

CONSERVATION



As MN CREP unrolls, reasons for enrolling cropland multiply

Meet buffer requirements. Stop battling wet ground. Build a legacy.

Nine months in to the new Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program enrollment period, those motivations have sparked the most sign-ups throughout 54 eligible counties in the southern and western parts of the state.



"It's going to accomplish a lot as part of the conservation goals for Minnesota," said Dave Rickert, assistant easement section manager for the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources. "These are areas that are playing an important part for water quality and wildlife habitat."

MN CREP can buffer streams, restore wetlands or protect drinking water supplies.

It puts marginal cropland into perpetual conservation easements.

The federal-state partnership works like this:

Landowners enroll property for 15 years in the federally funded Conservation Reserve Program, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency. That same land is enrolled in a state-funded, perpetual conservation

From left: Arlyn Gehrke, Rock County Land Management engineering technician, met with Howard, Greg and Leroy Van Wyhe of Van Wyhe Farms. The Van Wyhes anticipate the land they enrolled in the Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program will expand their hunting opportunities in Rock County.

Courtesy Photo

easement through Reinvest in Minnesota, administered by BWSR.

MN CREP is funded with \$350 million from the federal government and \$150 million from the state.

By mid-February, 35 soil and water conservation districts had submitted 130 applications. The 102 funded involve 3,582 acres and nearly \$31.8 million.

"I would attribute the success of that to local SWCD efforts as well as wanting to leave a legacy for future generations. These may be areas that are getting drowned out every so often. It's putting less stress on the landowner having to worry



about constantly flooded areas," Rickert said.

Reasons for enrollment varied among landowners from three counties. But all of them mentioned creating wildlife habitat as a benefit. Their stories follow.

Buffer compliance

The Van Wyhes knew they needed to buffer the drainage ditch feeding Mud Creek. They could have seeded it to grass and fed the hay to Howard's cattle. But they'd enjoyed the wildlife habitat that grew out of an existing 80-acre Reinvest in Minnesota easement along the Rock River.

"As long as we needed to put it in the buffer on each side, we decided we might as well get paid for it. So we put it into the CREP program," Leroy Van Wyhe said. "We do pheasant hunting and deer hunting; that's another one of the reasons we decided to



Chad Billat of Freeborn Soil & Water Conservation District, left, discussed the Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program with landowner Bob Muilenburg in Albert Lea. Muilenburg enrolled 145 acres in MN CREP. Courtesy Photo

put it in the CREP program – so it gives us access to more hunting ground."

One of the three brothers usually harvests a deer from the RIM property every year.

Leroy, Howard and Greg Van Wyhe are Van Whye Farms, a 1,500-acre corn and soybean operation based in Rock County near Hills.

"The ground is good, real good for farming and raising corn and beans. It's pretty valuable land down here," Leroy said. He advised farmers considering MN CREP to determine their soil type and payment rate.

What Arlyn Gehrke called "fairly attractive rates for marginal crop ground" may be driving some Rock County sign-ups.

"We've had a surprisingly high interest in CREP. We're not known to have a lot of conservation easements in the county because we have a lot of fertile ground and expensive ground as well," said Gehrke, Rock County Land Management/SWCD engineering technician. "It takes a bit of risk out of the operation."

This spring, the Van Wyhes will seed their 12.75-acre MN CREP easement with the SWCD-recommended, six-grass mix.

"It'll be real good for habitat, and then at the same time it'll be helping the water quality, too, since it'll be acting as a buffer to keep the contaminants out of the ditch water," Leroy Van Wyhe said. "I would hope that nitrate level would go down (and) if it is high in Mud Creek that we do see a change. That's what these buffer strips are for, to cleanse the water before it gets to the stream."

Legacy creation

Bob Muilenburg has raised potatoes for Hormel's Dinty Moore stew, onions for the open market, and sweetcorn for the local cannery. As he plans for retirement – he'll turn 66 in June; his wife, Darlane, retired late last year – Muilenburg has pared down his 1,100-acre Freeborn County operation. This year, he'll farm about 260 acres.

In recent years, the property his father purchased in the late 1960s just off Interstate Highway 35 near Geneva

Lake produced carrots and sweetcorn. Muilenburg described the land as peat or "muck" – a silty soil that falls away from the root crops at harvest.

