



MN CREP easement links tracts of public land, augments habitat

Voluntary program fit Cottonwood County farmer's goals of permanently protecting marginal cropland, creating a wildlife haven



DUNDEE — Ronald Porth's Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP) enrollment restored a wetland and revived wildlife habitat on land where he'd struggled, in dry years, to make a profit on corn and soybeans. Now, it's part of a habitat corridor with wildlife benefits that extend well beyond Section 34 of Southbrook Township.

"I felt that this ground was so marginal that it should be in a permanent type of (easement)," Porth said of his 257.6-acre MN CREP enrollment. "It shouldn't be farmed. The prices for inputs and everything were getting to be so high, and your return was so low — especially if we didn't have sufficient rain."



Top: Ronald Porth hunts deer and watches wildlife on 500 acres he's enrolled in permanent easements in Cottonwood County. For the past five years, a pair of trumpeter swans has nested on his slough. **Photo Credits:** Ronald Porth

Above: Porth's 257.6-acre MN CREP easement was recorded in 2019. Contractors in late summer 2020 scraped earth from prairie potholes to build a 3- to 4-foot-tall embankment as part of a wetland restoration.

Photo Credit: Cottonwood SWCD

With enough moisture, the sandy loam soil produced well — in wet years, even out-performing neighbors whose crops on heavier ground flooded out. But yields took a serious hit when it was too dry, sometimes four years out of 10.

Porth explained why taking marginal land out of production was important: “A lot of it was washing away into the creeks and into the rivers and into the lakes — let alone all the chemicals that go along with it. It wasn’t suitable — maybe (for) small grain, but not row crops.”

Porth’s MN CREP sign-up recorded in 2019 is one of three easements that, together, do more than permanently protect marginal cropland on his Southbrook Township farm. Combined, the three easements create a 500-acre habitat corridor linking the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources’ 5,240-acre Talcot Lake Wildlife Management Area and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service’s Clear Lake Waterfowl Production Area.



Ronald Porth hunts deer on the Southbrook Township land he’s enrolled in permanent easements, which allow him to restrict hunting access. Porth described the other wildlife he watches on the property: “We’ve got ducks, we’ve got geese, coyotes — which I don’t like, pheasants. I’ve got probably one of the best areas for pheasants there is.” **Photo Credit:** Ronald Porth

“That’s one thing that we struggle with in our part of the state, is having continuous habitat. It’s one thing to have these pieces of habitat here and there. But that does no good in terms of producing habitat for animals to live

in,” said Becky Buchholz, Cottonwood SWCD program technician and Farm Bill assistant.

Porth’s MN CREP enrollment followed a 152.5-acre Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) easement recorded in 2015.

“ Through the first few weeks of development, the crops were really fast (growing) on the light ground because of the heat buildup. But when it really caught us was the end of July, the first part of August. If it dried up and we didn’t get any rain, within a week to two weeks the corn burned up and the beans just shriveled up to nothing. ”

— Ronald Porth, on land he enrolled in MN CREP

This winter, he is working with Cottonwood Soil & Water Conservation District staff to finalize a 97.9-acre RIM grasslands easement.

“I’m enhancing this farm strictly for the wildlife and for the environment.



Building embankments is one way to restore a wetland. It’s the method used on Ronald Porth’s MN CREP easement in Cottonwood County. With two other permanent easements, including a previous RIM enrollment and a RIM grasslands enrollment on pace to be recorded in winter 2022, Porth will have protected more than 500 acres that bridge larger habitat complexes and create a habitat corridor. **Photo Credit:** Cottonwood SWCD

Plus, I still love the farm. It's my Ponderosa. I love to look out across it and see the natural grasses and the tree plots I've got and the wildlife. It's just unbelievable," Porth said.

After a recent snowstorm, Porth said he watched 40 to 50 deer and 100 to 200 pheasants on the food plots he's planted. He said traveling the paths through 6-foot-tall grass between deer stands routinely kicks up 40 to 50 pheasants.

Buchholz, who has worked with Porth on all three sign-ups, said the diversity of native grasses and wildflowers on his well-maintained land — previously enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) — attracts insects, which in turn draw songbirds, raptors and other critters.

"She understands the people. She understands what's going on. She really works with you very well," Porth said of Buchholz.

Porth had considered a permanent easement years earlier. Back then, the payments were lower and the requirements — such as allowing public access — didn't fit his goals. The current easements' initial payments made it possible to live debt-free while investing in wildlife enhancements he would not have otherwise pursued.

"It's one way to get an initial payment, but they still give you control of the land,"



Becky Buchholz, Cottonwood SWCD program technician and Farm Bill assistant, has worked with Ronald Porth to enroll permanent easements that meshed with his goals. Here, Buchholz completed a survey on a different Cottonwood County site. **Photo Courtesy Becky Buchholz**

“ Having sequestered that into a permanent easement and having native grasses there, we don't have all of those chemicals and agricultural inputs that would've been put on the landscape — nitrogen and phosphorus and other herbicides or pesticides that we're not applying anymore. So we're improving water quality that way. ”

— Becky Buchholz, Cottonwood SWCD, on the benefits of Porth's RIM buffer easement

What is MN CREP?

A voluntary, federal-state funded program, the Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP) targets the highest priority areas across 54 counties in southern and western Minnesota. Landowners enroll simultaneously in a 14- to 15-year federal CRP contract administered by the USDA's Farm Service Agency, and a perpetual

Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) conservation easement administered by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources. The program aims to restore hydrology, increase infiltration, provide flood mitigation and wildlife habitat, and reduce nitrate-loading in drinking water supplies through permanent protection.



Clean Water Funds are one source of MN CREP easement funding.

Porth said. That includes restricting access.

Porth hunts deer on the property with about 10 family members including his wife, Carol, their children, in-laws and grandchildren. The hunters who descend upon bordering public lands likely harvest deer and pheasants that move off of his property.

"Theirs enhances mine and mine enhances theirs," he said of the habitat corridor.

From their house, Porth, 69, and his wife can look out across nearly a mile of permanently protected land. They moved to Cottonwood County from Iowa in 1978 to farm the land where his family had grazed cattle. He retired from farming and truck driving about 20 years ago; she retired from nursing. Today, he owns all but 80 acres of Section 34 in Southbrook Township.

"I'd just like to have it stay the way it is. If the kids want to keep it, they can. There's many people in the area that showed interest if I ever wanted to sell it," Porth said. "As far as passing it on to my kids, I enjoy the idea of them being able to enjoy it after we're gone."



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