

Rare wetland raises restoration hopes

ENVIRONMENT: The Fens project could lead the way in replacing wetlands lost to development.

BY LEE BLOOMQUIST
NEWS TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

ZIM — A vegetable farm once owned by frozen-foods entrepreneur Jeno Paulucci is becoming the only wetland bank of its kind in the nation.

In the 1950s and '60s Paulucci grew carrots, celery, broccoli and mushrooms at his 350-acre Wilderness Valley Farms tract along St. Louis County Highway 7 in Zim. For a while, Paulucci had horse manure brought in by train from Chicago to help the mushrooms grow.

The farm was later used for research on hybrid poplar, greenhouse gases, berries and sod.

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LEE BLOOMQUIST / NEWS TRIBUNE

Tom Malterer, Natural Resources Research Institute peat program director, checks the water table in a monitoring well at the Fens Research Facility in Zim. The NRRI is creating a peat bog wetland bank at the site that is unique in the nation.

LAND | Former Paulucci vegetable farm takes on brand new challenge

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completed at the Fens site. Another 132 acres are nearly re-

stored.

Fens was once the name of a railroad siding at the site, about 50 miles northwest of

Duluth.

"The Fens is representative of much of the peat land in

wetland bank.

ists have spent frigid northern Minnesota," said

Tom Malterer, NRRI peat program director. "Its character-

istics and its setting reflect the wide-open land,

and hot summers and transplanting moss from a

ons. Research Facility

ens the kind of habitat

velopers need to replace

After Paulucci closed the

farm, the Iron Range Re-

sources and Rehabilitation Board owned the property

until 1986, when it was sold to the NRRI.

With the land, the NRRI responded to property developers' need for wetland replacement and a mid-1980s mandate by the federal and state governments that developers replace wetlands they destroy.

WETLAND MANDATES

ter.

Many settlers to Northeastern Minnesota dug ditches to drain lands for farming and agriculture, he said. As demand for wetland increases, less land in Northeastern Minnesota will remain available for farm use.

"Almost all of the effort that the settlers did is being turned around now, which will mean less agriculture."

All 350 acres of the Fens site are already sold.

"Almost no new industry could be developed on wetland in the U.S. because they couldn't get permits to drain

them," said Malterer. "Society changed and made a series of judgments about wetlands."

Plugging the ditches, flattening fields that were once

growned, adding sulfur to the soil and replanting the site with native wild mosses turned the Fens site from an "effectively drained" status into a certified wetlands bank.

NRRI scientists are also reversing what many early white settlers did, said Malterer.

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The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Research bought the 110-acre parcel for several planned projects in Northeastern Minnesota.

Economic development projects such as PolyMet Mining Co.'s proposed base and pre-

vious metals mine, Excelsior Energy's coal-gasification plant and Mesabi Nugget will

probably require wetland replacement.

With the exception of about 10 to 20 acres near Duluth,

there's no certified wetlands credits available in Northeastern Minnesota, said Malterer.

"It's a crisis," he said. "Where will the credits come from?"

Tim Peterson, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project manager in Two Harbors, said

Northeastern Minnesota needs more wetlands for mitigation.

"Up in this area, there isn't too much for banks at the mo-

ment," said Peterson. "Compensatory mitigation for these

projects hasn't been figured out yet — they're discussing different options."

But a major problem could be ahead for other developers.

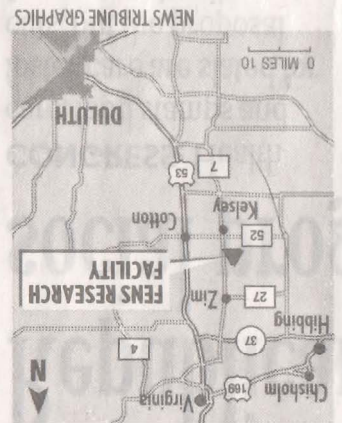
A scarcity of available wet-

lands for developers to compensate for wetland loss could

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lands for developers to compensate for wetland loss could become a large issue for several planned projects in Northeastern Minnesota.



Replacing wetlands with the same type of wetland and in the same watershed is preferred, he said. However, different types of wetland can also be considered before looking to a bank for replacement, Peterson said.

PolyMet Mining Co. is studying solutions to replace about 1,200 acres of wetland that could be filled over two decades, said Warren Hudelson, a PolyMet spokesman. About 700 potential acres have so far been identified, some of it former agricultural land between Floodwood and Meadowlands, he said.