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# Restored Marsh Helps Clean Creek

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ST. PETER — Most days this fall you'll find Charlie Reasner hunkered down in a duck blind on a small wetland, surrounded by decoys, cattails and grassland. Charlie Reasner has a hunting paradise on a small restored wetland on a farm owned by his friend, Gary Gintner.

The little wildlife oasis near Highway 99 and Nicollet County Road 13 is like other marshes that dot the landscape in Nicollet County - except for the fact it didn't exist until last year. For more than a century, it was a field for corn and soybeans.

The wetland restoration is one of three in the area that aims to improve the water quality in Seven Mile Creek and create wildlife habitat.

"There are a lot of options out there for landowners, they just don't always know about them," said Kevin Kuehner, who is helping oversee construction of the latest wetland just north of the one Reasner hunts in. Kuehner works for the Brown-Nicollet-Cottonwood Water Quality Board.

The projects are a joint effort between several state, federal, and local agencies with funding by the McKnight Foundation. It is a small part of a larger effort to reduce nitrates entering the Minnesota River and subsequently the Gulf of Mexico.

The latest restoration is on a 50-acre parcel of former cropland now enrolled in conservation programs. The wetland, with about 20 acres of water, is on land owned by neighbors Irma Hendley and Lois Peterson.

"Around the water pool, we'll plant about 30 acres of native grasses and wildflowers," Kuehner said. The main benefit of the restorations is to clean the water that flows through farm field tile and into Seven Mile Creek. The creek, a designated trout stream,

has for years been the focus of efforts to reduce nitrates, phosphorus and fecal coliform bacteria.

Using the wetlands as water purifiers is a fairly simple process. A field tile line is angled up to the surface of the ground on one end of the wetland. The water in the tile is forced up to the surface and flows into the wetland. On the other end of the wetland, an inlet lets the water flow back down into the tile line on its way to Seven Mile Creek. The vegetation and settling process in the wetland pulls nitrates from the water and allows dirt particles to settle. "The nitrate reductions we've seen have been phenomenal," Kuehner said. "Nitrates dropped 50 to 80 percent from where it comes in (to the wetlands) to where it goes out."

The first two wetland restorations were done last year. Kuehner said all three sites were frequently flooded in the past. "They were always problem spots for the farmers, so this is a nice option," he said.

Kuehner said other landowners along the tile line like the project because the wetlands will hold back water after heavy rains, allowing the rest of the drainage system to work better. The wetland Reasner hunts is on land owned by Gary Gintner and was the first restoration in the neighborhood. Reasner, a retired Mankato police officer, is a longtime friend of Gintner, helps him with farm work, and now enjoys the restored wetland for hunting.

"It's a beautiful spot," Reasner said. The grass has provided good pheasant cover and attracts some deer. The water draws ducks and geese.

The grass on the site is temporary, holding the soil until the slow-growing native grass and flowers take hold. The DNR will burn off the grass and weeds each spring for a few years until the native species take over. Landowners taking part in the projects are paid to keep the land out of production and a variety of agencies and foundations provide funding and assistance to build the wetland and plant the native prairie plants.

The agencies involved include: Natural Resources Conservation Service, Board of Water and Soil Resources, Soil and Water Conservation District, Farm Service Agency, Department of Natural Resources, Conservation Reserve Program, county agencies, the Clean Water Partnership, and the McKnight Foundation.