



United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service

# CONSERVATION Showcase

## CRP in the City

*Neighbors Add CRP in Mechanicsville City Limits, Much to the Delight of the Community*

**by Jason Johnson, State Public Affairs Specialist**  
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If the citizens of Mechanicsville didn't know anything about the [Conservation Reserve Program \(CRP\)](#) prior to 2016, they do now.

Neighbors Bob Steen and John Sandberg live within shouting distance of each other near the northeast city limits of Mechanicsville, about a 30-minute drive east of Cedar Rapids. They own adjacent agricultural land that sits partly in and partly outside of city limits.

Since 2016, their family and friends – along with the entire community – have enjoyed the beauty and uniqueness of native plants and grasses and the various wildlife that utilize CRP for food and shelter.

"It's been a topic of conversation within the community," says Steen. "It's not just us enjoying it. I think people around here love the beauty of it."

Steen and Sandberg have hosted field days and tours for young children and adults, alike, who want to know more about this enormous, colorful flower "garden" on the edge of town.

### Why CRP?

Sandberg, a retired home builder, developed some of his cropland into the neighborhood they call home, including a nearby elementary school. For years, neither paid much attention to the few acres of cropland they rented out to a local farmer. However, Steen noticed farm equipment getting larger and it began to affect his and other homes in the area. "When the



sprayer came along here, it was getting awfully close to our house," he says. "The last corn harvest out here, I was cleaning up husks out of the neighbor's yards. Our homes were just too close for that size of equipment."

As a local banker who works often with farmers, Steen was familiar with CRP and knew he and Sandberg's land might qualify. CRP is a conservation program administered by the [USDA's Farm Service Agency \(FSA\)](#) where landowners receive a yearly rental payment in exchange for removing environmentally sensitive land from agricultural production and plant species that improve environmental health and quality.

Steen owns just over five cropland acres near his home. He approached Sandberg about including a couple of his adjacent acres in CRP. "I had never heard of CRP until Bob mentioned adding two acres by the creek," said Sandberg.

To learn more about it, he went to the Cedar County USDA Service Center in Tipton to familiarize himself with the program. "I left there knowing that I wanted to not only add those two acres, but knew I wanted to add another 10 acres, too," said Sandberg.

Steen and Sandberg both qualified for CRP in 2015 and signed 10-year contracts to enroll nearly 17 contiguous acres, helping them to re-establish cover and help improve water quality, prevent soil erosion, and add wildlife habitat to their properties.



## Seeding CRP

CRP offers many seeding options, depending on site conditions and the landowner's conservation goals. Steen and Sandberg chose a seed mix that included 30 forbs and legumes including Butterfly Milkweed, Pale Coneflower, Wild Bergamot, and Compass Plant to attract pollinating bees, butterflies, and insects. They also included a mix of short and tall native grasses including Little Bluestem, Fox Sedge, and Sideoats Grama to attract birds and four-legged animals.

Prior to contractors drilling in the seed, Steen and Sandberg planted a rye cover crop to hold the soil in place over the winter. In the spring, they terminated the rye in preparation for seeding. Bob said the contractor who seeded it did a very nice job. "They took their time," he said. "The seed is so expensive you want to get that seeding right the first time, if you can."

Steen said they were lucky enough to get a nice soaking rain shortly after the seeding that helped get the forbs, legumes and grasses established.

Steen called Teresa Wendt, the district conservationist in Cedar County with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), for advice on the seed mix. "She really did a nice job helping us choose a diverse seed mix," he said. "I didn't realize how nice this would be."

## Using CRP

Because their CRP is within city limits, Steen said they won't hunt on the land, but they still stocked it with some pheasants and quail. "We like to take the dog out there and kick up some birds for fun," he said.

Sandberg said he and his wife Pat sit on their deck and enjoy the beautiful colors of the plants and grasses, along with the wildlife. "This has added so much to



*Bob Sandberg's CRP ground sits adjacent to a cornfield. Pollinators such as butterflies and bees are able to enjoy Sandberg's plant diversity.*

our lives, you can't believe it," he said. "When it was corn and beans, we didn't give this land much thought and now we use it every day."

CRP contract holders must abide by some land use requirements including no dumping, maintaining roads or lanes, or equipment storage on participating acres.

## Managing and Maintaining CRP

Participants are required to conduct a management activity at least once for most land enrolled in CRP. For example, mowing CRP during the first year is a critical component in establishing forbs and legumes in any native planting. "An issue with pollinator plantings is the grasses can overtake the entire stand," said Wendt.

Along with regular fall mowing, the neighbors have burned all the land at least once – in sections. "We recommend burning CRP every few years," said Wendt.

Steen and Sandberg hired the fire departments from Mechanicsville and Lisbon to conduct their prescribed burn. "We would never burn it all at the same time because we want some cover for the birds in the winter," said Steen. "If you haven't seen a prescribed burn on





CRP ground, you wouldn't believe how high and hot the flames are. It's unbelievable.

"It was never close to out of control, but the flames were over 20 feet high and created a lot of smoke. It was just big and scary!"

Steen and Sandberg said keeping Canada Thistle from taking over is a major challenge. "Canada Thistle is a problem in most pollinator plantings," she said. "To manage it, you need to cut it back, pull it, or spot spray." She says spraying herbicides risks killing the native flowers.

To qualify for CRP, there are various land and participant eligibility requirements. Visit your local USDA

Service Center if you are interested in finding out more about participating in CRP. The Continuous CRP Signup is ongoing.

Signed into law in 1985, CRP is one of the largest private-lands conservation programs in the United States. Thanks to voluntary participation by farmers and landowners, CRP has improved water quality, reduced soil erosion, and increased habitat for endangered and threatened species.

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*Mechanicsville landowners John Sandberg (left) and Bob Steen (right) look at Steen's CRP stand in August 2021 with Iowa NRCS District Conservationist Teresa Wendt.*