

# CONSERVATION Showcase



## Bremer Co. Project Saves Money, Improves Environment

It sounds very strange, but it is true. Taxpayers will save around \$500,000 on a road reconstruction project in Bremer County and, at no additional cost, get a wetland that will reduce flooding on the Wapsipinicon River, clean the water and protect threatened and endangered species.

The road project is a 7.5 mile, \$2.82 million improvement to Highway 63 near the Bremer/Chickasaw County line. The road is being widened, shortened and raised 12 to 15 feet to prevent roadway flooding by the Wapsipinicon River. It will also remove two ninety degree turns where five vehicle accidents have occurred in the past 12 months.

Hard work, planning, five months of negotiations and creative cooperative partnerships made possible the creation of this 40-acre wetland and a taxpayer cost savings of 20%.

Flooding has long been a problem along the Wapsipinicon River in northern Bremer County. Over the years many farmers received disaster payments for flooding on their land. In 2002, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), under the authority of the Emergency Watershed Protection/Flood Plain Easement Act (EWP/FPE), bought a flood plain easement on 252.2 acres of land south of Highway 63 owned by the Heffernan family. The easement left the title of the land to Heffernan, but NRCS purchased a land use



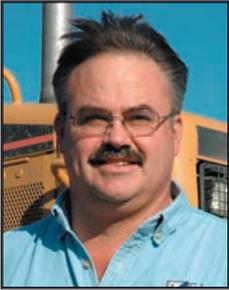
*This Highway 63 sign, seen by John Moyna, third from the left, president of earth moving contractor C. J. Moyna and Sons, triggered five months of negotiations that formed a partnership between his company and three government agencies that is allowing a wetland to be built that will clean water, prevent flooding, protect endangered species and save the taxpayers \$500,000. Pictured with Moyna are John Shimek, Iowa DOT Construction Technician, Doug Chafa, Iowa DNR Biologist at the Sweets Marsh Wildlife Unit, Moyna, Laura Wilden, Bremer County NRCS District Conservationist, Mike Webster, NRCS Wetland Specialist and Al Ehley, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations.*

restriction so that this section of floodplain could no longer be used for agricultural crop production.

Heffernan kept what was anticipated to be the right of way for the new Highway 63 construction that would cut through the NRCS easement.

A wetland was planned for the easement site and a sign announcing the wetland went up, but construction funds to make a functioning wetland out of that flood plain were not available. The land remained as it had been enrolled under a previous Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contract; a minimal mix of native grasses.

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*



*John Moyna*



*Laura Wilden*



*John Shimek*



*Mike Webster*



*Doug Chafa*

In November of 2003 Heffernan sold the highway right of way through his land to the Iowa Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) bought the residual land rights with the permanent NRCS flood plain easement attached. DNR's purchase opened the land up for the public's use. NRCS kept the EWP/FPE flood plain easement. That meant that land that originally was owned by one family is now owned or controlled by three public agencies: Iowa DOT, DNR and NRCS.

Enter John Moyna. In 2006, a number of highway construction contracts were bid and let to reconstruct and widen a portion of Highway 63. John's company, C.J. Moyna and Sons Construction, won a contract to move 1/2 million cubic yards of earth from a "borrow" area onto the construction site to raise the road. Then it would be shaped to DOT's roadway specification and other contractors would finish the road construction.

The original plan had Moyna taking the 1/2 million cubic yards of fill dirt from a farm DOT had purchased to provide material for that purpose. To use fill dirt from that farm, the soil would be stripped from the farm making parts of it unsuitable for crop production. It would also require 12 to 15 side dump tractor trailers to continually make an eight mile round trip on Highway 63 going between the borrow and construction sites. This heavy volume of slow moving truck traffic would add to traffic safety concerns and, because of where they had to drive, the trucks would muddy up the highway adding to travel woes and slippery conditions while burning a lot of fuel.

Moyna had a better idea. Right next to the highway construction site he saw a highway sign announcing a wetland on the former Heffernan site and thought to himself, "This could be made a much better wetland. I wonder if I could do that and get my borrow fill from here." He talked to the agency partners and got



*Pictured are Laura Wilden, Bremer County NRCS District Conservationist; Doug Chafa, Iowa DNR Biologist at the Sweets Marsh Wildlife Unit; John Shimek, Iowa DOT Construction Technician; John Moyna, President, CJ Moyna and Sons Inc.; Al Ehley, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations; Mike Webster, NRCS Wetland Specialist; and Charlie Scherf, C. J. Moyna & Sons Finish Dozer Operator.*

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*



an enthusiastic reception. Getting the details worked out was another matter. Because of the agencies' different missions and focus, it took five months of negotiations between the four parties to work out a memorandum of agreement all could endorse. Finally, Moyna's proposal calling for taking his fill dirt from the former Heffernan farm instead of the DOT farm site was approved. He started taking fill dirt from the Heffernan site and constructing a wetland to NRCS and DNR specifications.

There are other benefits besides those that add up to the \$500,000 cost savings figure. The DOT notes construction traffic on Highway 63 will be greatly reduced. There are a number of related construction cost savings and energy savings which result in an improved environment. Besides saving money, the DOT will earn at least \$65,000 per year on rental income from the 307-acres of cropland that became

excess right of way that would otherwise have been taken out of production and seeded to control weeds.

There is also another way the project was a win-win-win between the partners. "Once the construction work is done, that farm will be sold as 'excess right of way.' A farm with its top soil intact is much more valuable than one without," said Ron Loecher, DOT Project Engineer.

"There are also environmental benefits for both man and animals," said Mike Webster,

NRCS natural resource specialist. "Thanks to this amazing win-win situation and great cooperation, we are all getting a well designed and constructed wetland that will reduce flooding for the people downstream, filter out nutrients, recharge groundwater and keep sediment from going into the Wapsipinicon River. It will also provide habitat for many birds and animals including otters, ducks, geese, cranes and a number of threatened and endangered species."

NRCS Biologist Jennifer Anderson-Cruz studies wetlands and their impacts on wildlife populations. "Biodiversity is very important," said Anderson-Cruz. "Moyna's construction company is building turtle basking and nesting structures on the site using materials excavated, but not suitable for road construction. In addition to providing habitat, these structures will provide islands of high ground refuge for wildlife during future flooding events, a habitat attribute found to be very important to the eastern massasauga rattle snake, a State and Federal Endangered Species Act candidate species."

Construction on this Highway 63 project is expected to be completed in 2009. It will be then that the accountants will be able to accurately tally the cost savings the taxpayers will receive from this unique partnership. To John Moyna, Ron Loecher, Mike Webster, Jennifer Anderson-Cruz and many others, saving money is great, but there is also immense personal satisfaction in figuring out creative ways to improve the environment, too.

Maybe that shouldn't be so strange after all.

*By Dick Tremain, Public Affairs Specialist  
USDA-NRCS, Des Moines  
November 2007*



*Structures will create habitat for the eastern massasauga rattle snake, a State and Federal Endangered Species Act candidate.*