



WRE Overview

State Technical
Advisory Committee

October 15th, 2024

ACEP (Agricultural Conservation Easement Program)



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graph TD; ACEP[ACEP (Agricultural Conservation Easement Program)] --> WRE[Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE)]; ACEP --> ALE[Agricultural Land Easement (ALE)];
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Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE)

help private and tribal landowners **protect, restore and enhance wetlands** which have been previously degraded due to agricultural uses

Agricultural Land Easement (ALE)

help private and tribal landowners, land trusts, and other entities such as state and local governments **protect croplands and grasslands** on working farms and ranches **by limiting non-agricultural uses of the land** through conservation easements

FY24

Funds Allocation

- ACEP WRE General: \$1,035,825
 - >98% Spent
 - 1 new easement obligated for acquisition
- ACEP Stewardship: \$ 464,826
 - >99% Spent

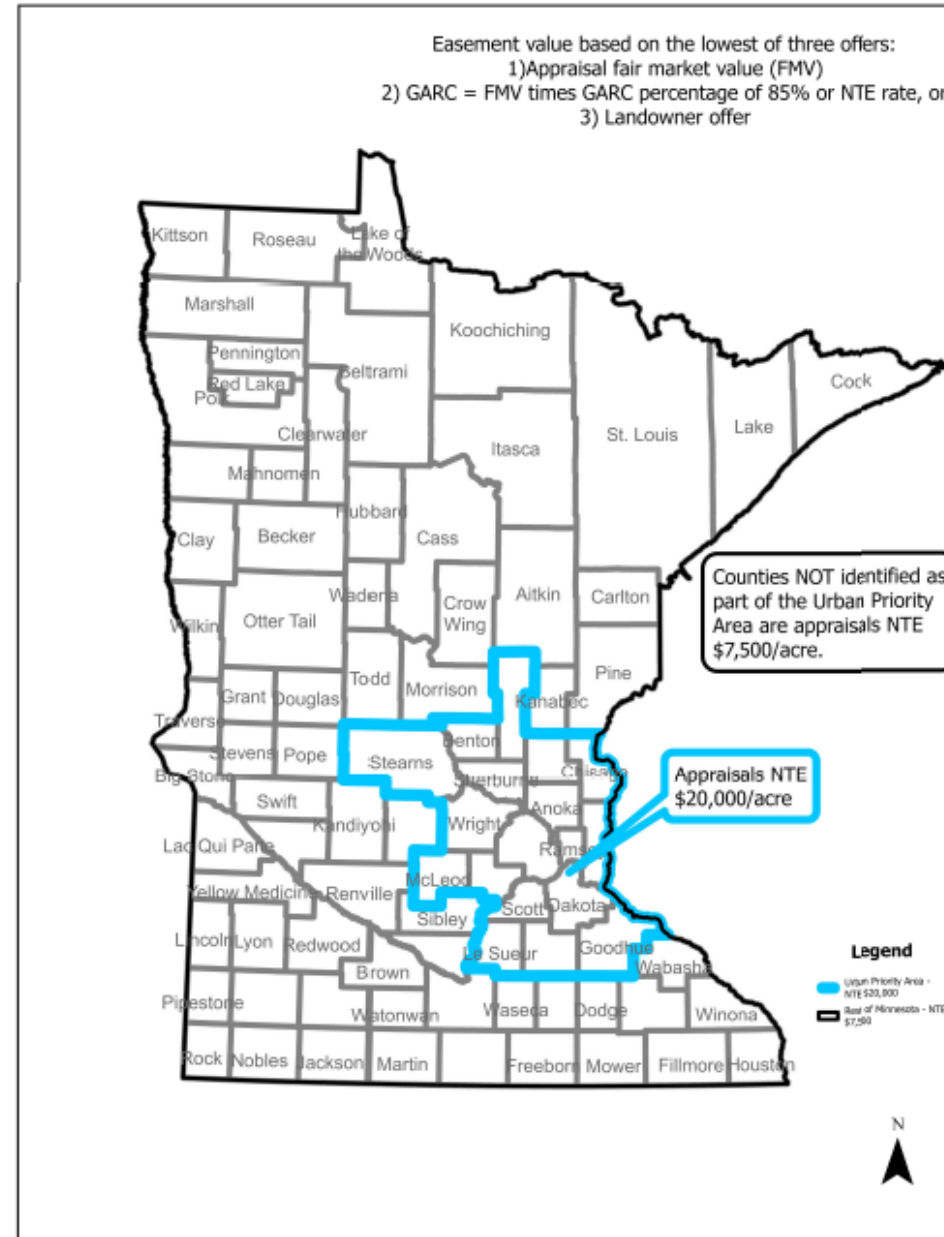
>60 contracts for management obligated in FY24

FY25

Funds Allocation

- ACEP WRE General: \$ 1,271,711
- ACEP Stewardship: \$643,000
- ACEP IRA: \$1,085,821

