



A Team Approach to Wetland Restoration in Norman County

February 2015 Snapshots

Just east of the tiny town of Syre in Norman County, a group of neighbors, relatives, and friends were stumped. A piece of marginal farmland they had collectively tried to drain and farm wasn't panning out, and floods kept destroying the crops. The group, consisting of Lowell Ellefson, Orrine Ellefson, Bud Johnson and Jeff Opsahl, began looking for alternative uses for the land. With the help of the Norman County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), Natural Resources Conservation Service, Ducks Unlimited consultants and BWSR staff, they found a good fit with the Reinvest in Minnesota Reserve/Wetlands Reserve Program (RIM/WRP) private lands conservation easement program and all four applied as a group project.



In 2013, the group received \$149,000 in grant money from BWSR's RIM/WRP program, and work began on the Ellefson Wetland Restoration Project. After many meetings in farm yard shops, potato barns, and at kitchen tables, construction and native grass seeding was completed in 2013. The project resulted in the restoration of 448 acres of contiguous native prairie grass and wetlands, including eight wetland basins.



In addition to providing wildlife benefits and improved water quality, the project also resulted in reduced downstream flooding. Surface runoff from the site is estimated to be reduced by 88% during significant rain events. Landowners and surrounding neighbors noticed that spring flood events and water levels in the downstream ditch systems have been reduced since construction was completed.

The Ellefson group wetland restoration was a combined effort by four landowners and state, federal, and local agencies. Removing deposited sediment from wetland basins is a quick and beneficial way to improve wildlife. After the material was removed the entire basin was planted to a diverse wetland seed mixture. Two weeks after construction this wetland was full and being used by a wide range of wildlife. These shallow wetlands are used by shorebirds as well as amphibians and reptiles.

The restored site was included as a tour stop on the annual Detroit Lakes Bird Festival in 2014, and a fantastic amount of birds were observed. Festival participants, who come from all over the United States, marveled at the high quality restoration. In one shallow wetland basin, participants spotted Marbled Godwits and Hudsonian Godwits standing almost shoulder to shoulder, and 11 total species of shorebirds.

In southern Norman County, there are now over 4,400 acres of private land easements, which exceeds the area of the surrounding state and federal lands. These acres help protect many species of threatened and endangered wildflower species, as well as the Greater Prairie Chicken, the true vanguard of the prairie.

As Conservation Reserve Program acres dwindle, securing

blocks of contiguous grasslands like the Ellefson Project is vital for the long term future of grasslands in Minnesota. Today, the Ellefson Wetland Restoration Project is talked about by many landowners, neighbors, and birdwatchers. As people see the wildflowers, flowing grasslands, and wildlife unfolding around them, they realize how much nature matters to our health, spirit, sense of community, and connection to the world around us.