

Rice County MN CREP enrollment restores wetland, preserves legacy



MIN CREP: A voluntary program to permanently protect environmentally sensitive land, [MN CREP](#) taps federal and state funds. Landowners enroll in the USDA Farm Service Agency-administered Conservation Reserve Program for 14-15 years, and in the BWSR-administered Reinvest in Minnesota Reserve program — a state-funded perpetual conservation easement.

MILLERSBURG — A 157-acre Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP) enrollment in Rice County has restored a wetland and surrounding upland habitat, reduced the likelihood of downstream flooding, and established a father's legacy.

"That was a big deal to my dad, that he was leaving an inheritance to his family," said Sharla Fillhouer, one of three sisters who own 123 acres of the MN CREP site. A neighbor enrolled the rest. "The money was attractive in that we still feel like we would receive his inheritance. But at the same time, by putting it in the conservation program, it allowed us to leave a legacy in his memory. That land meant so much to him. He took great pride in his farm."

Fillhouer said her father, Loren Jacobson, a commercial airline pilot and founding partner of Sun Country Airlines, grew up on a farm and longed to return to the country. The property he eventually bought in Rice County included a drained, 80-acre depressional floodplain wetland that once connected to Wolf Creek, a Cannon River tributary.

Previous landowners' work to make the land tillable started in 1971 when the wetland was drained. Related work included installing about 10

“ His heart was always back in the country, keeping his machine shed full of tractors running, and tinkering around in the machine shed. I think because we did this after he passed away, it's like a legacy to his daughters. ”

— Sharla Fillhouer

miles of subsurface drainage tile and constructing a quarter-mile-long levee along the creek, which protected the site from flooding. Three lift stations pumped water from the site — and its 190-acre contributing drainage area — over the levee and into the creek. The property was enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) for 10 years starting in 1987, and then farmed again.

Wetland restoration is one of several conservation practices eligible for MN CREP. The voluntary, federal-state funded program secures perpetual conservation easements on targeted, environmentally sensitive land in 54 counties in southern and western Minnesota.

Top, from left: A weir structure, seen Sept. 21, 2022, at a MN CREP wetland restoration site near Millersburg, will help to control water elevation. Part of the 157-acre enrollment involving two neighboring properties is seen from Rice County Road 1. An excavator from DeCook Drainage of Byron dug out a section where a culvert was later placed and then the drive rebuilt.

Photo Credits: Siri Doyle, BWSR

“In particular, the program focuses on wetlands that are riparian in nature and are connected to floodplains. So they’re looking for that water quality and storage component as part of one of the program goals. This project fit that really well,” said Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) Senior Water Resources Engineer Tom Wenzel, who designed the project and oversaw its construction. “It is riparian to Wolf Creek, which borders the south edge of the site. And it’s large in scope. And fairly straightforward in terms of the means to restore it and reconnect it back to the floodplain of the creek.”

Contractor DeCook Drainage of Byron finished the \$179,810 restoration in fall 2022. Visible from Interstate Highway 35, the site borders Wolf Creek, which is impaired for aquatic life. The neighboring landowner’s 33.6-acre MN CREP enrollment made the project possible.

Fillhouer worked directly with the Rice Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD).

Rice SWCD technician Emmie Scheffler grew up in the area, and said she drove by the property often. When the land was too wet to farm, she would think to herself that it could be a good candidate for MN CREP.

“Anytime the creek would experience high water levels or come out of its banks due to large rainfall or runoff events within its much larger watershed, this area was likely inundated as that floodwater would back into it,” Wenzel said, based on observations during the past few years while the project was being planned.

Fillhouer and her sisters were



Rice SWCD technician Emmie Scheffler visited the MN CREP easement shortly after wetland restoration work finished this fall. **Photo Credit:** Rice SWCD

preparing to sell the property when she received a letter from Scheffler, whose duties at the SWCD



Wenzel

include identifying and ranking sites that qualify for MN CREP, and then contacting landowners.

“The dollars listed in the prospect letter seemed too good to be true, so I called Emmie,” Fillhouer said.

Fillhouer and her two out-of-state sisters sold the homestead and 10 acres in June 2019. They continued to rent 18 acres of cropland to a local farmer, and enrolled the rest in MN CREP.

“If it wasn’t for her representation of the (SWCD), who knows the outcome? She was so receptive. As a landowner you don’t know what you’re doing with proposals like this, so it’s really important that you have a good working relationship with the county representative,” Fillhouer said. “She literally walked us through every step of the process.”

Restoration work involved disabling the drainage tile, removing the lift stations,

and lining the levee — which serves as an access road to part of the property — with rock riprap that protects it from wave action and muskrat damage. A rock-armored notch in the levee is designed to manage water levels in the restored wetland, and reconnect it to Wolf Creek.

The wetland is expected to be fully restored this spring after snowmelt. Once that happens, the wetland will abut Rice County Road 1, which borders the north edge of the site. Grading against the south edge of the road protects it and the utility poles along the road from wetland impacts.

Work to reroute tile and bring some of the neighbor’s drainage to the surface finished in September.

“In terms of the benefits that this and many restorations like it provide, obviously the big one in this case is the reconnection of this storage area back to the creek that has been lost since the original construction of this levee system,” Wenzel said. “Now when it comes out of the bank, (the creek) has an additional 90 to 100 acre-feet — if not more — of storage area that those waters can spill into. ... In terms of helping the creek manage that water better, helping downstream areas by getting a reduction in peak flows and flood levels

that they might otherwise experience — it’s significant.”

Wenzel said planting native grasses in the uplands, disabling subsurface tile and restoring the former wetland would help to improve water quality downstream. He elaborated on other benefits.

“Wildlife benefits are fairly significant,” Wenzel said. “It’s in an area that has a fair amount of woodland around it. It’s got the entire creek system around it. And it’s a very sizeable, restored wetland that should increase habitat conditions and provide for significant uptick in wildlife in the general area.”

Fillhouer said her husband, their three children and spouses are pheasant hunters; they are considering waterfowl hunting because the restored wetland will attract ducks and geese. Fillhouer, who is semi-retired from the banking industry and moved from Prior Lake to Nisswa a couple of years ago, visited the land this fall with her family and their German shorthair pointers.

“The idea that it would go back to its natural state and provide refuge to wildlife and water sources (would) be re-established was definitely an incentive,” Fillhouer said.

“You just see all the farms being absorbed by all these new developments, and it makes you sad. So for me it just meant that this property that meant so much to my dad will always be just part of nature. Even though it’s not actively farmed, its surrounded by farmland. It keeps a heritage of the state of Minnesota. We’re putting it back to how it was maybe when my Norwegian ancestors came across and thought this looked like home.”