



*Helping People...*

*...Help the Land.*



## Restoring Wetlands to their Natural Habitat

When people buy property adjacent to a major highway like Interstate 65, they're most likely doing it for investment purposes. Most aren't imagining deer grazing on native grasses, bald eagles nesting in mature trees or the sounds of bullfrogs vibrating through the air. But wildlife enthusiast, Jeff Pals isn't like most people. Instead, he and some family members purchased the 100 acre parcel of land in Newton County with the intention of allowing their families to enjoy Mother Nature the way it's intended.

Historically tillable farmland that was highly erodible and frequently flooded, the previous owners took the initiative to enroll the land into a Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contract. In 2004, Pals purchased the property and in 2007, when the CRP contract was set to expire, Pals weighed his options.

"I had to decide whether to reenroll the land in CRP or find something that better fit what we wanted to do with the property," said Pals.

Because of his strong desire for habitat restoration, Pals was steered toward the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), now called the Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) Program.

"I had heard of WRP but wasn't familiar with NRCS or the details of the program," recalls Pals. "When I started working with NRCS, we realized WRP would be a perfect fit because we could incorporate wildlife habitat restoration and enhance the property the way we had envisioned."

Pals enrolled approximately 30 acres into a permanent conservation easement. He worked closely with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to develop a plan that would reintroduce native

vegetation, allow the land to flood naturally, and provide a sanctuary for local wildlife. More than 1,500 tree seedlings, including swamp white oak, river birch, and button bush were planted within the area and Pals says the wildlife is responding really well to their new habitat.

"I was out here in the spring and it was like something out of National Geographic. The diversity is absolutely amazing," said Pals.

It isn't uncommon for Pals and his family to visit the area and see deer, turkey and red-winged black birds on the same day that they spot rare wildlife like bald eagles, river otters and rusty black birds. This makes this area the perfect place for the Pals family to bird watch, shoot photography, hunt, camp, and hike.

Pals encourages any landowner with the goal of restoring wetlands or creating a wildlife habitat to enroll in the Wetland Reserve Easement Program under the new 2014 Agricultural Conservation Easement Program.

"NRCS staff are incredibly knowledgeable and truly care about your property and the wildlife you're protecting. This has been a really fun experience from developing the plan to seeing it come alive," said Pals.

And Pals now has the reassurance that this once marginal cropland with the highly erodible soils will be protected forever as wildlife habitat.

"It's exciting that we're turning a little piece of land into a snapshot of what it used to be," said Pals. "But what's even more exciting is my children will be able to enjoy it in the future as much as we enjoy it now."

Wetland Reserve Easements provide habitat for fish and wildlife, including threatened and endangered species, improve water quality by filtering sediments and chemicals, reduce flooding, recharge groundwater, protect biological diversity and provide opportunities for educational, scientific and limited recreational activities. For more information NRCS' easement programs, please visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/in/programs/easements/?cid=stelprdb1248149>.

To learn about technical and financial assistance available through conservation programs, visit [www.nrcs.usda.gov/GetStarted](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/GetStarted) or contact your Indiana NRCS District Conservationist <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/in/contact/local/>.