

# Prairie strips: Smaller in scale, new practice offers big results



**Watershed-Based Implementation Funding that supports prairie strips and other watershed planning priorities comes from the Clean Water Fund.**

**T**wo soil and water conservation districts in southeastern Minnesota are using prairie strips — a relatively new conservation practice — as a low-risk option to help farmers integrate conservation into their operations.

The Mower County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) and the Freeborn County SWCD are offering up to \$80-per-acre incentive payments to landowners who plant prairie strips on land enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Those who participate in CRP receive an annual payment for 10 to 15 years (depending on the contract length) from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service in exchange for taking environmentally sensitive land out of agricultural production. Private ownership continues under CRP.

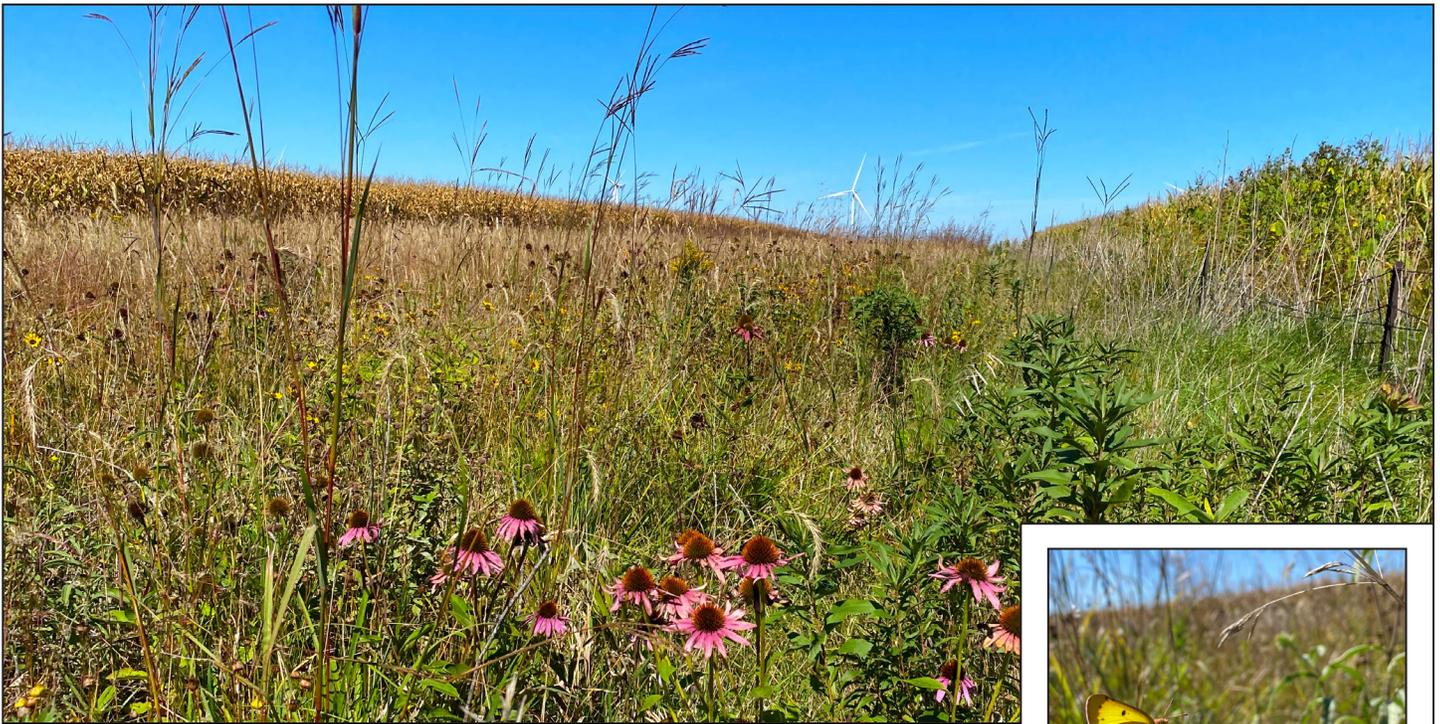
“It’s a good way to get the landowner in the door to start doing a little conservation,” said Chad Billat, private lands biologist at Freeborn County SWCD. “They can get their foot in the door and realize it’s maybe not as overwhelming or complicated as they thought, and it can open up other possibilities on their land.”

Established in or near agricultural fields, prairie strips are small sections of native vegetation 30 to 120 feet wide. The practice was [developed by researchers at Iowa State University \(ISU\)](#). Since 2018, prairie strips have been among the [43 practices](#) eligible for use on CRP-enrolled lands.

Billat said most agricultural properties



*This mature prairie strip established at Iowa State University's (ISU) Armstrong Research Farm features flowering native plants and grasses. Prairie strips were developed by researchers at ISU. Since 2018, they have been among the 43 practices eligible for use on lands enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program. Photo Credit: Iowa State University STRIPS team*



**Above:** A prairie strip in Mower County was established using incentives offered by the Mower County SWCD. **Right:** Forbs such as purple coneflower planted in prairie strips offer food sources and habitat to pollinators. **Photo Credits:** Mower County SWCD



would qualify for prairie strips, making it a good first practice for someone new to conservation. The strips require relatively low maintenance. Producers are allowed to drive on prairie strips — making them a valuable in-field option for turning equipment around.

“It’s nice that we can suggest this new practice to landowners, because it’s very flexible,” Billat said.

Mower County SWCD conservation technician Jessica Bulman said common places for planting prairie strips are at the edge of fields, in areas where crops get shaded out by trees, near streams or other waterways, and around wind turbines and other utilities.

“The way we use prairie strips in Mower County is to take away the low-yielding areas of the field,” Bulman said. “We’re not putting an entire field into CRP, we’re just taking away those problem areas.”

The practice offers multiple conservation benefits. ISU field testing showed prairie strips can reduce nitrogen transport from a field to a waterway by 85% and phosphorus transport by 90%. The strips improve soil health by reducing soil compaction. The native prairie plants’ deep root systems help to improve organic matter in the soil, while providing habitat for pollinators and small game birds.

“They’re going to have water-quality and erosion control benefits like many other CRP practices,” Billat said.

Bulman said a secondary benefit is beautifying the landscape. Prairie strips must be seeded with at least 10 native flowering plants, plus grasses.

Since the Freeborn County SWCD began offering the incentive in 2022, eight landowners have enrolled 35 acres in prairie strips via CRP. In Mower County,

13 landowners have enrolled 80 acres since 2022. Bulman and Billat said both SWCDs aim to enroll a combined total of 120 acres this year.

Funding for the incentives comes from three sources. A total of \$62,000 in CRP state incentive grants funded by Minnesota’s Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund and administered by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) supports prairie strip incentive payments in Mower and Freeborn counties. Additionally, the Mower County SWCD received a \$30,000 grant from The Nature Conservancy to support the work.

The third source, a total of \$45,000 in [Watershed-Based Implementation Funding](#), is dedicated to establishing prairie strips in three watershed planning areas where creating perennial cover is a priority. Those three watershed planning areas

include parts of Mower and Freeborn counties: the Shell Rock River and Winnebago watershed planning area, the Root River watershed planning area and the Cedar River watershed planning area.

Mower and Freeborn County SWCD staff members have spread the word about the incentives via postcards, newsletters, two billboards and social media. In Freeborn County, Billat said word of mouth has been the most effective outreach strategy.

“It’s about getting the farmer in our office and finding ways we can help them put conservation on the ground,” Bulman said. “Even if prairie strips aren’t the best option, getting them (landowners) into the door helps us find a practice or BMP (best management practice) that might work.”