

Iowa CONSERVATION Showcase

Washington County Wet & Wild Because of Haeffner

Leroy Haeffner retired June 29 after serving the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for 27 years, the last 16 as a soil conservationist in Washington County. If you don't think one person can dramatically alter a landscape, drive around this area of southeast Iowa. Instead of field after field of row crops, you will see an inordinate amount of wildlife habitat, including wetlands, buffers, native prairie plants and grasses, and trees.

Much of that can be attributed to Haeffner, who has promoted the restoration of wetlands and native prairie throughout his NRCS career; all to improve the soil and attract wildlife to the region.

Bruce Trautman, Iowa NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations,



Leroy Haeffner

says Haeffner has left his signature on the landscape of Washington County and all of southeast Iowa. "Leroy is a dedicated conservationist and his passion for wetlands can be witnessed driving around the county, seeing the many wetland projects he's responsible for," he said.

Washington County Leads in CRP Wetlands

Haeffner's passion for wetlands and conservation message has undoubtedly gotten through to area producers. Since 1992, 3,557 acres of wetlands have been restored through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in Washington County, which is 1,279 more acres more than any other county in Iowa.

The CRP is a voluntary program for agricultural landowners where producers receive rental payments and cost-share assistance to establish long-term, resource conserving covers on eligible farmland. Participants enroll in CRP contracts for 10 to 15 years.



Haeffner (right) talks with Caryl Leopold Smith and son, Nelson, about the 102-acre WRP wetland Haeffner helped design near Brighton, Iowa.

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Since 1992, Washington County ranks 18th in the state for wetland projects funded through the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). The WRP has funded the purchase of 16 easements and agreements (contracts) in Washington County for a total of 2,285 acres in the last 15 years. Another five WRP applications and 12 Emergency Wetland Program applications are on a waiting list, pending adequate funding.

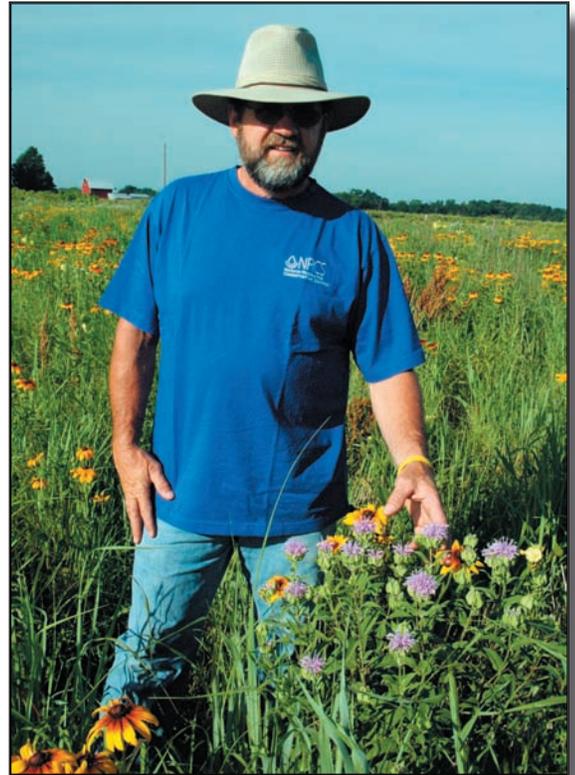
The WRP is a voluntary program that offers payments, based on the agricultural value, for restored wetlands that have previously been drained and converted to agricultural uses. It pays up to 100 percent for restoration costs and allows landowners to maintain ownership of the land and control access to the property.

How did Haeffner convince so many producers to take land out of row crop and into wetlands? He went with producers out to the field following heavy rains. “When I showed them the effects of heavy rains on their cropland, many were ready to do something different,” he said. “What they were doing wasn’t working, and

was not making money for them. I gave them another option. For some it was about money, but some had other values, such as wildlife for hunting or protecting rare plants.”

Leopold’s Influence

Haeffner considers Aldo Leopold, conservationist, forester, philosopher, educator and writer, who many believe to be the father of wildlife management, an influence on his career. Coincidentally, Leopold’s niece, Caryl Leopold Smith, resides in Washington County, near Brighton, Iowa. Smith, along with one of her four sons, Nelson Smith, worked with



One of the benefits of wetlands is biodiversity protection. Wetlands support a variety of species, and many of the species are unique and rare. Haeffner identifies some native plants at a CRP wetland near Wayland, Iowa.

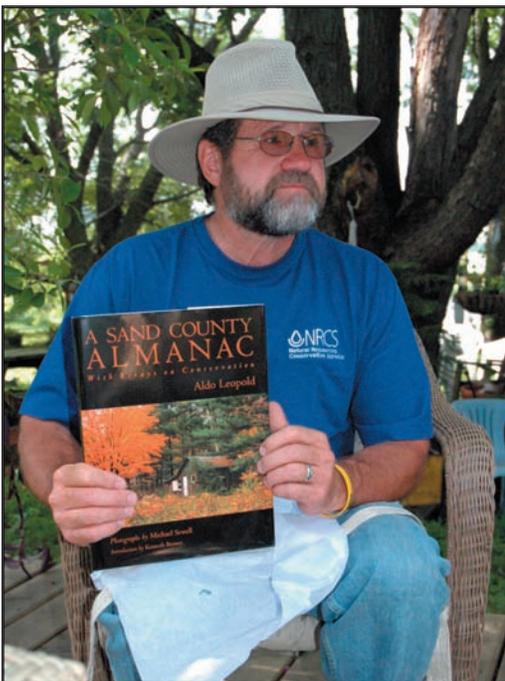
Haeffner to install a 102-acre wetland through the WRP along the Skunk River bottoms.

