

CONSERVATION HIGHLIGHTS

Leaving a Legacy through Conservation in the Little Cottonwood River Watershed

Kevin Kuehner-Little Cottonwood River Watershed Project

Seeding down marginal cropland with native grasses, trees, and forbs is one of the best management practices (BMPs) that Brown and Cottonwood County producers can use to protect soil and water quality. However, BMPs like buffer strips, and prairie and wetland restorations go beyond just protecting the soil and water. They are an excellent management tool because they offer multiple benefits. Better wildlife habitat, good neighbor relations, and the promotion of a sustainable concept of land management are just a few.

Several landowners in the **Little Cottonwood River Watershed** have taken advantage of two very popular programs, the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and the Continuous CRP program, and each have their own reasons for participating. Between CRP and CREP almost 4,000 acres have been enrolled by an estimated 150 landowners within the 170 square-mile watershed. This article highlights just a few of the landowners and their reasons for participating in the voluntary programs.

Gary Rathman, landowner in Mulligan township, enrolled his land into the CREP program to increase the bio-diversity on his farm through a prairie restoration. When it comes to prairie restoration and wildflowers Gary Rathman has done his homework. "I wanted to restore what was once on my land," states Gary. I felt the CREP program was intended to help restore what was once part of the original landscape. In the case of my land it was prairie." In just one year Gary has turned part of his farm from a corn/soybean field into a very diverse ecosystem. Through the help of Tom, Kathy, and Greg of the SWCD/NRCS, the DNR, prairie seed dealers, and some studying Gary enrolled part of his farm into the CREP program.



Gary Rathman-landowner in Brown County stands near a 122-acre field recently enrolled in the CREP program. The field was planted in 2001 with over 248 different species of prairie wildflowers (forbs) and 23 different grasses native to the area. When climaxed, this prairie will be one of the largest and most diverse prairies restored by a private landowner.

The Minnesota River Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program combines the USDA Conservation Reserve Program with the state's Reinvest in Minnesota Reserve (RIM) program to retire 100,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land in the 37-county Minnesota River Basin. Targeted acres include frequently flooded cropland in the Minnesota River Valley and its principal tributaries, riparian buffers along cropland identified as a major polluter, and wetlands that can be restored and provide water quality and wildlife benefits to the Minnesota River and its tributaries. As of

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Pictured above, prairie blanket flower, just one of many prairie forbs blooming during the first growing season. Over 240 varieties of wildflowers were planted on the 122-acre field at the Rathman farm. The prairie was recently restored through Minnesota's Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program that retires marginal farmland into a permanent easement for water quality, and habitat purposes within the Minnesota River Basin. (Photos by Gary Rathman)

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recently the 100,000 acre goal has been met with over 4,000 of those acres being signed up in Brown County. The initiative was one of the largest efforts to restore habitat and improve water quality in the Minnesota River—one of the nation's most polluted rivers—and its tributaries.

"When I heard about the program I became interested and after learning more I decided to participate in the program," Rathman said. After enrollment at the SWCD office in Sleepy Eye, Rathman spent most of the 2001 winter planning the project and selecting what to plant. "I wanted my land to be as diverse as possible. I wanted to attract as much wildlife as I could. Hopefully one day when I look out at my field from my house I will not only have prairie chickens, partridge, and pheasants back on my land but many types of small creatures like butterflies as well." To accomplish that goal Gary knew he had to plant variety to get variety. Gary planted over 248 species of wildflowers and 23 different species of grasses native to the area on a 122-acre field. Gary's planning is already paying off. In just the first year, hundreds of wildflowers were in bloom during different stages of the summer and the short and tall prairie grasses are starting to take hold. The Rathman CREP Prairie Restoration is planned to be a part of the Brown County Watershed Conservation Tour in August of 2003. The Rathman farm is located in the Little Cottonwood and Watonwan River Watersheds.



Not only does Gary have some prairie being restored but also some buffer strips along a drainage ditch to help prevent runoff from entering the surface water. Pictured above Gary Rathman stands in a dense planting of switch grass along a drainage ditch on his property in southern Brown County.

Roland Richert, Bashaw township, also decided to enroll some of his land into the CREP program. Roland has his reasons for enrolling 116 acres into the program. "It is marginal crop land. In wet years the bottomland would flood and the sandy soil would produce. During dry years the bottomland would produce but the sandy soil would burn. In the best years, this was 170-bushel corn but with more frequent flooding and rotten grain prices, CREP became a lifesaver. It saves so much soil from



Roland Richert stands in front of a 116-acre field recently enrolled in the CREP program along the Little Cottonwood River.

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getting into the Little Cottonwood River and is really attracting the wildlife. There are so many more pheasants out there and the deer love to run and hide in that tall grass. I really like to walk and look at the wildflowers too. Wildlife needs room too, so I gave some to them. CREP is still farming, just in a different type of way," states Richert. Roland Richert was one of the first landowners in Brown County to participate in the program.

