



# Forest Lake Airport Expansion Project Balances Rules for Airport Safety and Wetland Protection

## Featured Project

An airport expansion project in Forest Lake required local, state and federal government agency staff to design the project to comply with federal regulations for airport safety, which prohibit open water near runways, and state and federal wetland regulations, which require wetlands that are drained or filled to be replaced.

The City of Forest Lake constructed a parallel taxiway and new building within the existing airport in 2008. The land near the existing taxiway included 1.7 acres of wetlands that were being farmed. As a result of the expansion project, those wetland acres were within the Runway Safety Zone, as designated by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). So according to FAA rules, those 1.7 acres needed to be filled.

The Rice Creek Watershed District is the local government unit that implements the Minnesota Wetland Conservation Act (WCA) in that area. The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources oversees WCA administration statewide, and for this project, the City of Forest Lake, Washington Conservation District, and BWSR also provided technical staff to make sure the project complied with WCA. (DNR not on TEP unless DNR water is involved; it is not believed there was a DNR water in this project.) The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers also was involved to make sure that the project met federal wetland regulations under the Clean Water Act. Staff in all of those organizations were able to resolve the project alternatives to best comply with the requirements of the various laws and rules.

The final project involved restoring 2.27 acres of high-quality wetlands to replace 1.7 acres of wetlands that needed to be filled. Those 2.27 acres were also farmed wetlands, located farther away from the Runway Safety Zones and within the property of the airport. The results were 2.27 acres of high-quality sedge meadow wetlands that will provide greater wildlife habitat, greater vegetative diversity, greater water quality protection and greater stormwater protection than the wetlands that were filled to accommodate the airport expansion. Also, 1.88 acres of upland buffer were established to provide additional mitigation and a buffer from the cropped fields adjacent to the wetlands.



**Location:** City of Forest Lake, Washington County



**This sedge meadow is one of several types of wetlands that does not have open water, and it was restored to replace wetlands that were filled in as part of the airport expansion project. Federal airport safety regulations prohibit open water near runways, so this project complied with state and federal wetland protection regulations without jeopardizing airport safety. The photo was taken after one growing season.**

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# BWSR Featured Project

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**Partners:** Federal Aviation Administration, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Rice Creek Watershed District, City of Forest Lake, Washington Conservation District, and BWSR.

**Project Timeline:** Construction of the runway began in 2008 and was completed in 2009. The wetlands were restored in the fall of 2009. One year of monitoring was completed and will continue for 4 additional years.

**Project Costs / Funding Sources:** Funding for the airport expansion project was provided by the City of Forest Lake and the Federal Aviation Administration. BWSR receives state dollars from the General Fund to oversee administration of the Wetland Conservation Act, and provides grants to local government units to implement WCA at the local level.

**Keys to Success:** With the constraints that the FAA placed on the requirements for airports, it is a challenge to meet wetland avoidance and minimization requirements of the MN Wetland Conservation Act and the federal Clean Water Act. Compromise and discussions among all involved parties made this project successful, and the result was high-quality restored wetlands that will also comply with airport safety regulations.



**Previously farmed land that was restored with native grasses and forbs to provide a buffer for the wetlands that were restored as mitigation for the airport expansion project.**

**BWSR roles:** BWSR's role is to oversee administration of the Wetland Conservation Act by local governments, and to provide staff with technical knowledge of wetlands to serve on a Technical Evaluation Panel that reviews and make recommendations to the Local Government Unit (Rice Creek Watershed District in this instance).

**Measurable Outcomes:** Reduction and replacement of wetland impacts occurred through the wetland replacement plan review process. Compromises were made to allow wetland mitigation on the airport property, as opposed to using credits from the state wetland bank that were available through wetlands restored elsewhere. By restoring the wetlands on-site, the wetland functions and values that were lost adjacent to the airport have been replaced and improved.

**For more information:** Rice Creek Watershed District, <http://ricecreek.org>