Minnesota Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) FY25 ACEP-WRE



Existing Easements

Program	Number of Easements	Number of Acres
ACEP-ALE	2	180
ACEP-WRE	23	2,508
Emergency Watershed Protection Program – Floodplain Easements (EWPP-FPE)	41	5,604
Emergency Wetland Reserve Program (EWRP)	25	2,103
Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP)	62	7,164
Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)	4	215
RCPP-HFRP	1	429
RCPP-WRE	2	115
Wetland Reserve Program (WRP)	965	115,282
Total	1,125	133,600

Management on Existing Easements

Stewardship over the last 5 years:

Funds Obligated	Easements	Acres
>\$17,000,000	>650	>62,500

Activities: Wetland Structure Maintenance and Repair, Brush Management, Prescribed Burning, Tree Removal, etc.

Funding Mechanism: CPC (landowner contracts), Federal Contracts

Program Overview and Restoration Considerations (WRE/WRP)

- USDA Farm Bill Program with primary goal of restoring and protecting wetlands while providing habitat for migratory wildlife
- Restore land to pre-European settlement conditions
- Secondary Goals:
 - Provide habitat for Threatened and Endangered Species
 - Protect and improve water quality
 - Floodwater attenuation
 - Carbon sequestration
 - Protection of native flora and fauna
 - Protection of open space and aesthetic quality