Regular flooding and poor yields were enough to make Marvin and Esther Windschitl look for an alternative to cropping some of their farm land. "The area is close to the Little Cottonwood River. When the river would rise, about 20 acres would flood out. We would only get a crop off of it about once every five years. The land is even too low to tile." For Marvin, enrolling some of his land in the CREP program made good sense. The area that used to produce corn and soybeans has now been planted to about 60 acres of native prairie grasses which will help reduce erosion and agricultural runoff. The decision to enter into the CREP program will not only help the water quality of the Little Cottonwood River, it will also improve Marvin's bottom line. "The CREP payments are better than what I could get from farming the field," said Marvin. The trend toward larger and larger equipment also influenced Marvin's decision. "It's an odd shaped field, so it's hard to get into it with larger equipment." Marvin and Esther also recognize how important native prairie land can be for wildlife. "The land has only been planted (to grass) for a year. But we do see pheasants and deer on CRP land. Lots of wildflowers too." One major concern some landowners have when enrolling land into a conservation program is trespassing and unauthorized hunting. That hasn't been a problem for Marvin. "The land is posted. That keeps people off." All in all, the CREP program was a smart choice for the Windschitls as it will benefit the environment and themselves. Once the grasses become established, Marvin and Esther will have a beautiful stand of native prairie and a legacy that will extend long beyond the time they retire from farming.

Gerald and Lorrel Riederer have their reasons for enrolling some of their land into a conservation program. "The 10-acre area I enrolled into CREP sits along the Little Cottonwood River and used to be really good hay meadowland when we had cattle. I liked going to that area of the farm, since it was so serene. After we sold the cattle we had no need for the hay, but still needed to provide income so about 20 years ago we converted it into a corn and soybean field. Because of flooding, and washing problems, the low bottom ground created setbacks for us in the spring.



Pictured above Gerald explains the difficulty of farming the wet soils in his field. The 10-acre field has recently been enrolled into the CREP program and planted into native grasses.

"CREP is still farming, just in a different type of way."



Frequent flooding was one of the main reasons Marvin and Esther Windschitl enrolled 60 acres into a conservation program.

"The grasses will be great for pheasant cover. There was good hunting when I was a kid, but not anymore. I really miss hearing the crow of a pheasant in the morning. Hopefully I can help bring that back."



Over 2,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land like this one on the Windschitl farm have been taken out of production in the LCR watershed through the CREP program

Watershed Marginal Crop Land

-A total of 2,321 acres of marginal or environmentally sensitive land was enrolled into CREP. This accounts for 2.4 % of the cultivated land in the watershed. About 44% or 1,013 acres of CREP is located within the 100-year active floodplain of the LC River. The remaining land, 1,308 acres, is located on frequently flooded soils (wetlands) or along riparian corridors like streams and drainage ditches.



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After our retirement from farming our renter faced the same problems so he actually recommended the CREP program to me.” Riederer liked the idea of conserving the land and seeing it go back to its natural state while keeping it in the family. “The Riederer farm is a century farm so keeping it in the family was important to us,” notes Gerald.

Gerald has also recently enrolled almost 15 acres into a new USDA Wetlands in CRP pilot program. The new program, also known as the Farmed Wetlands Program (FWP) allows landowners to enroll small wetland areas and adjacent buffers in the continuous signup of the Conservation Reserve Program for 10-15 years.

The new program is intended for upland, cropped, wetland basins no bigger than five acres. The new CRP program is proving to be a valuable tool for many Brown County farmers since it helps them deal with the challenges related to managing consistently wet areas while improving water quality and wildlife habitat. Gerald found out about the program when the Little Cottonwood River Watershed group and NRCS office sent out proposals to eligible landowners. “I really couldn’t see any reason not to enroll in the program. Even with tiling I have always had drainage problems with those areas, notes Gerald. In some years I had to wait for the ground to freeze before I could get the corn out. I was going to add more tile, but the idea of being able to square off the field along with the competitive CRP rental rates convinced me otherwise.” When asked what the site will be like in the future, Gerald replied, “The grasses will be great for pheasant cover. There was good hunting when I was a kid, but not anymore. I really miss hearing the crow of a pheasant in the morning. Hopefully I can help bring that back.”



Gerald and wife Lorrel stand next to area soon to be enrolled into the new Farmed Wetland Program (FWP). The FWP is a new Conservation Reserve based program designated to the prairie pothole states –North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota and Iowa. The CRP based program allows producers to enroll cropped wet areas 5 acres in size or less into the program for 10-15 years.

Whether it’s a financial or conservation oriented reason, or just wanting to hear the cackle of pheasant once again on the land there are many reasons why local landowners and farmers in Brown and Cottonwood County are enrolling some of their land into conservation programs. Thanks again all to all those landowners of the Little Cottonwood Watershed for leaving a legacy through conservation.

Special thanks for the interview participants: Gary Rathman, Gerald and Lorrel Riederer, Marvin and Esther Windschitl, Ken Drexler, and Roland Richert.