“Leroy spent a lot of time back and forth along the (Skunk River) bottoms getting the lay of the land, deciding how the water was going to be retained,” said Nelson Smith. “The wetland is our water filter. People have to understand it’s the same water we’re using over and over, so if we don’t filter it and keep it clean, we’re going to have to drink all the stuff we’ve been putting into it.”

Haeffner also worked with the Smiths to place 55 acres into CRP and riparian buffers, including dry basins and water retention basins.

In his final visit to the Smiths before he retired, Caryl Leopold Smith presented Haeffner with Aldo Leopold’s collection of essays, *A Sand County Almanac*. “It’s one of the nicest things anyone has ever given me,” Haeffner said.

Caryl Leopold Smith says she’ll miss Haeffner. “He’s been a real neat guy to work with,” she said. “He’s been easy to get along with. We’re going to miss him. I love him.”



*Haeffner shows off *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold. The book was a gift from one of the landowners he worked with, Aldo Leopold’s niece, Caryl Leopold Smith.*

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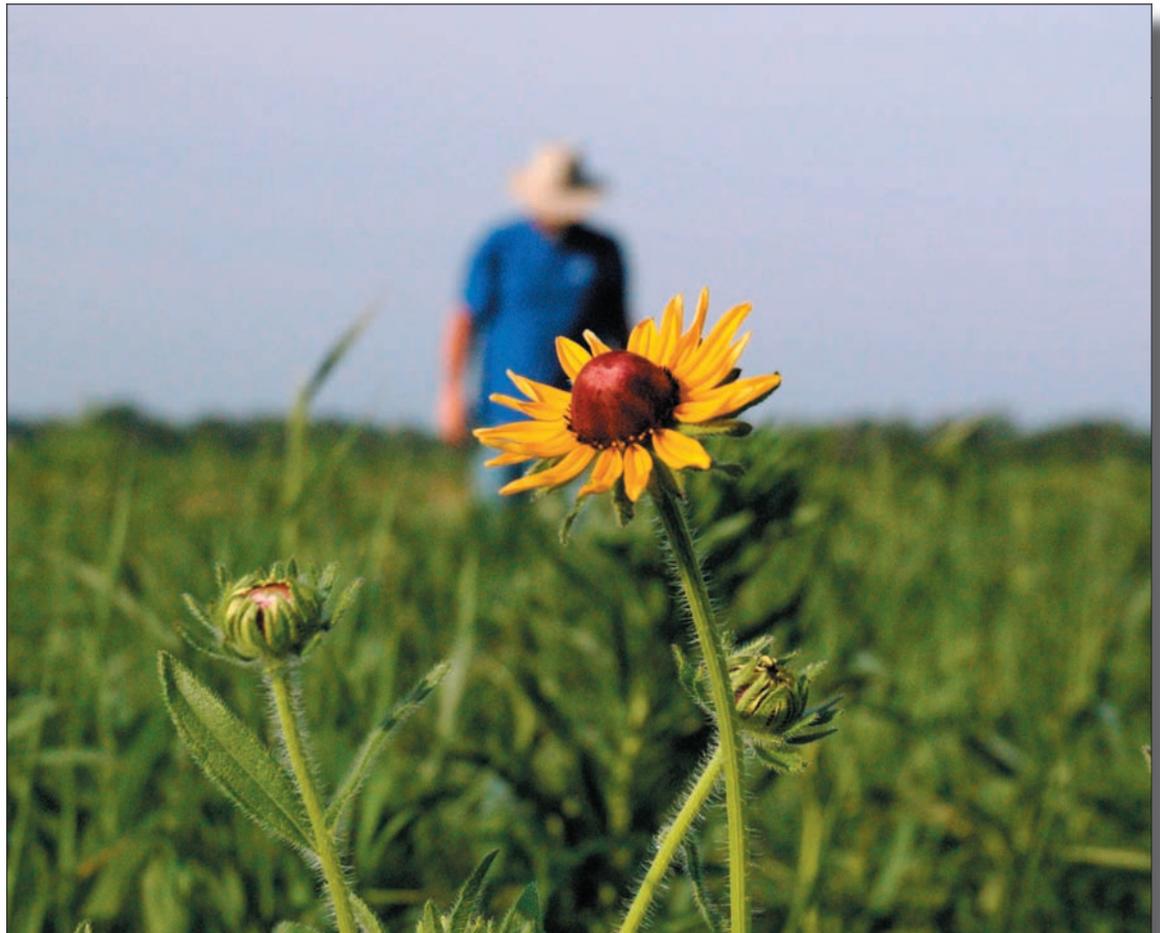
Haeffner and his wife plan to move to the Quad Cities, where his two daughters' families live. "We have five grandchildren there that we want to see more of," he said. Haeffner also has a son who lives in Cedar Rapids.

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*By Jason Johnson, Public Affairs Specialist
USDA-NRCS, Des Moines
July 2007*

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Haeffner (in background) takes a look at blooming prairie plants at a wetland site in Wayland.