"It's been very productive land. It's a farm I really love, but this was a good time to put it into an easement," Muilenburg said.

Chad Billat of Freeborn Soil & Water Conservation District said a lot of MN CREP enrollees had been waiting for the next conservation easement program.

"They were waiting for something that makes financial sense to them," Billat said, adding that payments over 15 years create less of a tax burden. "Landowners are getting close to retirement or their renters are getting close to retirement and looking for different options."

The 145 acres Muilenburg is enrolling in MN CREP will expand wildlife habitat abutting Geneva Lake. With two different conservation easements, he previously enrolled parcels totaling 50 acres. From the window of the home he built for

retirement, Muilenburg can see the MN CREP property a quarter-mile away.

Muilenburg said he never considered selling the land.

“It’s a nice wildlife area. We see lots of deer, we see lots of geese – you name it. Turkey. Right now I’m watching a bunch of deer,” Muilenburg said. “My wife and I love nature. We like to take the golf cart around the ditch bank.”

Wildlife habitat

Twin Cities elementary school principal Steven Geis raises 1,400 acres of corn and soybeans, allows hunting in exchange for help managing 500 acres enrolled in conservation easements, and this winter enrolled 105 acres of marginal Redwood County cropland in MN CREP.

Geis grew up in the city. His parents bought a farm in 1976. Being new to farming, Geis said he was receptive to conservation practices from the start. He credits a well-informed and cooperative Redwood Soil & Water Conservation District staff with identifying options suited to his property.

“With us having less than 1 percent of wetlands in our county (remaining), every wetland restoration we can do is extremely important for water quality and for putting conservation on the ground,” said Marilyn Bernhardson, Redwood SWCD administrator.

Geis’ Redwood County MN CREP enrollment includes 55 acres near the Cottonwood River in Lambertton Township that’s often too wet to farm, and 50 acres of less productive, lighter soils in adjoining North Hero Township.



Above: This 50-acre parcel in Redwood County’s Hero Township is one of two that Steven Geis is enrolling in the Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. **Photo Credit:** Redwood SWCD



Left: Geis posed with his son Matthew and dog Stella after a successful hunt. The Redwood County land Geis enrolled in the Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program is 100 yards from this site.

Courtesy Photo

“In looking at the maps, you can see what the yield is. When we get an adequate rain it’s good. But it’s also nestled between two pieces that are currently also enrolled (in conservation easements) so it’s going to make a larger tract,” Geis said. “It’s the best use for the land, in the sense that you’re taking a piece of ground that may be marginal and utilizing its full potential by restoring it.”

Geis fields calls year-round from people seeking permission to hunt his land enrolled in conservation easements. He used to charge \$150 per gun per day. Now, he tells hunters to call back in April or May when he needs help with controlled burns, cleaning up fence lines or picking rocks.

“City folk get to come out

and do sweat equity, and then they get exclusive hunting rights,” Geis said.

Both of his Redwood County MN CREP additions will make good pheasant habitat. Geis also expects to see wild turkeys and deer on the piece near the Cottonwood River.

“You have to look (at) what’s the best use of the land for the long-term – especially if it’s something that’s going to help with waterways, that’s going to help with water quality and wildlife management,” Geis said.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources’ mission is to improve and protect Minnesota’s water and soil resources by working in partnership with local organizations and private landowners. www.bwsr.state.mn.us

MN CREP: 6 things to consider

FAIR COMPENSATION:

Combining USDA Conservation Reserve Program contract payments and Reinvest in Minnesota easement payments equals at least 90 percent of the land’s value.

MARGINAL-CROPLAND

FOCUS: CRP and RIM payments often are attractive on land that produces lower yields because of wet ground, soil type or other challenges.

CCRP COMPARISON:

USDA does not plan to offer Continuous CRP to producers; MN CREP is the only option available. If CCRP becomes available at a later time due to additional incentives paid through MN CREP, payments will be 52 percent to 120 percent greater with MN CREP compared with CCRP.

FARM BILL UNCERTAINTY:

MN CREP or other cropland retirement options might not be available in future legislation. The next Federal Farm bill will expire Sept. 30, the end of the federal fiscal year.

CONSERVATION

ELEMENTS: Enrolling land in MN CREP directly benefits water quality and habitat.

LEGACY OPPORTUNITY:

A MN CREP enrollment can benefit future generations and the environment.