

MN CREP protects more than 35,000 acres



Landowners work with local, state and federal partners to create permanent conservation easements benefiting habitat and water quality



Data compiled by BWSR staff in mid-August show that the Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (MN CREP) has protected more than 35,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land since enrollment began five years ago.

MN CREP is a state-federal collaborative partnership that relies on local government staff and landowners to protect land via conservation easements in 54 southern and western Minnesota counties.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) and the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) oversee and administer the program. Landowners simultaneously enroll land in a 14- to 15-year federal Conservation

Reserve Program (CRP) contract and a permanent state Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Reserve program conservation easement.

Landowners receive payments from both programs to restore native vegetation and wetlands on enrolled acres, which maximizes water quality and habitat benefits. Land remains privately owned and controlled.

“The MN CREP is designed to help farmers and landowners establish long-term, resource-conserving plant species to control soil erosion, improve water quality and enhance wildlife habitat,” said Minnesota FSA Executive



A rock-armed spillway — one of two constructed on a MN CREP easement in Cottonwood County — provides temporary water storage if Judicial Ditch 1 overflows, creating a safe backflow area into a restored wetland and drainage back into the ditch as waters recede. Cottonwood County has the seventh-highest number of enrolled MN CREP acres among the 54 eligible counties.
Photo Credit:
 Cottonwood SWCD

Director Whitney Place.

Local soil and water conservation district (SWCD) staff play an essential role in the program. These professionals help guide landowners through the application process and explore the best restoration options for each unique application. So far, SWCDs have submitted more than 650 applications and provided outreach and resources to thousands of landowners.

“Local staff act as a bridge between landowners and the state and federal programs that provide funding for these essential conservation easement projects,” BWSR Executive Director John Jaschke said.

Previous CREP programs were active in Minnesota in 1998 and 2005. Those programs focused primarily on creating wildlife habitat. The current MN CREP program takes a broader approach, supporting projects such as wetland restorations, filter strips, wellhead protection and other conservation practices that improve water quality and enhance habitat.

Cottonwood County farmer Daniel Nelson enrolled 235 acres in the program last year. The



Above: An outlet structure installed on a Freeborn County MN CREP easement provides water storage. **Photo Credit:** Freeborn SWCD

Below: Daniel Nelson's 235-acre Cottonwood County MN CREP easement is depicted via drone footage. **Photo Credit:** Daniel Nelson



portion of land he enrolled consistently flooded. This made productive farming a challenge, but also made the site ideal for a wetland

restoration.

“This is a quality program,” Nelson said. “We wanted this as a backup project if

farming wasn't going to work. After talking with the SWCD to see what it would take, we decided to put (the land) into an easement program.”

MN CREP is a \$525 million program that aims to leverage approximately \$350 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and \$175 million in state dollars. The Clean Water Fund, Outdoor Heritage Fund, Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund plus capital investment dollars all contribute to state funding for MN CREP. An additional \$9.9 million is needed in state funding to meet the state's commitment of \$175 million for the program.

Landowners were eligible to apply for MN CREP starting in May 2017. If additional state funding is made available, applications will continue to be accepted through September 2026. MN CREP's current goal is 40,000 acres. Landowners can work with SWCD staff to enroll during batching periods, which are held periodically to align with federal CRP timelines. The most recent batching period concluded on July 9. BWSR staff anticipates the next batching period will begin this fall.