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A Sales Pitch for Farm Habitat

Habitat specialists are making strong pitches to protect soil, water, and wildlife on Minnesota farmland.

By Brian Devore

Steve Welle guided his Ford pickup truck through a closely cropped pasture as his cows turned new summer grass into milk. He stopped to open a gate and drove into a field lush with native grasses and forbs. "We are now entering CRP," the dairy farmer announced. As if on cue, a doe popped up from the habitat retired from farm production through the federal Conservation Reserve Program, or CRP. The doe twisted her body and sprang away, her white flag of a tail flipping up. A fawn, saturated with tawny summer colors, followed.

An ardent hunter, Welle admits he often allows wildlife sightings to interrupt chores on his Stearns County farm. He grinned at the sight of the deer. So did his passenger Jason Selvog.

Selvog is one of three dozen habitat specialists employed by the farm bill Assistance Partnership—consisting of the Department of Natural Resources, the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, and Pheasants Forever.

Partnership specialists help rural landowners tap into federal farm bill programs to develop habitat and conserve soil, water, wildlife, and other natural resources.

Since 2003 the partnership has used state and private funds to market federal government incentive programs. With good old-fashioned face-to-face sales talk, Selvog and his partners are helping to produce wildlife habitat one farm at a time.

"If you want stuff done, you have to go out there and knock on landowners' doors," says Tabor Hoek, a field conservationist with the Board of Water and Soil Resources. "Landowners aren't going to drop everything to come sign up for a program."

Fertile Crescent

Farmland makes up 27 million acres, a little more than half of Minnesota's landscape. The partnership focuses on the fertile crescent of farmland that runs from the southeastern corner of the state, swoops across the southern third, and creeps up the western border as far as Norman County. Every acre of new habitat in farm country is critical, says Bill Penning, DNR farmland wildlife program leader.

DNR wildlife habitat goals call for 2.5 million additional acres of restored grasslands to return Minnesota's pheasant harvest to 1 million birds annually. The DNR duck plan calls for 1.4 additional million acres of restored grasslands (a portion of which overlaps the grasslands to be restored in the pheasant range) and 600,000 additional acres of restored wetlands to recover

Minnesota's duck population. Almost all of that wildlife habitat will need to be developed in farm regions.

Penning says the DNR helped launch the partnership—one of the only programs of its kind in the nation -- because rural areas have often lacked field agents who could help landowners make full use of almost a dozen federal farm conservation incentive programs. The paperwork and red tape involved in enrolling in some programs can be daunting, especially for farmers who are grappling with weather, fluctuating markets, and other vagaries of making a living on the land. So far, the partnership has helped enroll more than 60,000 acres in programs such as CRP and its offspring, the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. In 2005 alone, Minnesota farmers established more than 19,600 acres of grasslands, wetlands, riparian buffers, and other wildlife habitat.

Now the partnership is hoping the new farm bill, up for renewal in the U.S. Congress in 2007, will continue to offer strong conservation incentive programs that partnership habitat specialists can market to farmers.

Renville County

Before planting this past spring, Renville County crop and livestock farmer Blair Anderson puzzled over what to do with a perennially wet spot on his farm. Should he try to raise corn and soybeans on it again? Or should he enroll it in a set-aside program that would pay rent to him to idle the acres and establish native grasses and forbs for waterfowl, pheasants, and other wildlife?

According to Anderson, decades of tile drainage have made land in his area into a reliable bin-buster by keeping the soils dry enough to support row crops. In fact, Renville County is Minnesota's number one corn and number two soybean producer.

In recent years, Anderson and his wife, Louise, began noticing how a neighbor's 30 acres of CRP had become a hotbed for songbirds and game species such as pheasants. Louise once counted 60 pheasants there.

"After seeing the effect of this across the road, and considering what little crop I was getting off those wet acres," he said, "I decided to do it [to restore wildlife habitat]."

In mid-April Anderson contacted Cory Netland, a partnership habitat specialist based in Olivia. Netland had studied soil maps and aerial photos of the site, and had a good understanding of what perennial plants would thrive on the wet soil. Seeing the field as a good candidate for a 15-year continuous CRP contract, Netland drew up a conservation proposal. He crunched some numbers to show how much money the restored habitat would produce over the life of the contract. Anderson's 6.7 acres qualified for an annual payment of \$173 per acre, a very competitive rate for his area.

On a bright day in late June, Netland walked along a ramrod-straight drainage ditch to visit the wetland developing in the middle of a cornfield. Deep ruts in the rich, coal-black soil left by cropping equipment provided a hint as to how wet this area had been just a few weeks ago. But now the recently dried out soil was sprouting Canada wild rye, slender wheat-grass, and three-square bulrush, among other grasses and forbs—the makings of a restored wetland that would hold water temporarily in the spring and provide nesting habitat for waterfowl and grassland birds.

Seasonal wetlands such as this are extremely vulnerable in farm country. "It's the most commonly drained type of wetland," said Netland as he watched a few killdeer skirt the edge. Yet small wetlands provide protection of critical nesting areas, as well as winter habitat for deer and pheasants. And they can have a cumulative positive impact when several neighboring farms set up such wildlife havens and create a larger complex of restored habitat.

