

Iowa CONSERVATION Showcase

Snow Catch Area to Help Iowa Motorists and Farmers

Iowa Motorists could see better winter driving conditions in the future thanks to a new conservation component of the continuous Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

The living snow fence program, established to combat drifting snow on Iowa's roadways and other public facilities, added snow catch areas as a new component in 2005. Snow catch areas downwind of a living snow fence are now eligible for payments through the continuous CRP.

Living snow fences are trees and shrubs planted in rows running parallel to roadways or around portions of communities and farmsteads. These vegetative barriers trap and control blowing and drifting snow. Snow catch areas range from 75 to 100 feet or more in width and are seeded to native grass species. These areas are located between the roadway and the living snow fence, where farmers often have difficulty farming.

"Farmers have been hesitant to plant windbreaks and living snow fences because soils in the downwind area remain wet and cold in the spring, making them difficult to farm," said Lyle Asell, Iowa Department of Natural Resources coordinator for agricultural



This illustration shows a young living snow fence and snow catch area protecting a rural highway. (Illustration by John Paulin, NRCS)

programs. "This area will catch blowing and drifting snow, and provide much needed winter habitat for wildlife."

Landowners with property on the north or west side of lanes, roads, railroads and public facilities, with land cropped four out of the six years from 1996 to 2001 are eligible to participate in the continuous CRP living snow fence program. The USDA provides annual rental payments for a 10- to 15-year CRP contract, and assists landowners in establishing the practice by providing a 50 percent cost-share and a 40 percent practice incentive payment. An additional sign-up bonus of \$100 to \$150 per acre is available the first year of the contract.

There are several options in designing a living snow fence. In Iowa, two rows of conifers or one row of conifers and one row of shrubs provide effective protec-

Iowa
CONSERVATION
Showcase

tion. The snow catch area must be seeded to native grasses, such as Big Bluestem, Indiangrass, Switchgrass, and Canadian Wildrye. Specialists from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provide technical assistance in designing snow fences and selecting plant materials.



As part of his living snow fence, Dennis Rognes planted 525 Armur Maple shrubs on his farm in Lake Mills, Iowa.

Winnebago County District Conservationist Brenda Tenold-Moretz of the NRCS said the response from farmers to the new snow catch area has been positive. "We sent out letters to eligible landowners promoting the program, and we received a lot of interest from that," she said. "Just this year we assisted in the installation of nearly 40 acres of living snow fences and snow catch

areas. With more response time and as rental agreements expire, I expect even more landowner interest in 2006."

John Laflen of Buffalo Center installed a living snow fence and snow catch area in spring 2005. His snow catch area covers more than seven acres. "I love having native grasses out here on my property," said Laflen. "Native grasses form a beautiful landscape. They attract wildlife and they are good for the soil."

Jim Ayen, State Resource Conservationist with Iowa NRCS, agrees with Laflen. "Native plants have an extensive root architecture that improves the ability of the soil to infiltrate water and withstand erosive conditions," he said. "The high organic matter content produced by natives helps soil hold water like a sponge."

Other benefits of living snow fences and snow catch areas include livestock protection, flood reduction, energy conservation, cost-effectiveness, and more beautiful farms and rural landscapes. With an expected life span of 50 years, longevity is also a benefit of living snow fences.

Dennis Burkheimer, Iowa Department of Transportation Winter Operations Administrator, said the traveling public benefits from living snow fences as well. "Vegetation from living snow fences has been shown to significantly reduce snow drifting on roadways and increase visibility for travelers, particularly in critical areas," he said. "We install between 110 miles and 120 miles of snow fence per year in Iowa. Certainly the living snow fence program will help lessen that number."

To learn more about the continuous CRP living snow fence program, visit your local USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) office or go online to www.iowadnr.com/forestry/pdf/CRPLivingsnowfen.pdf.

*Jason Johnson, Iowa NRCS
November 2005*

Helping People Help the Land

USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.