

# Easement expands habitat, water storage



Drone footage shows a 278-acre MN CREP easement in Cottonwood County with Judicial Ditch 1 running through Daniel Nelson's property. Nelson — who enrolled 235 acres — collaborated with two other landowners to complete the easement and wetland restoration project. **Photo Credit:** Daniel Nelson

A Cottonwood County MN CREP easement involving three landowners, Cottonwood SWCD and BWSR is poised to improve water quality, provide temporary water storage and enhance habitat

MOUNTAIN LAKE — Three Cottonwood County landowners have collaborated to protect nearly 300 acres in Mountain Lake Township east of Windom through the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' (BWSR) Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP).

The easement lies where shallow Mountain Lake was drained in the early 20th century and then farmed.

Daniel Nelson, who enrolled 235 acres toward the project — the most of any of the landowners involved — said for three years he had tried to farm

the area that is now enrolled in the easement. Judicial Ditch 1 (JD 1) runs through the center of that land. Heavy rains frequently cause the ditch to overflow and flood the area where the lake once was.

"We wanted this (easement) as a backup project if farming wasn't going to work, because what we farm, we want to farm well," Nelson said. "This is a way to give back to the environment."

Nelson's father-in-law, Jon Adrian, enrolled just over 5 acres in the MN CREP project. Neighbor Steve Pankratz enrolled just over 38 acres.

MN CREP is a voluntary, federal-state funded program that targets environmentally sensitive land in 54 counties

in southern and western Minnesota. Landowners simultaneously enroll in a 14- to 15-year federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contract administered by the USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA), and a perpetual Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) conservation easement administered by BWSR. Enrollments remain privately



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—Becky Buchholz, Cottonwood SWCD Farm Bill assistance and program technician



owned.

The project restored a 206-acre wetland, constructed two rock-armored spillways on Nelson’s land, required 565 feet of tile blocks, constructed a tile outlet and filled in a private ditch. BWSR engineering staff provided wetland design and engineering oversight. Mountain Lake-based Lohrenz Construction completed work in September 2021.

The project is 10 times larger than the average MN CREP easement in Cottonwood County. Becky Buchholz, the Cottonwood Soil and Water Conservation District’s (SWCD) Farm Bill assistant and program technician, said the typical MN CREP easement in Cottonwood County encompasses about 25 acres. The Mountain Lake project included 278 acres.

Because JD 1 runs through the easement, project partners secured approval from the local drainage authority before construction began. The rock-armored spillways provide temporary water storage if JD 1 overflows, creating safe backflow areas into the restored wetland, and drainage back into JD 1 as waters recede.

“In the past, when the ditch flooded, farmland flooded,” said Buchholz, who provided project management and oversight. “Now when the ditch floods, it’s going to flood the wetland.”

Tile blocks bordering the ditch keep water on the landscape by restricting subsurface drainage. A tile outlet installed on Pankratz’ property drains cropland west of the easement downhill into the restored wetland. To further mitigate flooding issues, contractors filled a private ditch on Nelson’s property.

Project costs totaled just over \$20,000. Landowners are responsible for paying contractors upfront and are later reimbursed by FSA and SWCD cost-share programs.

In addition to offering temporary water storage, Buchholz said the project will curb sediment and the pollutants it carries to JD 1,



which eventually flows to the Watonwan River.

“That should allow for some improved water quality over time. As far as sedimentation, that will be lower because we’ll have permanent vegetation (in the once-drained lake bottom).”

Landowners incorporated highly diverse seed mixes designed to benefit pollinators.

“We always think of big mammals and birds (as wildlife), but sometimes we fail to recognize that it’s the smallest ones that make everything work,” Buchholz said of pollinators. “They had the foresight to think of that.”

Nelson, a hunter, said creating and enhancing habitat was a major motivation for him to pursue the easement. Since the project finished, he’s seen a herd of about 85 deer grazing the land, plus many geese and other waterfowl in the wetland.

“I’m excited to see what’s coming because if this is Year One, what’s it going to look like 10 to 15 years down the road for wildlife?” Nelson said. “It’s definitely turned into a giant natural habitat for the animals.”



**Above:** The project involved a 206-acre wetland restoration. **Below:** Workers with Lohrenz Construction install one of two rock-armored spillways in September 2021. **Photo Credits:** Cottonwood SWCD

