



September 6, 2024

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**RE: Lower Otter Tail River Corridor Habitat Restoration
(HA03: ML 2021, First Sp. Session, Ch. 1, Art. 1, Sec. 2, subd. 5(c)).**

Dear Council Members,

Buffalo-Red River Watershed District (BRRWD) is requesting an extension to our grant agreement for the Lower Otter Tail River Corridor Habitat Restoration (HA03: ML 2021, First Sp. Session, Ch. 1, Art. 1, Sec. 2, subd. 5(c)). BRRWD understands the Council has adopted a policy restricting scenarios when extensions are appropriate. We believe our request meets the requirements of the policy.

The goal of the Lower Otter Tail River Corridor Habitat Restoration is to enroll land in Reinvest In Minnesota (RIM) program to acquire permanent easements to protect and enhance the habitat along the Lower Otter Tail River in Wilkin County. To date, BRRWD, in partnership with the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), has made good progress on working with landowners to acquire RIM permanent conservation easements. BRRWD has successfully enrolled three landowners in the RIM program for a total value of approximately \$189,000.00 which will enroll 48 acres in the RIM program. Three additional landowners have expressed strong interest in signing up for the RIM program, which would allocate an additional \$500,000.00 and enroll 105 acres in RIM.

There have been three extraordinary circumstances related to unforeseen circumstance that have impacted the timeline of progress for the Lower Otter Tail River Corridor Habitat Restoration.

- 1) Landowner outreach to secure easements has been more challenging than anticipated. One of the key components of the project is to enroll landowners in the Reinvest In Minnesota (RIM) easement program, to provide permanent conservation for habitat. Enrolling land in the RIM program is voluntary and has taken more time and effort for landowners to agree to enroll in the program than originally anticipated. In addition, BWSR has advised BRRWD that RIM easements typically take 18-24 months to finalize, once receiving signature from a landowner. As such, landowners that have already enrolled their land in the RIM program may not have finalized easements with payments executed by the time the grant is set to expire on June 30, 2025. An extension from the Council will allow BRRWD to ensure RIM easements are finalized and payment is executed before the grant expires. BRRWD has discussed the extension request with BWSR, as a project partner, and they support the requested extension.

- 2) BRRWD spent over a year working with United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to coordinate the restoration of the Lower Otter Tail River. Restoration work would have been partially funded by USACE with the acquisition of RIM easements for habitat protection completed through this grant. Ultimately, BRRWD had to forego the potential funding partnership with USACE because the funding goals did not align with the habitat protection and enhancement goals of the RIM easements. BRRWD still plans to restore the Lower Otter Tail River with other funding sources already obtained.
- 3) BRRWD partnered with the local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to assist with landowner outreach and enrollment in the RIM program. The SWCD office had multiple staff turnover during the grant period. Staff turnover resulted in significant delays. BRRWD has now started working with landowners directly to market the RIM program for Lower Otter Tail River Corridor Habitat Restoration.

Due to these extraordinary circumstances, and to allow for additional landowners to enroll their land in RIM easements, we are requesting an extension until June 30, 2027, to ensure RIM easements are finalized and payment is executed before the grant expires.

We appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,



Kristine Goeden
Administrator