

STRAIGHT RIVER MARSH PROJECT INFORMATION

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The Straight River Marsh is a 1200 acre drained wetland basin in southern Steele County. The project area also includes surrounding uplands and totals nearly 5000 acres.

The basin was first drained in 1915. The peat land proved productive as cropland and pasture. However, landowners experienced ongoing drainage problems due to disintegration of the peat over time, which caused the level of the fields to sink, as well as an increase in the amount of upland drainage outletting into the ditch system. Several expensive ditch cleanout efforts did not solve the problems the landowners were experiencing with frequent flooding.

In 1995, a group of landowners from the basin area approached the local NRCS office asking for potential solutions to their drainage problems. A variety of options were explored, with the WRP program proving to be the most promising. The "Straight River Marsh Project" generated a great deal of local support. A partnership was formed consisting of at least a dozen local, state, and federal agencies and nonprofit organizations. Due to the attention the partnership effort generated, Bob Misso, National WRP Program Manager, visited the project area in 1996 and was impressed with what he saw. He offered his support to the project, and Minnesota designated it as a WRP Special Project Area, which prioritized funding for landowners in the project area. Numerous informational meetings were held, letters were sent to all landowners, and NRCS staff went out door knocking.

Presently there are 26 WRP easements totaling over 1550 acres enrolled in the project area (in addition to ~660 acres USFWS WPA, RIM, DNR WMA, and MNDOT wetland bank). When the project effort began, many of the partners hoped to build a structure on the main ditch, which would flood the entire basin. Several key landowners, however, have chosen not to enroll in the voluntary program and without their participation, full basin restoration is not possible. For the time being, we have concentrated on the restoration of individual cells within the basin. Some day the land may change hands, and the dream of restoring the whole basin can become a reality, but for the present we have focused on enrolling the willing participants and restoring some prime wetland and upland habitat.

Every year there are one or two new landowners who come in to apply for WRP as their circumstances change. Just a few weeks ago a landowner put in an application on a 65 acre piece in the heart of the basin. As farmers near retirement, pass away and leave land to their heirs, or tire of the almost annual flooding that occurs, they contact myself or Noel Frank, the NRCS District Conservationist, to sign up for the WRP program. Because we have maintained this respectful and voluntary approach, the overwhelming majority of farmers in the area have been extremely supportive of the project.

WRP has invested around \$1.5 million dollars in the project, and other partners such as the MN Board of Water and Soil Resources (through the RIM program) and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation have also contributed funds.

The Straight River Marsh has historically been a major stopover point for waterfowl during spring migration. The restoration work that's been completed thus far has already resulted in a large increase in the number of waterfowl utilizing the area, including a number of species that haven't been seen in decades. The documented return of the following species clearly verifies the restoration success: Tundra swan, Canada Goose, Snow Goose, Sandhill Crane, Canvasback, Redhead, Pintail, Scaup, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Shoveler, Wood Duck, Blue Winged Teal, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, Ruddy Duck, Merganser, Heron, Egret, Cormorant, Snipe, Plover, Bald Eagle, and Burrowing Owl.

We'll be visiting two sites on Tuesday. Dave Seykora owns 180 acres, which was enrolled in WRP in 1999. The soils are mostly peat, and vegetables (potatoes, onions, and sweet corn) had been grown on the site for many years. Restoration work took place in 2001 and 2003. Seven basins were restored through the installation of seven dikes, four vinyl sheetpile water control structures, and numerous tile breaks. Jim Killen, the nationally renowned wildlife artist, owns roughly 120 acres of WRP straight to the east. One basin on Killen's property was restored through the construction of a dike on the Seykora property in 2001, and two additional basins were restored in 2002 by breaking tile and constructing "scrapes," small shallow water excavations. The upland areas were seeded to a native grass/forb mixture in 2000 and 2002.

I began working on this project in 1996 as an NRCS employee in Steele County, and have continued my involvement over the past 4 years of employment with Ducks Unlimited. I have been intimately involved with most of the restoration work that has taken place, and would be happy to provide you with any additional information you need.

