

Wetland is Landowner's Dreamland

By: Joanna Pope, Public Affairs Specialist

Randy Hoff, a businessman from Wisconsin, was looking for his own little slice of heaven. He found it in Rock County, Nebraska.

An avid outdoorsman and wildlife enthusiast, Hoff wanted a large piece of property that he could use for hunting and recreation. Hoff also wanted a place he could restore to exceptional wildlife habitat. Hoff found what he was looking for when over 1,600 acres recently enrolled in the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) came up for sale.

The property Hoff purchased had a permanent WRP conservation easement attached to it, which matched Hoff's goals. He wanted to not only keep the property functioning as a wetland permanently; he wanted to fully restore the wetland and the surrounding upland acres.

"My goal is to have the best carrying capacity for wildlife possible. This property has so much potential for wildlife habitat, and I want to help it reach its full potential," Hoff said.

Jerry Kovarik, district conservationist at the NRCS office in O'Neill, Neb., has been working closely with Hoff. Kovarik has seen the property make several transitions over the past 20 years, but is happy Hoff wants it fully restored.

"WRP will ensure this land remains in its natural state, which will provide wildlife habitat, flood control and water quality to the area," Kovarik said.

To design Hoff's wetland restoration plan NRCS assembled a "bioengineering team" from different conservation agencies. Kovarik's team included Bill Vodehnal with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and Mark Lindval with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"By working as a team and sharing our expertise we can create the best plan for the landowner and the resource," Kovarik said.

The wetland restoration plan designed for Hoff's property included plugging the old ditches used to drain the wetlands. Water control structures were then installed to help regulate the depth of the water held in the wetlands.

Vodehnal said, "Controlling water depth is an important wetland management tool when it comes to controlling vegetation or waterfowl use. Water control structures give the landowner control and help mimic the way a wetland's water level would fluctuate naturally."



Joanna Pope, NRCS
(L-R) Bill Vodehnal, Randy Hoff and Jerry Kovarik worked together to make improvements to Hoff's wetlands through the Wetlands Reserve Program.

Hoff is doing his part to make sure the wetland acres are fully functioning. Since the land had previously been irrigated cropland there are two irrigation wells on the property. Hoff uses the wells to pump water into the wetlands when there isn't adequate precipitation. He has also planted food plots to attract wildlife, planted shrubs for wildlife cover and installed wood duck boxes.

Hoff has already seen positive results on his property. The amount of wildlife using his land has greatly increased.

Prior to being enrolled into WRP the property had been in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) for several years. No haying or grazing was allowed under CRP's rules. This resulted in the invasion of eastern red cedar and cottonwood trees, and poor grassland quality causing the land to lose

wildlife habitat potential. To help improve the property's upland acres an intensive grazing plan through a compatible use agreement was developed by the bioengineering team.

Another improvement that is being considered for the property is the removal of some of the trees that have invaded the wetland acres. According to Vodehnal, this would greatly increase the amount of waterfowl using the wetland.

Hoff admits that he is not a wildlife or land management expert, but he has a deep desire to make his little slice of heaven all it can be.

Hoff said, "The agencies have been great to work with. Their help has been critical in making this wetland function like it used to. It wouldn't look like this or be this full of wildlife with out their help." ♦

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Hoff's WRP incorporates intensive grazing through a compatible use agreement to help manage the wetland and upland vegetation.

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