Like their neighbor's CRP land, someday the Andersons' set-aside acres will provide a splash of technicolor—purple prairie-clover, black-eyed Susan, common yarrow, Indiangrass, switch-grass, little and big bluestems—abuzz with bees and other insects that supply food for pheasant chicks, meadowlarks, and other grassland birds.

Pope County

It doesn't take long for retired crop fields to sprout wildlife. On a recent summer day in Pope County, egrets stalked the shallow waters of a low spot next to a hillside of soybeans, and a mallard hen with ducklings in tow swam amid emerging vegetation. Old cornstalks leaned at sharp angles in the mud, a reminder that less than a year ago this 34-acre wetland had been a crop field. Mandy Uhrich, a partnership habitat specialist based in Glenwood, examined a map of the site owned by farmer Jerry Maus. During the fall of 2005, her office helped the farmer create this wetland by crushing two tile drainage lines and installing a small dam. Despite a dry spring and summer, an open-water wetland emerged.

"I really was surprised at how quick the ducks and geese showed up to have lunch," Maus said. "It probably is starting to look like it did in the past." The slough was drained four decades ago, he said, and the lowest acres produced a good crop maybe two out of 10 years. Still, he had a hard time seeing any productive land not farmed.

"I'm an active farmer," the 55-year-old said emphatically, adding that he turned down an offer in the 1990s to enroll the land in a set-aside program. But with the rising cost of fuel and fertilizer, the CRP rental rate of about \$70 per acre started to look increasingly attractive.

Besides, he says, his sons hunt ducks. "There's some economic reasons and some social reasons for doing this," says Maus. "I have a history of tiling a lot of land. In this case, I decided to give something back."

Competition to Rent

Uhrich says when drawing up a conservation plan for projects like Maus', she does "maximum" and "minimum" scenarios of how much land to idle, and she produces what-if maps to glimpse the future when restored grasslands, trees, and wetlands begin to mature. She might draw up several sample plans to lay out all the alternatives before the landowner signs a contract.

"Some landowners can get pretty particular," she says.

In some cases, they can afford to be picky: Minnesota farmland prices have been increasing for 12 straight years, according to a recent University of Minnesota analysis. In central and southeastern Minnesota, the average cash rent rate for cropland has risen by more than 4 percent per year during the past decade. Some farmers have placed newspaper ads telling landowners to consider renting for crops rather than extending CRP contracts.

"There are many competing interests for that piece of private land," says Hoek. "We need to be able to look the landowner in the eye and say, 'This is what we can offer you,' and be in the ballpark."

Partnership habitat specialists often try to sweeten the pot by procuring funds from county agencies and private groups such as Ducks Unlimited and lake associations.

"You get a little creative," says Netland. "You feel a little like a car salesman. But that's what you're doing, selling CRP."

New Bill on the Horizon

A looming issue for farmland habitat restoration efforts is the 2007 revision of the federal farm bill, which Congress rewrites every five years. CRP, the workhorse of farmland conservation programs, marked its 20th anniversary in 2006, and is up for renewal in the bill. Despite CRP's popularity in Washington, as well as across the country, policymakers could decide two decades has been long enough for the program, according to Dave Nomsen, vice president of governmental affairs for Pheasants Forever.

Competition for farmland is keen. Over the years, large grain companies and other agribusiness firms have pressured Congress to cut back on any programs that reduce acreage for crops. And the burgeoning demand for ethanol is expected to up the ante. Corn-based ethanol plants are going up across Minnesota and demand for corn cropland is expected to rise (see Grass for Gas?).

While about 20 percent of the current farm bill's funds go to conservation, the federal budget is tighter than ever. "I think this is going to be a very difficult farm bill," says Nomsen. "We may have all these great conservation programs that we can't get delivered because of lack of funds."

The DNR plan to increase the state's breeding duck population to 1 million, as well as DNR efforts to maintain and increase habitat for upland species such as pheasants, bobolinks, and meadowlarks, absolutely hinges on the partnership and the farm bill conservation programs, says the DNR's Penning.

Partnership habitat specialists concede that at times they feel they are racing the clock—gaining a few acres of habitat in one part of a county while losing acres to row crops encouraged by other federal farm programs. And new federal farm policy could potentially make it more lucrative for farmers to plow and drain marginal acres.

Piece Work

On the Welle farm, Selvog has determined 2.7 acres on Stony Creek could be added to 36 acres already in CRP along the river. Welle had resisted enrolling this piece because it allows the cattle access to the creek for drinking water. But Selvog and an engineer found a way to use a nearby spring as an alternate source of livestock water. Fencing out cattle conserves soil and reduces nutrient runoff into the creek.

Parking his truck, Welle gestured toward the riparian corridor of native grasses, forbs, and mixed plantings of trees taking shape along the creek. "Whatever happens to the farm, that part of it is for the kids," he said with a smile.

To learn more about farmland conservation programs, go to
<http://www.mn.nrcs.usda.gov/programs>.

Brian DeVore editor of the Minnesota-based Land Stewardship Project Letter was a contributing writer for *The Farm as Natural Habitat*, Island Press, 2002