

Partnering for success in Rice County

September 2016 Snapshots

Collaboration among agencies, local government units, and landowners is often necessary to successfully restore drained and altered wetlands across Minnesota's varied landscape. This was the case for a recently completed Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Reserve project located just north of Morristown, MN in Rice County. BWSR, the Rice Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the local Drainage Authority, and five landowners successfully worked together to restore a 60 acre digressional wetland basin drained by both public and private drainage tile. Despite numerous legal issues related to both the public and private drainage systems, perseverance and patience finally paid off with the project now completed.

The wetland was first drained in 1917 as part of an agricultural drainage project. A large drainage tile was installed up to the wetland basin as part of Rice County Ditch No. 15 (CD 15). In 1982, five landowners who were farming the basin entered into a private drainage agreement and installed a second drainage tile main alongside the original CD 15 tile for increased drainage capacity. These drainage systems met the needs of these five landowners for over twenty years until about 2007. At that time, it was discovered that both drainage systems within the wetland basin were in disrepair with the CD 15 system completely dysfunctional.

Working with the Rice SWCD, the NRCS, and BWSR, the landowners decided rather than to repair the drainage systems the best management practice for the area was to restore the wetland basin back to its pre-drained conditions. Steps were taken by these landowners to enroll portions of their properties into the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) in 2007. Through CREP, perpetual conservation easements were secured over about 100 acres of land.

BWSR and SWCD staff took a lead role in coordinating both the technical and legal issues surrounding this project. After numerous meetings and public hearings, the County Board acting as the Drainage Authority for CD 15 finally ordered the partial abandonment of the upper reaches of CD 15. Along with this decision, the private drainage agreement recorded on the affected properties was terminated. Through this combination of legal actions, the drainage tile systems within the wetland basin could now be destroyed allowing full restoration of the wetland basin.

Additional challenges existed with the engineering design for the project. BWSR and SWCD staff worked directly with each affected landowner to develop a design that provided protection to non-easement lands and associated tile drainage systems. Along with a unique outlet structure that is intended to be maintenance free, the final design incorporated strategies to daylight several surrounding private tile systems into the restored wetland. On one property, a tile drainage line had to be diverted away from the wetland to avoid adverse impacts to it and the land it drained.



Before



After

Construction of the restoration project was completed in 2014 at a cost of \$141,000. This 60 acre wetland restoration illustrates the importance of perseverance and collaboration when it comes to getting wetland restoration projects off the ground and implemented. It also highlights the effort and time it can take to complete certain projects.

Considering the need to acquire multiple easements, addressing the legal issues and challenges of modifying a public drainage system and terminating a private drainage agreement, and designing and constructing a challenging site, this project would not have been completed were it not for the commitment of the project landowners, agency and SWCD staff, and the Rice County Board.

The benefits from this project include increased wildlife habitat, flood detention storage, water quality benefits, and reduced future maintenance cost on the CD 15 tile system.



The restored wetland and outlet structure.