

Lake Volney benefits from MN CREP sign-up



A wetland basin on Jeff and Christy Gibbs' Le Sueur County farm is on pace to be fully restored by the end of the year. The Gibbs enrolled parcels totalling 47 acres in the Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP) putting restoration plans in motion.

Photo Credit: Ann Wessel, BWSR

Too flooded to farm, Le Sueur County wetland is instead restored; designed to benefit water quality and habitat



When heavier rains and higher lake levels became the norm in Le Sueur County over the past several years, some of Jeff and Christy Gibbs' fields became untillable. Working with Le Sueur Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) staff, the third-generation grain farmers settled on an alternative that benefits the Lake Volney watershed and provides compensation for land taken out of production.

For years, a lift pump in the Gibbs' field across the road from Lake Volney sufficiently drained into Lake Volney.

But by 2013, the pump couldn't keep up with increasingly heavy rainfalls. Despite running the pump full time, the field was flooded to the



Le Sueur SWCD District Manager Mike Schultz worked with the Gibbs. Photo Credit: Ann Wessel, BWSR

extent that it could not be farmed. Le Sueur SWCD staff approached the Gibbs about restoring the series of drained wetlands on their farm adjacent to Lake Volney to help filter and retain runoff before it entered the lake.

"The wet cycles that we've seen recently



The Le Sueur County Highway Department will replace a culvert under County Road 138 to provide additional protection for the road embankment and right-of-way. The culvert work is one component of the project to restore a wetland on Jeff and Christy Gibbs' farm.

Photo Credit: Le Sueur SWCD

have changed some of the thought processes on land uses around here,” said Le Sueur SWCD District Manager Mike Schultz.

Lake Volney is a popular recreational lake with a county park featuring public water access. The lake’s 2,017-acre watershed is predominantly agricultural. About 45 houses and cabins line the shore. In the 1990s, significant summer algae blooms began to emerge. In 2002 the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) listed Lake Volney as impaired for aquatic recreation due to excess nutrients.

In fall 2017, the Gibbs enrolled two parcels totaling 29 acres in the Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP) to

restore wetlands directly upstream from Lake Volney. In 2018, they enrolled two more parcels totaling 18 acres in MN CREP. That enrollment provided permanent native vegetation, which filters runoff from adjacent fields before it enters the restored wetland complex.

“I just felt like turning it back to its natural state and maintaining ownership was a better solution for us than letting it go,” Jeff Gibbs said. “We still have control over what goes on here, since we do own it.”

The Gibbs were the first Le Sueur County landowners to enroll in MN CREP, a state-federal program initiated in 2017. Administered by the Minnesota Board of Water and

Soil Resources (BWSR), it aims to permanently protect environmentally sensitive land in 54 Minnesota counties.

“It’s a tool we didn’t have traditionally, and we’re able to help set aside marginal or sensitive cropland,” Schultz said. “It’s a good value for the landowner, provides wildlife benefits and clean water benefits.”

Landowners who sign up for MN CREP simultaneously enroll land in a 15-year federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contract and a permanent Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Reserve program conservation easement. Landowners receive payments to restore native vegetation in enrolled acres, which maximizes water quality and habitat benefits.

To date, landowners have enrolled 12,200 acres in MN CREP. The program’s overall goal is to permanently protect 60,000 acres in southern and western Minnesota.

For more than a year, the Gibbs and Le Sueur SWCD staff planned the restoration. It involves removing the lift pump that drains 55 acres of the watershed upstream, and eliminating drainage from about 3,600 feet of drain tile. BWSR and Le Sueur SWCD staff also worked with the Le Sueur County Highway Department to replace a culvert under County Road 138, providing additional protection to the road embankment and right-of-way. The county is paying for the culvert replacement. The restoration project is expected to be complete by the end of the year.

“I think it’ll help the neighborhood,” Gibbs said. “All in all, it’s just Christy and my part in making Lake Volney a better place to live.”

