

CSP Enhances Wildlife Habitat and Survival

Stearns County, MN

By: Meghan Lene

Soil Conservationist, NRCS

110 agricultural producers in Stearns County, MN are actively engaged in the 2005 Sauk Watershed Conservation Security Program (CSP). CSP is a voluntary program administered by USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that encourages ongoing conservation stewardship of soil, water, air, energy, and wildlife habitat on Tribal and private working agricultural lands. In addition to the programs baseline eligibility requirements, producers were offered enhancements-voluntary conservation practices that go "above and beyond" the minimum soil and water eligibility requirements.

Stearns County, a productive dairy locale in MN, produces over 100,000 acres of alfalfa and tame hay annually (*think habitat!*). These crops attract several wildlife species, particularly pheasants and other upland birds who utilize these areas for nesting cover and a food source. A common misfortune for alfalfa/hay producers is sending an animal through the harvesting equipment, causing severe injury or killing the animal. Although cautious and watching for wildlife, it's easy to not see them or a nest before it's too late. Enhancements through CSP were designed specifically to prevent events like this from happening.

Two popular CSP wildlife habitat enhancements included "*delayed haying and livestock grazing*" to avoid the wildlife nesting, fawning period from May 1st to July 1st; and "*using a flushing bar when harvesting forages*" to allow the exit of wildlife from the path of harvesting equipment. A flushing bar is a horizontal bar that extends several feet in front of the entire cutting swath of the harvesting equipment. The bar has vertical "flushing devices" (chains, metal bars, etc.) spaced 1 ½ feet apart, and extend downward into the alfalfa/hay. As the alfalfa/hay is cut, the flushing bar "alerts" the wildlife and allows them to escape safely and quickly from the path of the harvesting equipment.

Both enhancements were practical choices for producers who have alfalfa/hay in their crop rotations. Stearns County producers have observed high success rates implementing these two enhancements. The delayed haying and livestock grazing enhancement triggered extensive interest from producers to leave valuable alfalfa/hay stands untouched for two months. Large pheasant clutches were observed by many CSP producers in 2006.

Although not 100% effective, several CSP participants utilizing a flushing bar have witnessed a remarkable success in the survival of pheasants, ducks, and deer in crop year 2006. Stearns County producer and CSP participant, Roman Schaefer, from Evergreen Acres Dairy Partnership near St. Cloud, MN used the flushing bar on 150 acres of alfalfa in 2006 and has offered an additional 150 acres to his contract in 2007 because his success rate was so high. "I had a success rate of at least 90%. Next year I'm going to keep track of exactly how many I save," Roman stated.



A Flushing Bar on haying equipment can prevent wildlife injury or death. Photo Courtesy: Jaime Schaunaman



1 Roman Schaefer (left) of Evergreen Acres Dairy Partnership near St. Cloud, MN with his flushing that was designed and manufactured by his son, Darrin Schaefer (right). Photo Courtesy: Meghan Lene

Darrin Schaefer (Roman's son) designed and manufactured the flushing bar. The flushing bar is mounted to a self-propelled cutter by four bolts and is designed so it's detachable. "At first I was a little worried the flushing bar was going to be unstable. After minor modifications, it worked great. It never got in the way of harvesting," Roman stated. Roman is considering extending the bar at least another foot forward to allow extra time for ducks to escape. Currently, the bar extends 6 feet in front of the cutter blades. "They (ducks) need a little extra time to exit the harvester's path. Pheasants are pretty responsive and exit quickly."

Roman commented on his innovative approach of adding horse harness bells to the flushing bar. "I used the flushing bar once in the field and brought it back home because it needed something that made noise. The drag chains alone didn't seem to be doing the trick. It was my dad who suggested attaching horse bells to it. That was the ticket to flushing those pheasants out!"

Roman also has six acres of delayed haying in his CSP contract which he manages diligently in common wildlife nesting and fawning areas, around bodies of water, or adjacent to his CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) acres. "The flushing bar will save the hen, but not the nest." Roman stated. "Delaying the alfalfa cutting until July 1 reduces the chance of the nest being destroyed." Together, these two practices enhance wildlife habitat and survival.

The original NRCS flushing bar information, obtained from Ducks Unlimited Canada, provided guidance on one specific design. Several self-engineered, on-the-farm designs were manufactured by producers in Stearns County to fit different types of harvesting equipment. Some flushing bars were mounted to the tractor so they could be alternated from side to side. Others were designed for pull-behind harvesting equipment, which normally travel at faster speeds. Innovative designs have been



Horse Harness Bells were attached to the chains of the Flushing Bar for added "noise" to alert wildlife. Photo Courtesy: Jaime Schaunaman

deployed to move the flushing bar farther forward to allow advanced warning for wildlife to escape. 2006 was a pilot year for CSP participants who used a flushing bar. Improvements will be made by many producers to make the flushing bar a more successful tool (i.e. the installation of harness bells on the drag chains, etc.).

These stewardship practices are not new in agricultural history. Comments were made from CSP participants that their ancestors used a flushing bar years ago for the same decisive reason. Conservation and wildlife stewardship goes back many years. CSP stewards continue to make conscientious decisions to improve their management techniques on working agricultural lands for wildlife habitat and environmental benefits.

For more information on CSP and NRCS, visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov>.