWCD in November, Noska has facilitated 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.

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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.

“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 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.

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