

In Meeker County, outreach funds boost MN CREP awareness, sign-ups



OUTREACH

FUNDS: awards MN CREP outreach and implementation dollars to SWCDs through grant agreements. From 2017 through June 30, 2022, the source was an appropriation from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund. Since July 1, 2022, it has been a Clean Water Fund appropriation.



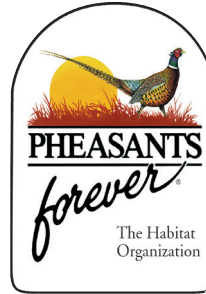
LITCHFIELD — When Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP) outreach and implementation grants from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) channeled the Meeker Soil & Water Conservation District’s (SWCD) resources, Josh Pommier saw an opportunity.

Pommier, a senior Farm Bill biologist with Pheasants Forever who works with Meeker County’s SWCD and Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) staff in the USDA Service Center, was already contacting landowners to discuss how voluntary conservation programs could help with buffer law compliance.

“It brought people into the office, and we got to talk about other options,” Pommier said.

With grant funding dedicated to outreach, Pommier was able to spend more of his time promoting MN CREP as an option. Meeker County’s largest MN CREP easement, 140 acres near Grove City, started with Pommier’s letter to a landowner about 7 acres of buffers required under the law, and grew to involve 260 acres and four neighboring landowners who enrolled in other conservation easements.

“What if I put the whole farm in



the reserve program?” Mark Johnson recalled asking during the conversation that followed. “It’s the kind of ground they were looking for. There were low parts. It would hold water. That was the idea: to flood about a third of it for the ducks and the geese and the deer and the pheasants.”

An avid hunter, Johnson, the CEO of Perennial Bank in Darwin, enrolled 140 acres in MN CREP, converting row crops to wildlife habitat. The easement was seeded in 2019. The wetland restoration finished in fall 2022.

“The payment’s a lot more than the rent was. I hunt, and my kids hunt, and my grandkids hunt,” Johnson said. His three sons and nine grandchildren live within 25 miles of the property. “We shot a lot of pheasants out there this fall.”

Meeker County landowners have enrolled 30 MN CREP easements totaling nearly 1,100 acres since MN CREP launched in May 2017.

Early on, Pommier sent 10 to 20 letters a month to landowners, promoting MN CREP as an option for buffer law

From left: Josh Pommier, a senior Farm Bill biologist with Pheasants Forever who is based in Meeker County, took a break with dogs Walter, left, and Ole before hitting the cattails in search of roosters. **Photo Credit:** Josh Pommier, Pheasants Forever

Larry Sharpe, seen here exploring his land years ago when it was enrolled in CRP, has since enrolled that property in MN CREP. **Photo Courtesy of Larry Sharpe**

On the Meeker County property he enrolled in a MN CREP easement, Mark Johnson hunted with grandson Zane and Zane’s dog, Brixie, in October 2022. **Photo Courtesy of Mark Johnson**

compliance. In one township alone, Pommier said 29 landowners qualified for that option.

After the initial wave of buffer-related contacts, Pommier examined maps of every section of every township to identify land that might qualify for non-floodplain wetland restoration — one of the four main conservation practices MN CREP focuses on, and the one with the most potential in Meeker County. The other practices are grass filter strips, wellhead protection and floodplain wetland restoration.

Because Meeker County lies in the transition zone between the prairie and deciduous forest biomes, much of the cropland consists of small fields strewn with small wetlands, and soil conditions that can vary widely — even within the same field.

“Maybe they don’t get a good crop out there all the time,” Pommier said.

Pommier enclosed a site map with the hand-signed letters he sent to landowners whose property might qualify. He requested a response by a certain date.

Part of Pommier’s job involves visiting sites of expiring Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contracts. Prompted by a postcard reminder and a phone call, about 70% of landowners meet him onsite.

“Then we can actually talk about their property and their cover and their goals, and I usually ask, ‘Have you thought about a permanent easement?’” Pommier said. “If we never make an ask, we never bring it up, and people are never going to know that it’s an option. On that site visit, we’ll talk about the basics of a permanent easement.”

He and the landowners meet at least one year before the CRP contract expires. He follows up



Meeker SWCD staff and BWSR engineers met with a landowner in fall 2020 to discuss how to handle existing tile coming into a proposed easement where a wetland was to be restored near Grove City. **Photo Credit:** Josh Pommier, Pheasants Forever

with a letter, and then a phone call over the winter.

Larry Sharpe enrolled land that was in an expiring CRP contract, plus 9 more acres — just over 21 acres total — into MN CREP in September 2021.

“I’m a conservationist at heart. A farmer and a conservationist. That’s the reason I’ve had that land in CRP all these years. And re-enrolling in CRP would have given me X amount of money but enrolling in CREP gives me more money,” Sharpe said.

Sharpe, retired from the construction business and living in Minnetonka, still rents adjacent land to a corn-and-bean farmer. He said a permanent easement was a big decision.

“I rolled it around in my mind quite a bit. I maybe could have gotten more for it by selling it on the open market. But I decided to put it into CREP, and, of course, it becomes a permanent RIM — permanently protected from development and a permanent wildlife refuge, more or less,” Sharpe said.

“I guess the bottom line is even though I could’ve gotten more for selling it on the open market, I was more interested in having it be a permanent wildlife refuge.”

For the past couple of years, a pair of sandhill cranes have frequented the Harvey Township

site, which borders a creek. A pond draws ducks and geese. His brother, nephews and their sons have hunted pheasants and deer on the land, where he’s camped, snowshoed and cross-country skied. Sharpe paid more to augment the seed mix planted in summer 2022 — settling on about 40 forbs and 20 grasses.

“Even though I don’t hunt anymore, I did when I was young,” Sharpe said. “I guess you just can’t be outdoors very much without arriving at an appreciation for what God has done out there — the miracle of all those microbes all the way up to those big trees.”

When he brings up the idea of a permanent easement, Pommier asks landowners if they’ve thought about leaving a legacy for future generations.

“For some people, they want to leave good, tillable cropland that’s pattern-tiled and produces a lot of corn and soybeans every year. For other people, that’s not the case,” Pommier said.

“You can kind of get a feel if people enjoy their CRP and they enjoy their habitat,” Pommier said. “There’s some people I would never bring up the idea of a permanent easement (with) just based on other conversations I’ve had with them. And others might surprise us. If we never ask, we never hear yes. So we’ve got to ask.”



MN 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. MN CREP easements are not open to public hunting.

STATEWIDE GOAL: 40,000 acres within eligible counties in southern and western Minnesota by Sept. 30, 2026

LANDOWNERS’ REASONS: Josh Pommier, Pheasants Forever senior Farm Bill biologist, broke down Meeker County landowners’ reasons for enrolling: “Ten (percent) to 20% of the people we got in, it was strictly about the money. I would say 50% was they appreciated the money, but they also recognized that their land was not very good for cropping, and it was probably a good, long-term, sustainable plan for their land. The rest of the 30% ... they always wanted to have hunting land. Now this is a tool that they could use to get hunting land forever — that they can pass on to their children.”