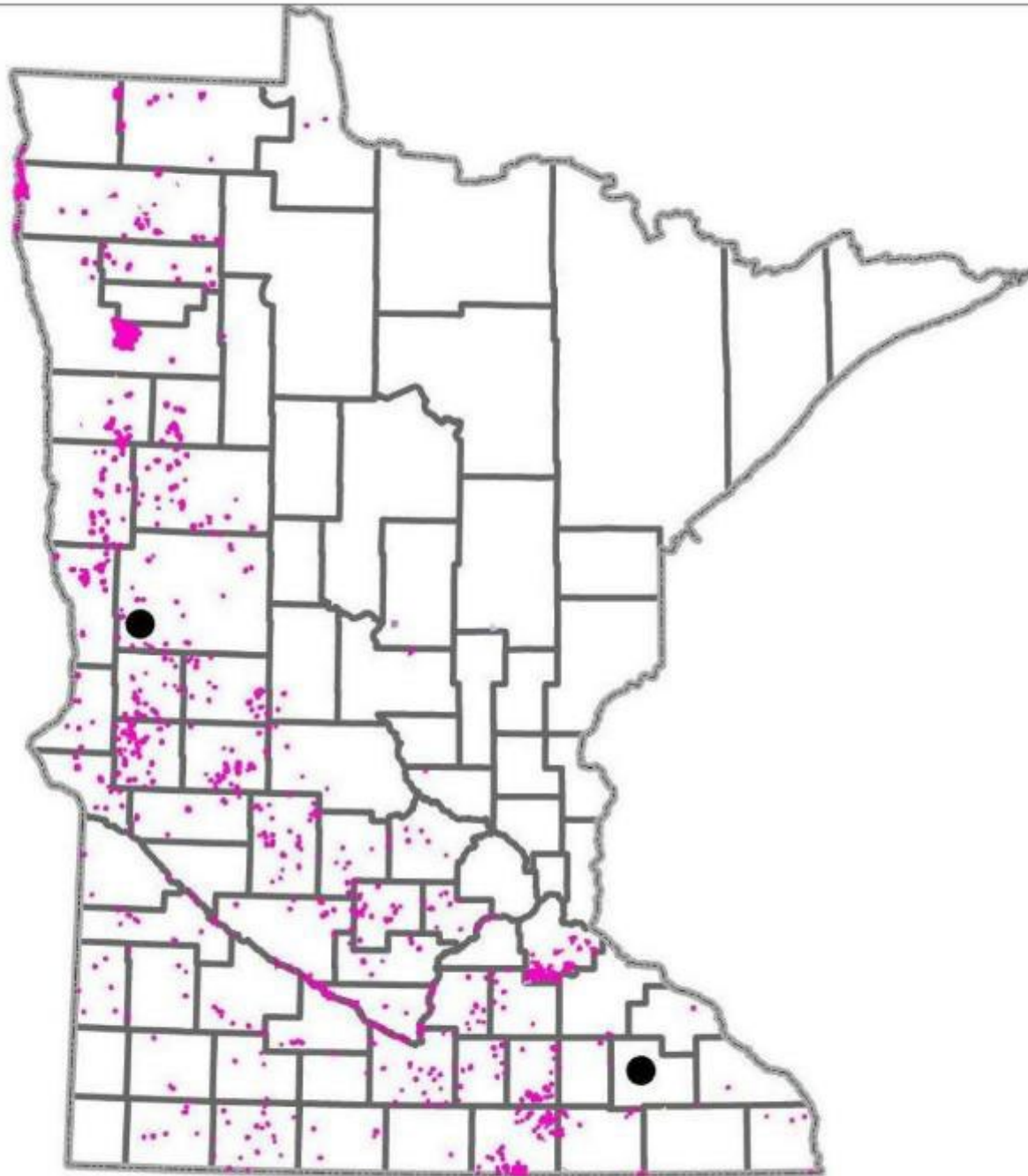
Easement Partnerships

- Landowner
 - Voluntary program
 - USDA acquires nearly all the development and agricultural rights to the land
 - Undeveloped recreation (hunting, fishing, etc.) is a right reserved to the landowner
 - Landowner retains title and control of access to their easement
- Partners
 - 561 WRP easements are 30-year NRCS easements that rollover to a perpetual BWSR RIM easement upon expiration
 - Other partners own underlying fee title

Where are field
easement staff
located?

3 in Fergus Falls

1 in Rochester



Restoration phase

- Restore wetlands – site dependent. Ditch fill, sediment removal, embankment, tile breaks.
- Seed cropland back to pre-settlement condition, which is usually a diverse prairie with native grasses and flowers. Could be oak savannah or forest depending on the location.

Drain tile example





3488.6h

5.5°

POWER





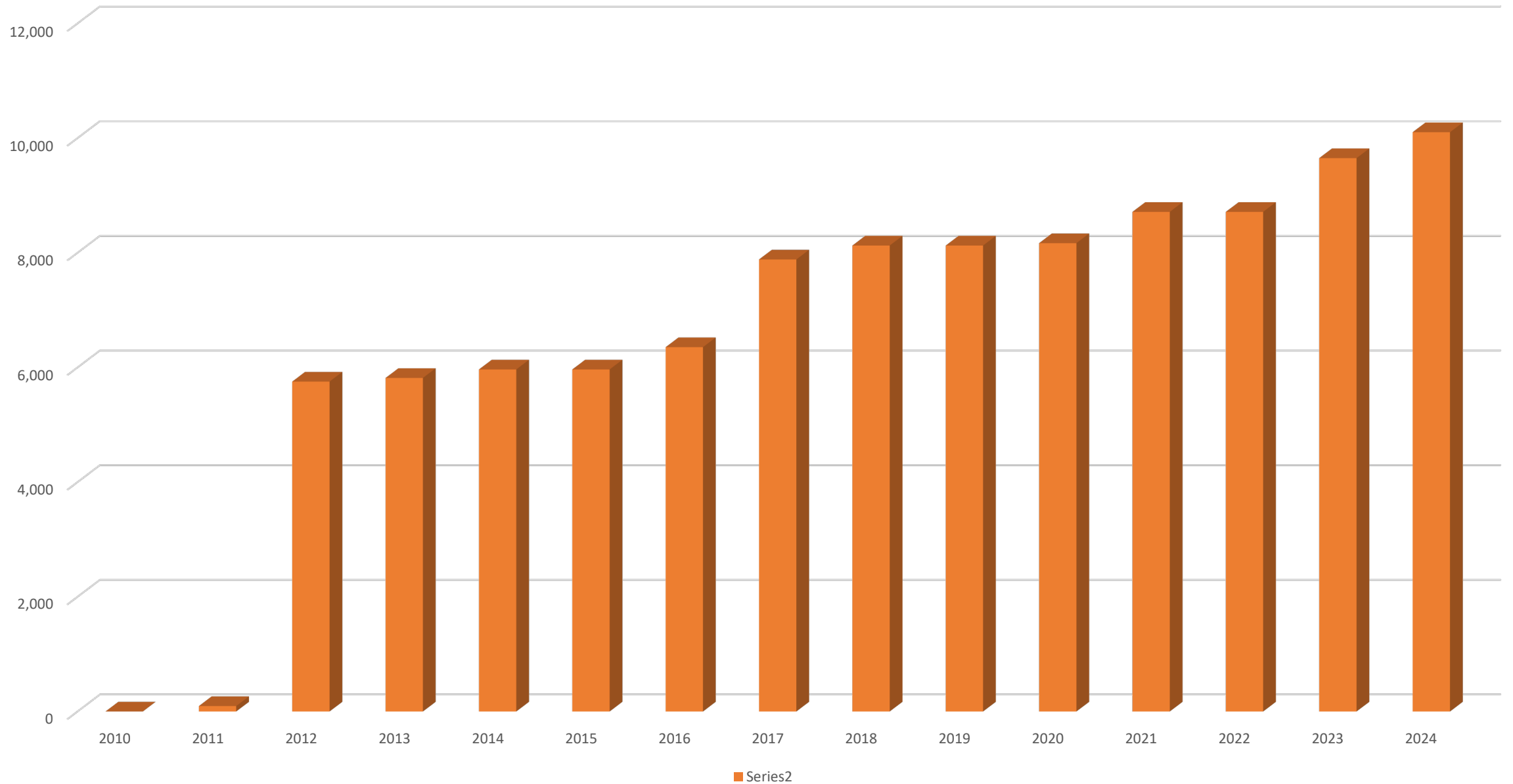
Management phase

- Match the habitat to the ecosystem: i.e. Red River Valley should be managed as prairie, Central Otter Tail County would be managed as savannah or a mixture of prairie and forest.
- Prescribed burning, grazing, haying

