

BUFFERNOTES

January 2005

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STOP A MINUTE AND ENJOY SUCCESS

When something works well, we tend to take it for granted. That may be the case with the Conservation Reserve Program.



For instance, the pages on the calendar turned to a new year this month, and it's a safe bet that few people took note that the year 2005 marks the 20th anniversary of CRP. That's right, the Conservation Reserve Program got its start in 1985, and has grown to become the premier private lands conservation program in America.

BufferNotes celebrates an anniversary this year, too. We mark six years of publication focusing on CRP, and specifically the continuous signup portion of the program. In a few weeks, more than 3 million acres of land will have been enrolled in CCRP and its offshoot, the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. Given all the challenges faced by conservationists in the field and by the owners of working lands where CCRP practices are installed, that's quite an accomplishment.

Every one of those acres required attention from staff of the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Farm Service Agency, America's conservation districts and other partners. State agencies, wildlife groups, watershed associations, citizens organizations and private businesses have all had a hand in the success. The list of benefits includes water quality, wildlife habitat enhancement, erosion control, guaranteed income for working lands and aesthetic improvements. Now that's something worth celebrating.



Yes, a lot has been accomplished, but there's more work to be done. This month's BufferNotes gets right down to business, focusing on successes across the country. We feature a landowner in Alabama, an innovative river restoration project in Minnesota and a successful business in Pennsylvania. We also offer information on a new tool for conservation practitioners.

If our readers glean valuable information from those stories, then we've done our job for this month. We'll be back next month with more. By the way, if you have a success story to share, we'd like to hear from you. Contact us at billnick@charter.net, or call Editor Bill Berry at 715-341-9119.

And here's to success and more success!

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TREES, WILDLIFE WORK TOGETHER IN ALABAMA

By Julie A. Best
NRCS Public Affairs Specialist

If you ask Jim Hughes of Lauderdale County, Alabama, what type farming he does, his response is “trees and wildlife.” Hughes was in the cattle business for 20 years. The transition from cattle to trees and wildlife was gradual.

“I did not want to spend money on equipment to farm a small acreage, so I started looking at practices that would benefit trees and wildlife,” he says. Installation of field borders was his first experience with a practice that enhanced wildlife habitat. “When I raised cattle, I grew hay and corn. I noticed that about 15 to 20 feet from the tree line, the hay or corn just did not grow. I got into field borders to keep from spending money trying to grow something in the shade, where the trees sucked all the moisture out of the ground. For some reason, sericea and partridge peas do fine up against those trees.” The sericea and partridge peas were an enhancement for wildlife habitat, and thus began Hughes’ experience with the benefits of buffers.



Grass and tree buffers on Jim Hughes’ land in Lauderdale County, Alabama, provide excellent wildlife habitat, in addition to water quality gains. (NRCS photo)

Before his retirement, Hughes was manager of the Water and Sewage Department for the city of Florence, Alabama. In that position, Hughes addressed water quality issues. In retirement, he still focuses on water quality. Hughes says, “I had some erosion on my farm. It had been a cotton farm, and the fields were planted so that the rows were as long as they could be.” To control erosion, Hughes installed terraces, and then he learned of grassed contours. “I have about 26 acres in contours and field buffers. On that entire 26 acres, I planted clover, lespedezas, and partridge peas — forages that would attract wildlife,” says Hughes.

Tim Albritton, state staff forester with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, took note of the multiple gains the practices achieved. “Mr. Hughes is using grassed contours to serve a dual purpose — improved water quality by trapping the turbidity and installation of green fields that enhance wildlife habitat.”

CRP goals immediate and long-range

CRP meshed well with Hughes’ goals. Hughes has taken numerous acres out of marginal cropland or pastureland and planted trees. Under the continuous CRP, he has installed several acres of riparian buffers along creeks adjoining his property to enhance and protect aquatic resources from adverse impacts. “In addition to improving water quality, my ultimate goal on the riparian buffers is timber production,” says Hughes. “I select the species that will be the most profitable for the commercial value of the trees. I stay with cherry bark oak and the white oak.” Installation of riparian buffers also support Hughes’ goal of timber and wildlife. “Any time you grow trees, you increase the potential for wildlife habitat,” he says.

