

# Grants support MN CREP implementation



A grant program that helps soil and water conservation districts enroll acres in the Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP) will continue for one more year after receiving an extension from the state Legislature in June.

In places like Redwood County, the MN CREP Outreach and Implementation grant program has allowed SWCD staff to provide technical assistance to landowners who enroll land in MN CREP.

“Without this grant, there would not be any specific assistance to landowners in Redwood County to either enroll or establish CREP sites,”

said Kristy Zajac, Redwood SWCD conservation specialist.

MN CREP creates and enhances grassland and wetland habitats, working with landowners to permanently protect environmentally sensitive land. Participating landowners simultaneously enroll land in two voluntary conservation easement programs: the federally funded Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), and the state-funded, BWSR-administered Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Reserve Program. Landowners receive payments from both programs.

Above: The first recorded MN CREP easement — recorded in February 2018 — is located on the VanderLinden family's land in Redwood County. Buffers protect 1 mile of Judicial Ditch 32. **Photo Credit:** BWSR

Inset: A monarch butterfly visits wildflowers blooming in a Renville County MN CREP easement. Renville SWCD has funded 55 MN CREP easements, permanently protecting 2,910 acres of environmentally sensitive land. **Photo Credit:** Renville SWCD



BWSR Executive Director John Jaszchke viewed the first recorded MN CREP easement from inside a bus during a 2018 event in Redwood County. Redwood SWCD has recorded 59 MN CREP easements as of March, permanently protecting 2,934 acres. **Photo Credit: BWSR**

Conservation easements established through MN CREP provide water quality benefits and create and improve habitat for wildlife including birds and pollinators. Restoring grasslands and wetlands provides nesting, brood-rearing cover and overall habitat improvements for game birds. Conservation practices that reduce pollutant loads help improve water quality.

MN CREP is open to landowners in 54 counties in southern and western Minnesota. All SWCDs within the project area are eligible to receive MN CREP Outreach and Implementation grant funding. With those funds, SWCDs can hire new staff to focus on MN CREP, or realign existing staff members' priorities. The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) administers the grants program, which has benefited 44 soil and water conservation districts to date. Grant recipients are reimbursed quarterly and contribute a 10% match.

Redwood SWCD had funded 59 MN CREP easements covering 2,934 acres as of

March. Zajac said the SWCD primarily uses the outreach and implementation grant funds to provide technical assistance to landowners, which often involves site visits. Technical assistance might include developing site-specific seed plans, site preparation, helping landowners find a seed vendor, and long-term easement management. Redwood SWCD staff also helps landowners apply, and get their input on designs for projects such as wetland restorations.

The state Legislature during a June 2020 special session granted a one-year extension to the MN CREP Outreach and Implementation grant program, which was set to expire June 30.

BWSR easements staff confirmed two more SWCDs plan to seek funding in the 2021 fiscal year; more information on those grant agreements will likely be available in late August. Funds are set to expire June 30, 2021.

Staff funded through the grant program work to raise awareness about MN CREP

and provide assistance to landowners. Key tasks include helping landowners complete MN CREP applications and providing advice on planned restorations after easements are funded.

"Our office does a lot of the legwork for landowners to make the process go as smoothly as possible," Zajac said. "Most importantly, CREP is successful in Redwood County because of the knowledge and passion of our staff to help landowners achieve their short- and long-term objectives, and to work with vendors and contractors to ensure projects are successful."

In nearby Renville County, SWCD Manager Holly Hatlewick said the funding helps maintain consistent staffing levels for MN CREP work.

"This has helped with consistent program delivery to customers, and a higher level of trust-building between SWCD staff and customers," Hatlewick said. "Selling permanent easements is more successful if there is trust between customers and local government."

As of March, Renville SWCD had funded 55 MN CREP applications covering 2,910 acres.

SWCDs can also use the Mn CREP Outreach and Implementation grants to contract with another organization to provide technical assistance to local landowners interested in MN CREP. Fourteen of the 44 SWCDs with active grant agreements have contracted with Pheasants Forever, a nonprofit that supports conservation projects that enhance habitat for pheasants and other game birds.

Grants became available in 2018 after the Legislature approved a \$6 million appropriation from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF) for MN CREP; \$5.77 million of that appropriation is allocated to support MN CREP Outreach and Implementation grants.