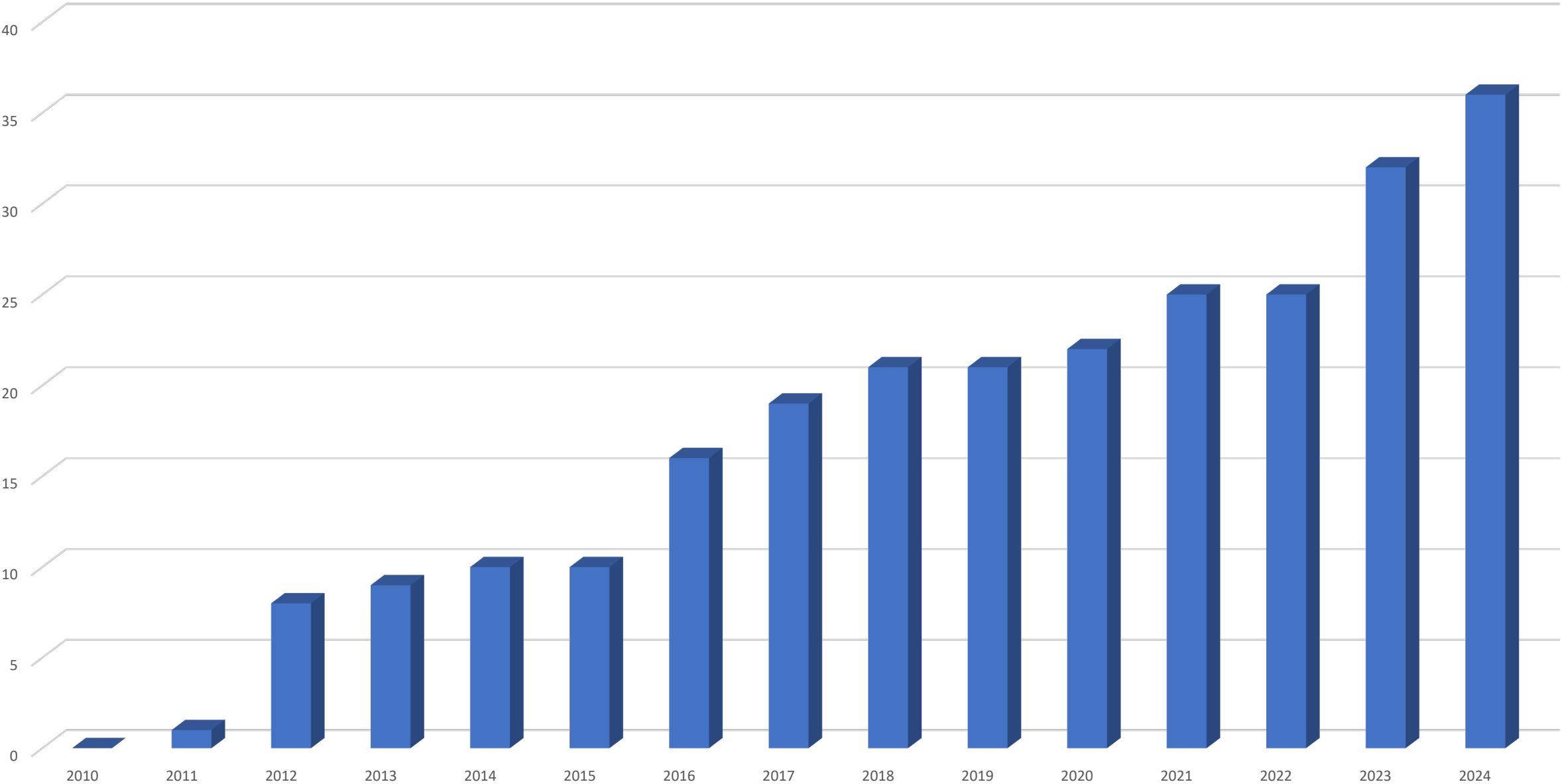
Grazing on WRE



WRE acres grazed per year



Number of easements grazed per year



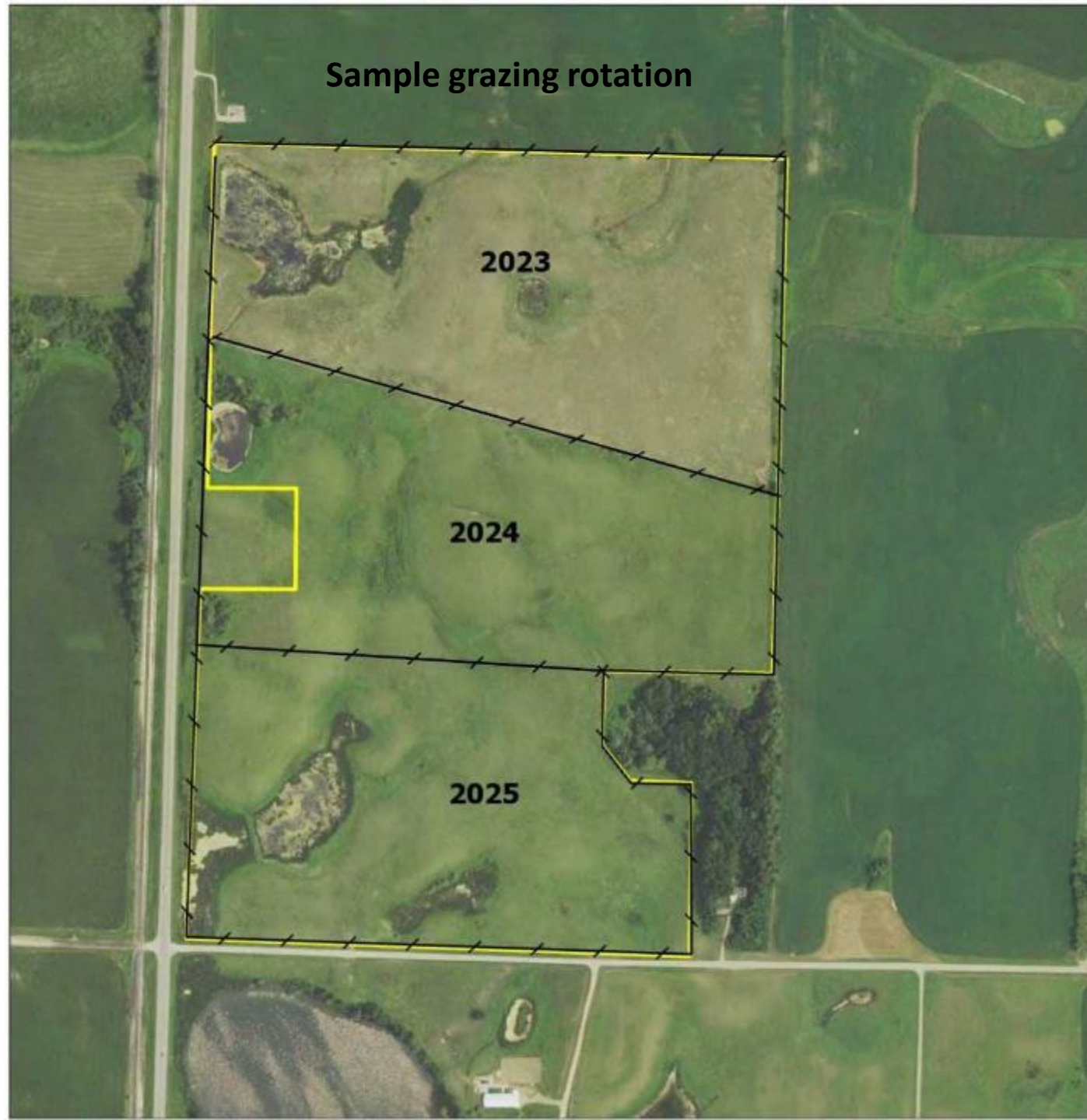
Challenges.....

- Clean & reliable water: seems counter-intuitive but a lot of easements don't have reliable water during the middle or end of summer
- Challenging finding grazers in certain areas of the state
- Challenging finding grazers who are willing to install fencing for wildlife friendly grazing
- Convincing landowners of the benefits

Benefits.....

- No cost to USDA
- Community buy-in
- Isn't weather dependent
- Promotes diversity – cattle often prefer grasses over flowers
- Can target specific areas – i.e. wetlands that are too wet to burn in the spring or fall can be grazed during a summer dry period
- Diversity of habitat on the easement & across the landscape – wildlife friendly grazing provides a component that is often missing in our prairie landscape. Many areas of Minnesota have heavily grazed pastures and idle land (CRP, WRP, etc), but lack that in-between habitat.
- Grazing provides varying stages of vegetative growth and heights vs. burning or haying.

Sample grazing rotation



Notice the flowers....



**Cattle have
stripped the
leaves off the
lower levels of
the tree....**



March 2024 – wetlands are starting to open up. Easement was heavily grazed in the summer of 2023 providing open water habitat for the spring migration.



A year of rest & the open water habitat is already missing.....