“Wildlife habitat is probably an overlooked benefit of riparian buffers,” says Albritton. “Buffer publications frequently focus on water quality and sediment filtering, and now they are even mentioning carbon sequestration. In Alabama, wildlife habitat enhancement is one of the primary benefits of riparian buffers.”

When it comes to water quality, Hughes believes that buffers will definitely do the job. “I notice on the farm that the runoff is a lot clearer now than when it was just terraced, and everything was plowed. The biggest problem with the Cypress Creek Watershed, the source of drinking water for the City of Florence and most of Lauderdale County, is rapid spikes in turbidity of the water. With the buffers installed, they trap a lot of sediments that cause turbidity, says Hughes.

Jim Hughes is an ambassador for the benefits of buffers. He has experienced the value of buffers and he encourages others to take a look at the program. “I have grass contours, riparian zones, and regular CRP land. I will not realize the value of the timber grown on the riparian buffers that I have installed, but hopefully my grandchildren will.”

Trees and wildlife — it’s been a good combination for Jim Hughes. When he finds something that works, he likes to stay with it.

For more information, contact Julie Best at Julie.Best@al.usda.gov.

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MINNESOTA WORK SHOWS GRIT, PROGRAM BLENDING

Persistence and creative blending of programs were the underpinnings of success for an innovative water quality and streambank stabilization project in Kandiyohi County, Minnesota. “It’s a reminder that things can be done even when it looks like an impossible task,” says Rick Reimer, program coordinator at the Kandiyohi Soil and Water Conservation District. “This has been two to three years in the making.” Original estimates for the project were in six figures, Reimer says. That was too much for the landowners and the programs would support the work. “We trimmed the plan, chose the worst areas for our attention and did the best we could. You take the best you can get. Maybe in a couple of years, we can do more.”

The project helped dairy farmers Bill and Nancy Hoelt drastically cut erosion of their soil into the north fork of the Crow River, says Reimer. Cattle had used the area, and the banks were severely eroding. “They were losing about 90 tons of soil and sediment on an annual basis, and the bank was gradually migrating toward his barn.”

The project drastically cut the erosion, and that’s good news for downstream lake dwellers on Koronis and Rice lakes. Property owner associations from those lakes were among the partners contributing to the stream improvement project. Other major sources included a state cost-share program that targets waterways with high suspended solid

and phosphorus counts. A county water plan also provided funds, as did CCRP, which funded filter strips, grass buffers and cattle exclusion, in addition to providing rental payments to the landowners. The Natural Resources Conservation Service provided technical assistance. Funding for the conservation practices came from the Farm Service Agency.

“We wanted to minimize the cost to the landowner, since it was a little over \$30,000 to complete the work,” says Reimer. “They were real happy with it, after being a little hesitant at first.”

Asked to envision the site 10 years from now, Reimer says: “There’ll be tall native grasses on either side of the stream, a stable bank, no more cutting of the bank, and almost complete abatement of soil loss.”



Rock veins and trees along Crow River in Minnesota’s Kandiyohi County have helped halt streambank erosion and heavy sediment runoff.

In addition to using the traditional conservation practices, Reimer sought to re-engineer stream flow. “This was the first one that I designed with rock spurs winding into the river, which will push the energy of the river back to the center of the channel,” he says. Rocks were also used as sediment blocks along the stream bank to control erosion. “We also used trees from the area and set them into the bank and next to the rock veins to add a habitat component.”

In addition to agreeing to exclude cattle from the area and also enrolling land parallel to the river into CCRP, the landowners planted shrubs and trees to re-established vegetation on the bank for stability, aesthetics and habitat.

Stream flow in rivers like the Crow has increased during wet periods due to tiling of agricultural lands. As a result, river characteristics are changed, says Reimer. “Man altered it, so now man has to alter what has resulted.”

For more information, contact Reimer at rlr@mn.usda.gov.

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