



On the outskirts

RIM easements on retired ag land protect St. James' drinking water



ST. JAMES —Two Reinvest in Minnesota parcels encompassing 108 acres once farmed and grazed are among the most recent conservation easements on the outskirts of St. James helping to protect the city's drinking water supply.

St. James draws groundwater from six wells north of town.

Water Superintendent Jason Monnens estimates the municipality serves 5,000 residents, including Red Rock Rural Water customers. The city's municipal water supply always has exceeded or met state standards.

"We're OK and we want to keep it that way," said Rich Enger, chairman of the Watonwan Soil & Water Conservation District board of supervisors.

Wellhead protection is among considerations used to rank eligibility for conservation programs such as RIM. It's one of three priorities in the current Minnesota Conservation

Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP), which aims to protect 60,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land within 54 eligible southern and western counties.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources administers RIM.

Curt Peterson's two RIM parcels include groundwater protection and a riparian buffer strip.

Well No. 15 (old wells close; new ones receive sequential numbers) is less than 500 yards from the edge of Peterson's 120-acre Nelson Township property and less than 2.5 miles from town. Peterson operates a gravel pit on land excluded from the easements recorded

Two Reinvest in Minnesota parcels on Curt Peterson's Watonwan County property, a riparian buffer strip and a wellhead protection easement, help to protect St. James' drinking water supply.

Photo Credit:
Watonwan
SWCD

in September 2015.

Butterfield Creek runs through Peterson's land for about three-quarters of a mile. It joins the Watonwan River, which flows into the Blue Earth and then the Minnesota River.

"It was always just kind of marginal land. It was pasture. Years ago they tried to farm it. There's good ground in there, but that part of Butterfield Creek had never been straightened, so it always flooded," Peterson said.

Peterson, 60, said he wanted to keep the land for hunting. He planted about 3 acres of food plots to attract deer, pheasants and turkeys.

"With this all being in the program, there is a lot better habitat for them — and cover," Peterson said. "With the wells there now, too, it's good to keep that cleaned up."

Enger, who holds one of the four RIM wellhead protection agreements

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I just thought it was the right thing to do for the land, being it was marginal land, to put it in a program like this so it helps protect our water.

— Curt Peterson,
Watonwan County landowner

outside St. James, encourages his neighbors near St. James Creek to do the same. He'd enrolled land through a previous program, and expanded upon the benefits.

"It's in the prairie grass. You don't have to spray. No fertilizer. No nitrates in the water will seep through," Enger said. "The land is just back to nature. There's no chemicals, no sprays, no fertilizer. That does help a little bit. If everybody would do it, it would help (more), but it does help the groundwater to a certain extent."

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Peterson's land was originally pasture. It was tilled, and then rented as farmland when renters no longer needed pasture. Before the RIM easement, part of it had been enrolled in CRP.

In Watonwan County, about 4,100 acres were either enrolled in RIM or coming out of CRP and rolling into RIM in 2016 — the most recent year for which data is available.

Peterson said he was pleased with the overall results.

"This was just kind of a good



fit. I get to control the land yet. I wanted to be able to hunt on it as long as I was able to get around and hunt," Peterson said. "That's the big thing, is to be able to go out and hunt and have the say-so who can go on there."

Three years into the easement, the mix of grass and wildflowers is well-established.

"A lot of it looks just awesome right now," Peterson 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. Website: www.bwsr.state.mn.us.