September 2024

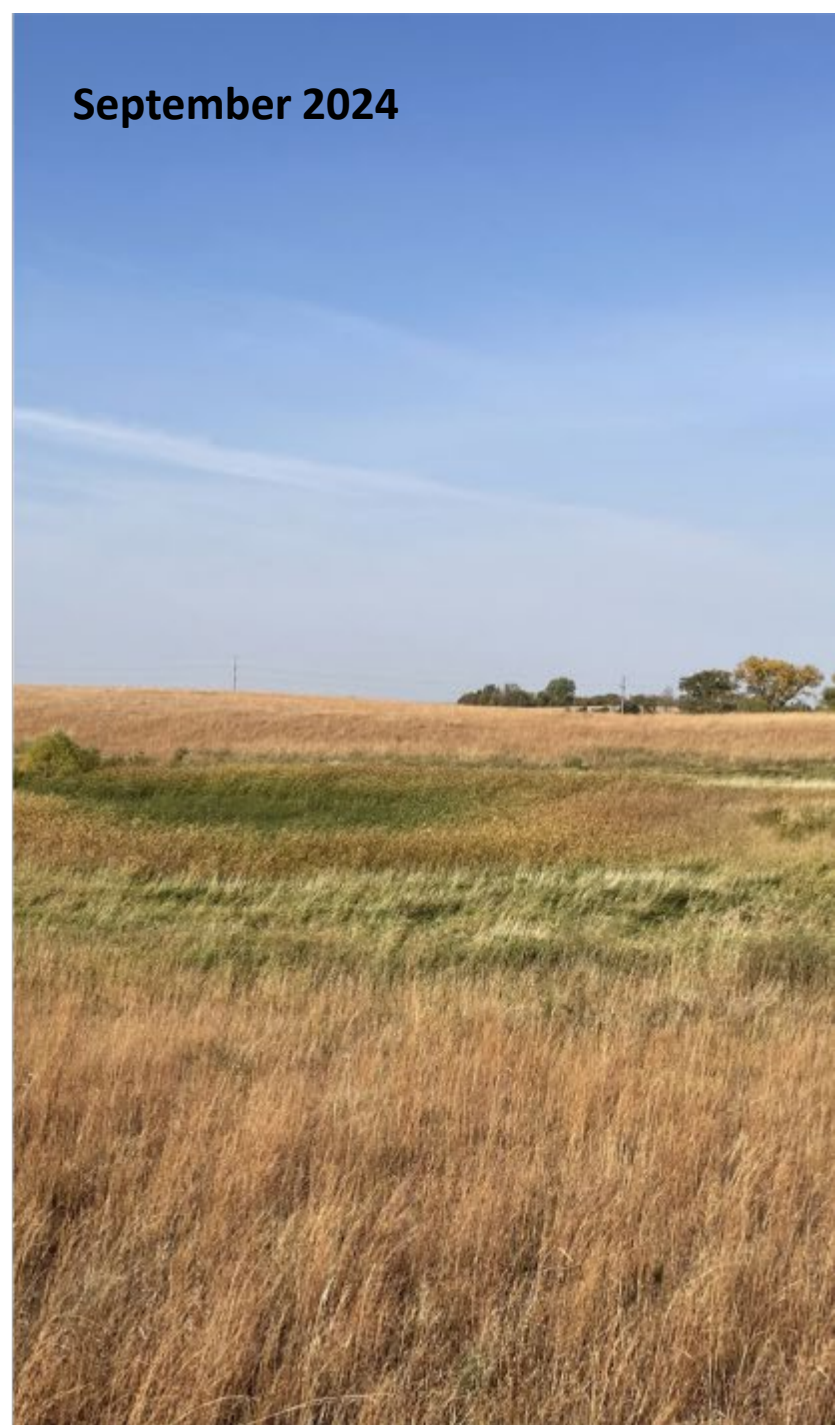
September 2023



March 2024



September 2024



- Shorebird habitat is often a missing habitat component on easements.
- Heavy stocking rates are often needed to get the desired disturbance

When left idle, this area becomes overgrown with cattails, which eliminates shorebird usage.



