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Natural Resources Conservation Service

CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Adjoining Wetland Easements Form Wetland Complex in Winnebago County

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A collaborative effort between rural Winnebago County landowners, local, state, and federal government agencies, and non-profit conservation groups have helped restore nearly 1,000 contiguous acres of prairie and wetlands to form a wetland complex.

The wetland complex includes 14 conservation easements entered into by local landowners voluntarily throughout the past several decades to restore once problematic cropland frequently subject to seasonal ponding into a haven for wildlife and recreational opportunities for private landowners and in some cases, the public.

Three U.S. Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) conservation easement programs were utilized to develop the wetlands:

- » Wetland Reserve Program (WRP)
- » Agricultural Conservation Easement Program-Wetland Reserve Easement (ACEP-WRE)
- » Wetland Reserve Enhancement Partnership (WREP)

Winnebago County is a prime location for the wetland complex. It lies in the Prairie Pothole region that extends from Canada south and east through several states including the north central portion of Iowa. Potholes naturally produce moist soil plants which are valuable sources of forage and cover for waterfowl. Similarly, uplands adjacent to these pothole wetlands provide habitat for nesting and rearing.



Also referred to as the Des Moines Lobe, standing water from farmed potholes is often drained through tiling for row crop production. However, even with the installation of drainage tile and surface ditches, some areas remain too wet to successfully farm year-to-year. For decades, landowners in these situations have sought alternatives to drowning out crops. That's where NRCS conservation easement programs can be a viable alternative.

Overall, Iowa has 1,664 conservation easements that cover about 190,000 acres statewide. Winnebago County has 107 wetland easements that cover 8,870 acres – more than any other Iowa county.

WREP Agreement with DNR

John Paulin, wetland restoration specialist for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in Des Moines, says two WREP agreements in collaboration with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in 2015 and 2017 triggered an expansion of the wetland complex. He says the easements enrolled through WREP filled voids in and around previously enrolled WRP easements now held by the DNR and the Winnebago County Conservation Board, helping to create the nearly 1,000 contiguous acre complex.

The DNR's goal in the WREP agreement was to improve breeding and migration habitat in the area for migratory birds, improve water quality in the Upper Mississippi River Basin, and to reduce flooding to benefit people living in the Cedar River Watershed. Through WREP, NRCS signed an agreement with the Iowa DNR to provide 25 percent of the restoration



NRCS Civil Engineering Technician J.D. Goemaat talks to Easement owner Bob Buffington about his newly seeded wetland.

costs and long-term management of the enrolled easements.

Nine of the 14 easements in the wetland complex project were completed during the past seven years, including Bob Buffington's family farm he shares with his three siblings. Buffington's parents purchased the farm near Forest City in 1951. Now in retirement, Buffington and his siblings agreed in 2016 it was the right time to voluntarily enter their land into a permanent easement.

Through the NRCS administered ACEP-WRE option, Buffington's family receives 100 percent of the easement value for the purchase of the easement. NRCS pays at least 75 percent of the restoration costs.

An added landowner benefit is retaining rights under the easement, including the right to sell the property, the right to private access, and the right to recreational uses such as fishing, hunting, and birdwatching.

Contractors completed the restoration on Buffington's 146-acre easement in Fall 2020. "I never dreamed we

would see so much water so soon," he said. "I thought that would be a slow process since we are in a bit of drought." Buffington says his easement already attracts deer, pheasants, turkeys, ducks, and geese. "Enrolling our land into an easement was one way for our family to get money for our farm now and still have the farm," he said. "It worked out well for our family."

NRCS Engineers Strategically Reroute Tile

One of the primary reasons why Buffington's easement began filling with water and taking shape so quickly was the planning and engineering by NRCS staff. J.D. Goemaat, an NRCS civil engineering technician, says a lot goes into restoring a wetland easement. "We rerouted tile on Bob's easement to avoid sand knobs, and shallow water excavated some areas down to a nearby creek, allowing for surface water," he said. "There are a series of wetlands here that are really, really cool because we strategically rerouted some of the tile."



Contractors lay tile to move water strategically to a location throughout a Winnebago County wetland easement. Photo by Lynn Kluver



Goemaat said he and two other NRCS engineers spent about a week planning the tile drainage for the new easements. “We conducted some tile investigations prior to planning, so when we started designing, we had good information to begin with,” he said.

Sarah Anderson, an NRCS agricultural engineer in Des Moines who also assisted with the design, says the Winnebago wetland complex was a large undertaking, but cooperation from local leaders helped make the restoration process go more smoothly. “We were able to do a lot more engineering because we had support from the drainage districts,” she said, “Much of our tile work had limited potential for off-easement impacts and many new easements were adjacent to other easements which allowed us to work on a greater percentage of the tile system.”

Paulin said two major obstacles to completing the two northernmost easements were overcome thanks to local and federal partners. “There was a point where a large tile needed to be routed under a county road, but since that was off easement NRCS could not fund or install the tile. Winnebago County stepped up and made that happen,” he said. “The second issue was the need for additional support structures for overhead lines due to the positioning of one of the wetland pools and associated dike. Payment needed to be made up-front for that work and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service stepped in and helped us with that expense. Without those two actions, our wetland restoration efforts would have been significantly curtailed.”

Goemaat said designing the easements required open communication and cooperation with multiple stakeholders. “There are private landowners who are continuing to farm, state-owned property, county conservation land, and three different drainage districts with infrastructure in the project area,” he said. “The landowners had tile infrastructure that needed to be maintained or surface outlet. It was huge to get everyone on the same page.”

“We spent a lot of time at drainage district meetings explaining the goals and the intent of this project, as well as talking to surrounding landowners, trying to get them on board with this large project,” continued Goemaat.



An easement boundary sign on a Winnebago County wetland easement helps inform public hunters and other recreationalists about property boundaries.

Paulin said one key point often overlooked is that the NRCS and DNR provided funding to replace decades-old drainage district infrastructure with modern materials.

Anderson added, “Whenever you’re talking about restoring wetlands adjacent to a landowner who farms, you’re going to have questions. A lot of the tile in the area was previously damaged and needed to be replaced.”

Nelson Easement A Wildlife Sanctuary

David Nelson’s new easement adjacent to Buffington’s smaller, 40-acre easement was already enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). “We didn’t ever intend on farming this land again,” said Nelson’s nephew, Mike Redig. “We’re very happy we made the decision to enroll it into an easement and impressed with how it turned out.”

“There were already native and cool season grasses here from the CRP, so we decided to save money and left that area as-is,” said Lynn Kluver, soil conservation technician in Winnebago County.



Not everything looks the same on Nelson's easement, however. Two large tile outlets quickly formed an open-water wetland in a depression on a portion of the easement, attracting wildlife and providing recreational opportunities.

"We don't plan to use this land much," said Redig. "We keep the hunting here to a bare minimum – maybe twice a year. We're leaving it as more of a sanctuary for wildlife."

Although the WREP agreement between NRCS and the DNR is complete, NRCS staff in the Winnebago USDA Service Center continue to look for opportuni-

ties to expand the wetland complex. NRCS accepts ACEP-WRE applications in all offices on a continuing basis. In 2020, NRCS enrolled two more wetland easements in Winnebago County that will be designed and restored in the next few years.

For more information about NRCS easement programs, visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/ia/programs/easements/.

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A pond formed quickly in a depression on David Nelson's Winnebago County easement. Two large tiles outlet water into the area, helping to form the pond.