

SWCDs celebrate two MN CREP firsts



First recorded easement, first wetland easement draw praise from Redwood, West Otter Tail county conservation partners



An expanded filter strip establishes pollinator habitat amid Redwood County corn fields while buffering an agricultural ditch. A wetland easement fulfills a daughter’s conservation goals while restoring a slough in West Otter Tail County.

Each represents a Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP) first.

Ultimately, each will improve water quality.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) marked progress toward MN CREP’s goal — protecting 60,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land within 54 southern and west-central Minnesota counties — with ceremonies and site visits hosted by the respective Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

Because both MN CREP easements enhance habitat, they draw from the Outdoor Heritage Fund.

First easement

The first recorded MN CREP easement on the Robert and Cathy VanderLinden

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— Mark Johnson, executive director, Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council

property near Redwood Falls buffers Judicial Ditch 32, which empties into Ramsey Creek and, ultimately, the Minnesota River.

With the state’s second recorded MN CREP easement — another filter strip on adjoining property owned by Robert’s sisters, Janet and Judy, and Judy’s husband, Warren Liepitz — the VanderLindens together protected both sides of a mile-long stretch of Judicial Ditch 32.

Left: Kristy Zajac, Redwood Soil & Water Conservation District conservation specialist, talked about the mix of grasses and forbs in the pollinator seeding at the site of Minnesota’s first MN CREP recorded easement during a June 18 event in Redwood County.

Right: After a ceremony at Dalton Community Center, visitors saw the state’s first recorded MN CREP easement on Loreli and Rob Westby’s West Otter Tail County property. A 32-species native grass and wildflower mix was seeded this spring; wetland restoration plans are in the works.

Photo Credits: Ann Wessel, BWSR



Redwood County: The first MN CREP recorded easement involves a buffer and filter strips bordering a public ditch in Redwood County. While the state buffer law requires a 16.5-foot-wide buffer here, the landowners chose to install 60- and 90-foot-wide buffers that incorporate pollinator habitat and protect 1 mile of land on either side of the ditch. A mix of native grasses and forbs were planted in fall 2017.

“That wider buffer is able to ... deal with both sediment and soluble potential pollutants,” said Tim Koehler, BWSR’s senior programs advisor. “With the wider buffers, they also incorporated pollinator plants within the seed mixes. So in addition to helping water quality, it’s helping habitat.”

The VanderLindens were required only to buffer JD32 with a 16.5-foot-wide strip, but opted for 60- to 90-foot filter strips. The field slope determined the width.

“I think that we can incorporate conservation on every farm as part of their farming practice. It can be beneficial both environmentally and financially, (providing) some security for the farmers who have maybe marginal lands,” said Kristy Zajac, Redwood SWCD conservation specialist.

Wetland easement

The first recorded MN CREP wetland easement on the Loreli and Rob Westby property near Fergus Falls put the balance of their 620 acres into permanent easements.

By donating about 20 acres of the 86-acre MN CREP enrollment, the Westbys protected everything not already covered by Minnesota



West Otter Tail County: Loreli and Rob Westby recorded the first MN CREP wetland easement in the state. It forever protects the balance of their 620 acres. She’s a pharmacist and he’s a taxidermist.

Land Trust easements. It’s rare for easements to cover an entire farm.

“My dad’s wish before he passed away was that the property be protected from development. All 620 acres of property is now permanently protected from development, and the CRP will stay in grasses, flowers and trees — never to be tilled up again,” Loreli said during the presentation.

The low area had been ditched, and then planted to wheat, corn or soybeans. **Some years it was too wet** for the renters to plant. **Some years it was too wet** to harvest. Now the wetland will be restored. On a hillside

above it, 32 species of native wildflowers and grasses are beginning to grow. A 4.5-acre tree and shrub planting will augment wildlife habitat.

“We don’t have any children. It was important for us to know that when we’re gone, that it’ll be the way it is now forever, and someone else can enjoy it,” Rob said.

MN CREP

Here’s how MN CREP works:

Property owners voluntarily enroll land in the federally funded Conservation Reserve Program, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Farm Service Agency, for 14 or 15 years.

The land is simultaneously enrolled in a perpetual Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) conservation easement administered by BWSR.

The \$525 million MN CREP program includes \$350 million from the USDA and \$175 million from the state. It focuses on filter strips, wetland restorations and wellhead protection.

The VanderLindens and Westbys are among approximately 200 Minnesota landowners who have applied for MN CREP since enrollment opened in May 2017. During this first year, more than 150 have been accepted for funds totaling \$49.2 million and affecting about 5,720 acres.

“We can’t come anywhere near the impact the private citizens can make on their own land,” said Mark Johnson, Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council executive director. “It’s the private landowner who can make the most impact — positively or negatively — on habitat, on pollinators, on wildlife and on clean water.”

Landowners work directly with their local SWCD, Farm Service Agency or Natural Resources Conservation Service office.