Ungrazed

Grazed



Evaluation

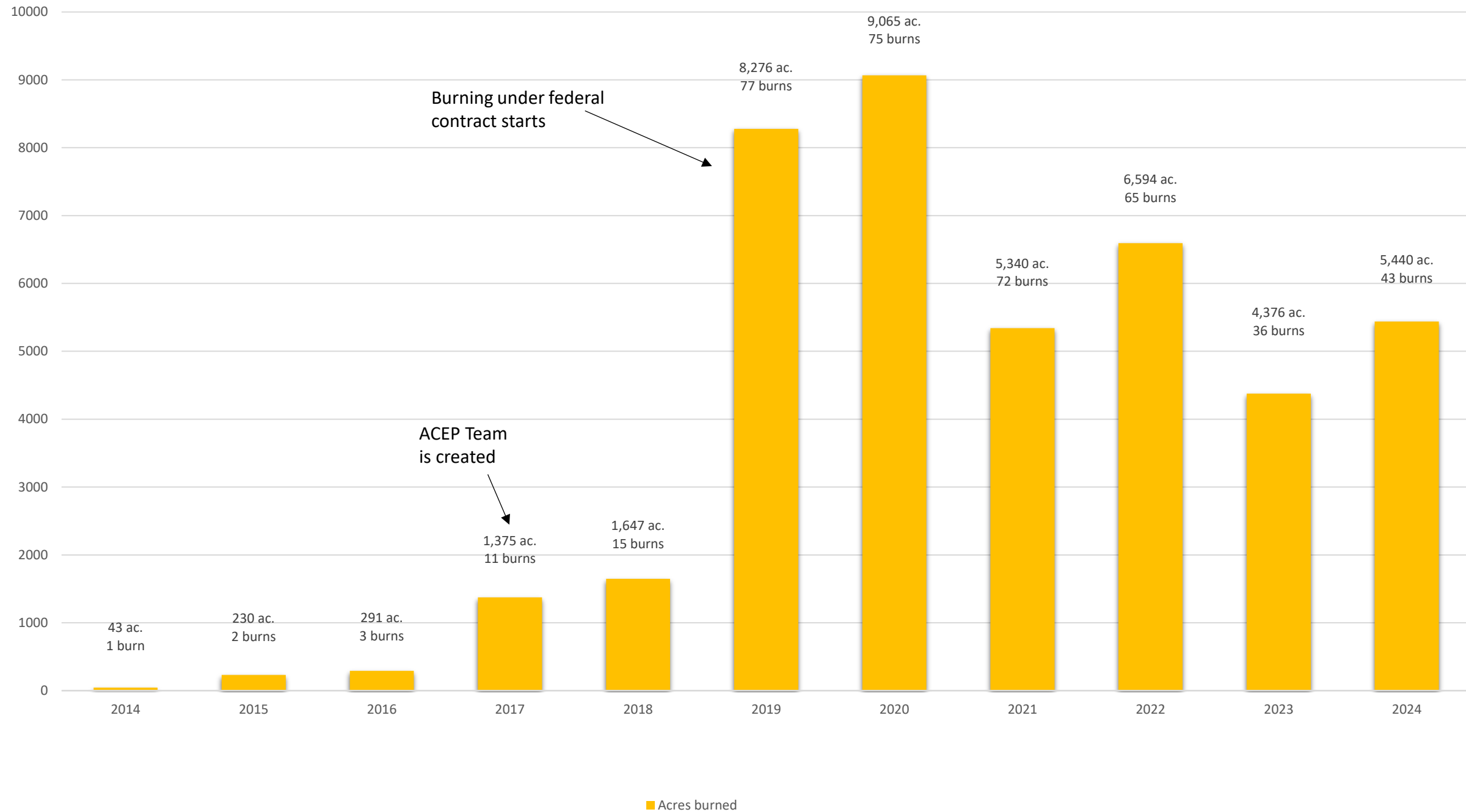
- Each easement that is being grazed is looked at annually in September.
- Jeff Duchene and Brady Blasher have been assisting with the checks
- Meet with every grazer on-site once every 3 years
- Not worried about days – want to train grazers to move the herd based on vegetative conditions.
- Most grazers are surprised when they meet with us. Worried they would get in trouble for overgrazing. Very hard to overgraze when grazing 1/3 of the easement per year.

Burning



- Benefits of burning:
 - Prairies are adapted to fire.
 - Fire can help control brush
 - Removes dead grasses
 - Allows seeds to germinate with increased sunlight.
 - Some native seeds need a burn to germinate
- Negatives of burning:
 - Weather dependent
 - Cost
 - Limited number of contractors
 - Temporarily catastrophic to the ecosystem
 - Public perception