**Straight River Marsh Restoration Project
Steele County, Minnesota**

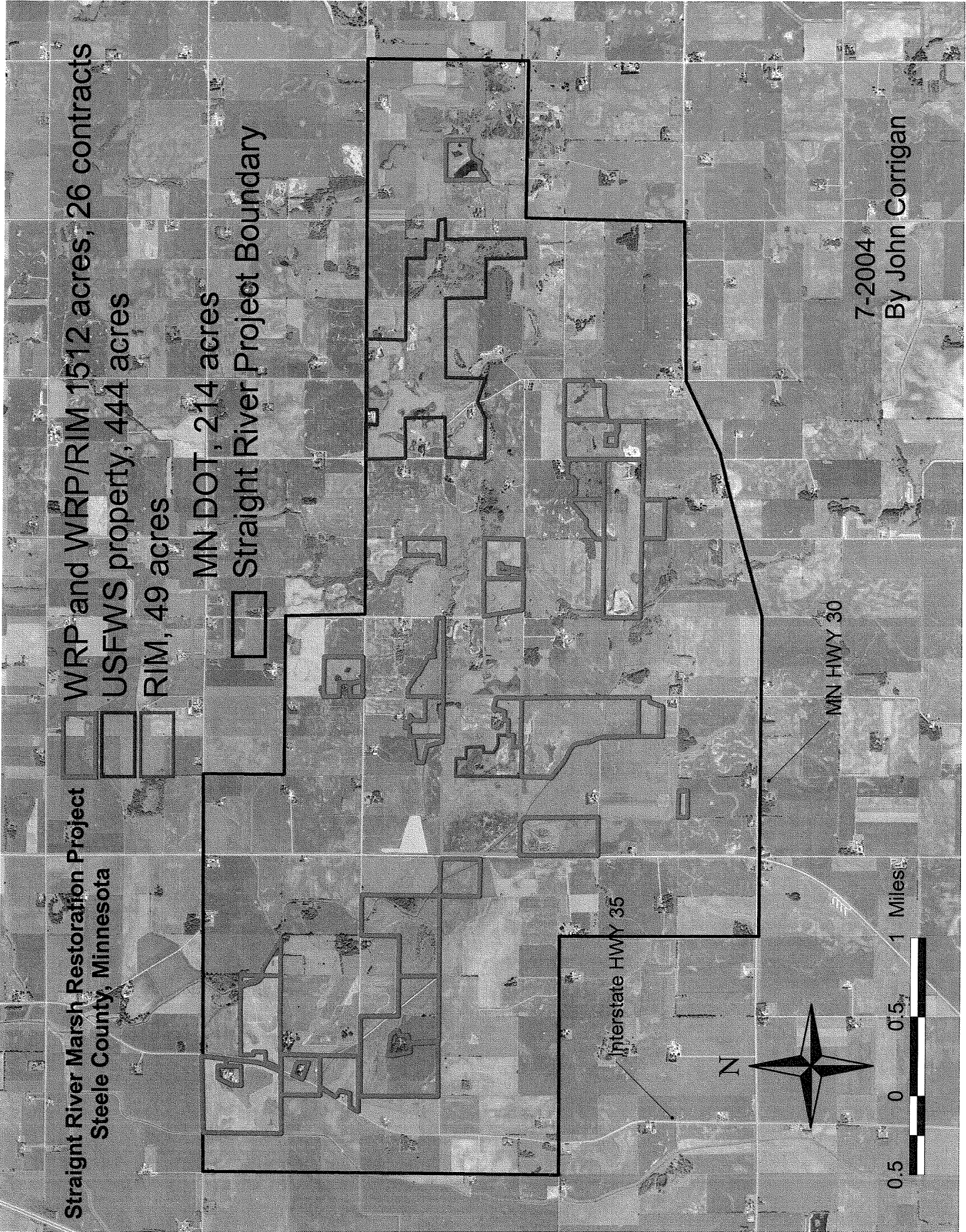
WRP and WRP/RIM 1512 acres, 26 contracts

USFWS property, 444 acres

RIM, 49 acres

MN DOT, 214 acres

Straight River Project Boundary



MN HWY 30

Interstate HWY 35



0.5 0 0.5 1 Miles

7-2004
By John Corrigan