WRE acres burned by year



October 2021



May 2022



July 2022

**Trees are dead or barely alive,
but have needles**



2nd burn in May of 2023

**Majority of the trees are
now completely dead**



March 2024



September 2024





May 2019

Mostly prairie, willows just starting to establish



December 2023

Brush has grown up

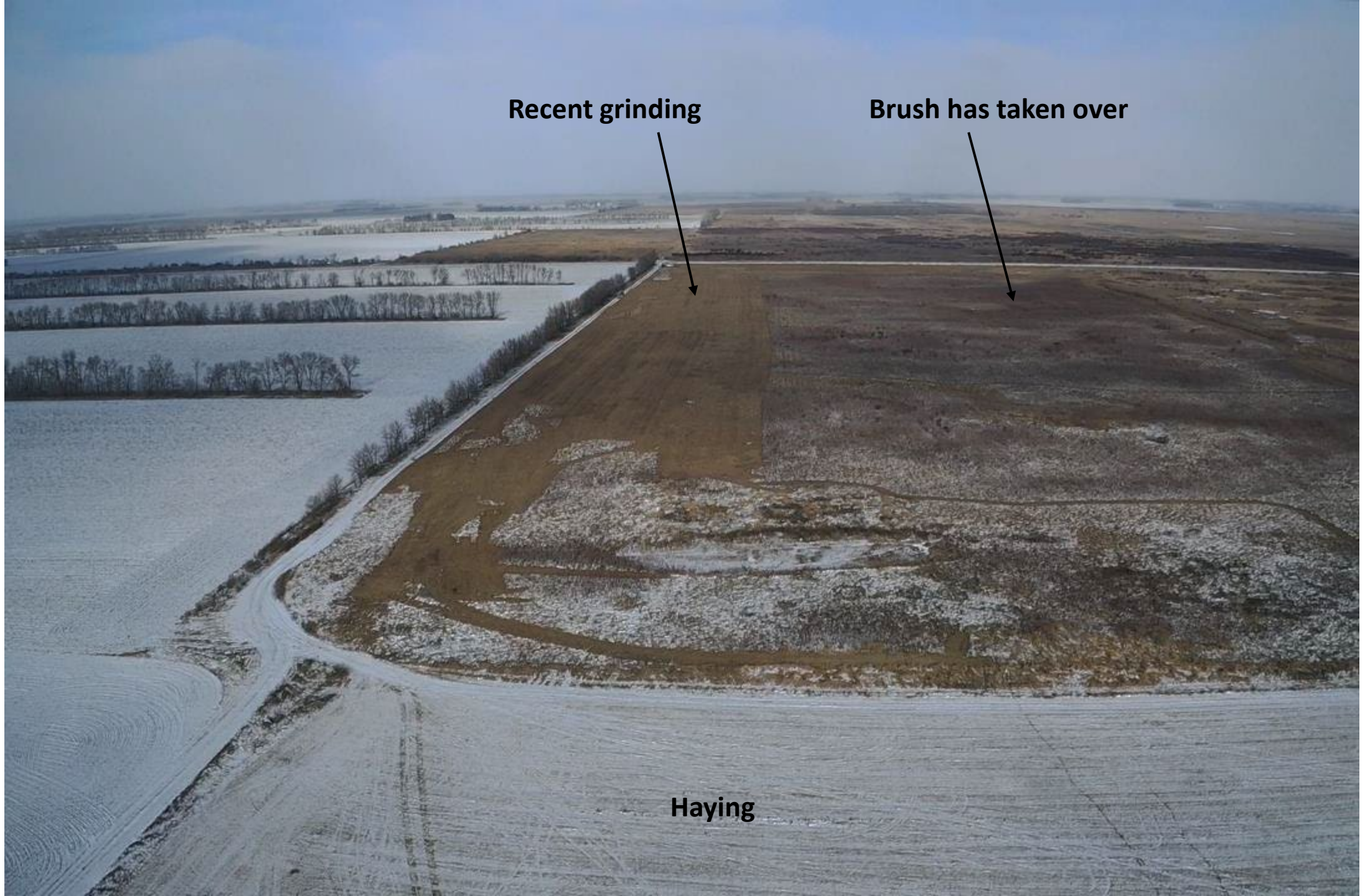
Wetland from the previous slide



Recent grinding

Brush has taken over

Haying



Grinder in action



Grinding completed.

Re-growth sprayed September 2024

Burn fall of 2024 or spring of 2025

Spray June 2025

Hay August 2026



THE 5-YEAR PUSH TO CATCH UP 2019-2024

- 2019-2023—FEDERAL CONTRACT (\$4.8M)
 - 6800 AC PRESCRIBED BURNS
 - 21 EASEMENTS – TREE REMOVAL AND BRUSH CONTROL
 - 5 EASEMENT – WRE/RIM PARTNERSHIP RESTORATIONS
 - 11 EASEMENTS – WRE RESTORATIONS
 - 10 EASEMENTS – MAINTENANCE AND REPAIRS
 - STRUCTURE REMOVAL/REPLACEMENT
 - STRUCTURE REPAIR
 - ADDITIONAL RESTORATION
 - 79 TOTAL EASEMENTS UNDER CONTRACT FROM ROSEAU COUNTY TO FREEBORN COUNTY

THE 5-YEAR PUSH TO CATCH UP 2019-2024

- 2019-2023— 22 EASEMENT—REPAIR, MAINT, RESTORATION (\$3.3M)
- 2019-2022— 60 EASEMENTS -- TREE AND BRUSH MANAGEMENT (1.03M)
- 2020-2025 – 30,000 AC – PRESCRIBED BURN (\$2.9M)
- 2021—3 EASEMENTS – REPAIR, MAINT, RESTORATION (\$223,000)
- 2022—5 EASEMENTS—REPAIR, MAINTENANCE (\$284,300)

TOTAL FEDERAL CONTRACT EXPENDATURE = \$11.5M

2023 – 3 EASEMENTS – REPAIR, MAINTENANCE (\$155000)

LIGHT GAGE STEEL SHEET PILE RODENT BARRIER



Restore Depressions





