

NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE



Jason Bakke only hunts trophy bucks on his Morrison County property. The potential wildlife benefits were among the reasons he enrolled in NRCS' Water Bank Program. Bakke had worked with NRCS to try rotational grazing. He's since switched to a feedlot operation.

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Deer inspire Water Bank sign-up



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Morrison County

The NRCS program preserves wetland habitat and water quality, and helps control flooding. For one conservation-minded Morrison County landowner, improving trophy buck habitat was a primary motivation.

PIERZ — Deer hunting drew Jason Bakke to Morrison County. He already was managing the 1,500 acres surrounding his house for wildlife when a friend told him about the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Water Bank Program.

Through 10-year, nonrenewable contracts, the program preserves and improves major wetland habitats for migratory waterfowl and other wildlife. It also improves water quality, flood control and subsurface moisture while conserving water and reducing erosion.

“The purpose of the Water Bank is to protect sensitive wetland areas. We want to try to protect the wetlands from grazing or cropping,” said Josh Hanson, the Morrison County-based NRCS district conservationist who worked with Bakke.

Bakke once grazed cattle on part of the land he and two partners acquired over 20-plus years. He once farmed a



patchwork of 12- to 15-acre fields there, too.

About 10 years ago he switched to a feedlot-only operation and moved the cattle 7 miles away. The patchwork of fields — about 90 acres total — was often wet, surrounded by even wetter ground, and difficult to maneuver with large equipment.

A channel flows through the wetland, connecting Mud Lake to Lake Sullivan, a panfishing spot just outside the Water Bank enrollment.

Bakke now farms about 300 acres, most of it corn, and feeds 500 to 800 head of beef cattle.

He enrolled 1,434 acres in the Water Bank Program in 2018.

"The cattle can graze it and I can grow corn on it. But I live here because I want to deer hunt. I have more tillable land down by my feedlot. This is a long ways from there, and the fields are small and chopped up. It works out better as a wildlife conservation area as far as I'm concerned. And I'm sure in turn the water is better because of it," Bakke said.

From Bakke's house, the wetland stretches to the horizon. It encompasses Mud Lake. A channel connects Mud Lake to Lake Sullivan, a popular panfishing spot a half-mile from the boundary of the Water Bank Program-enrolled land.

Eric Altena, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources' Little Falls-based area fisheries supervisor, said Lake Sullivan is well-known for walleye, bass, bluegills and crappies. The 1,103-acre lake is 57 feet deep at its deepest point. Its 7.7 miles of shoreline are heavily developed.

"Any time we can make improvements on what goes into the lakes or



Jason Bakke's Water Bank enrollment is one of five in Morrison County and one of six in Minnesota. The program exists in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota.

rivers, whether it's quality or quantity, it all makes a difference in the end," Altena said.

Wetlands naturally filter silt and any pollutants it may carry.

Bakke's is one of six Water Bank Program enrollments in Minnesota totaling 1,840 acres. Five of the six are in Morrison County. One enrollment totaling 30 acres is in Polk County. Properties in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota are eligible.

In exchange for agreeing to idle the land for 10 years, property owners receive an annual, per-acre payment based on the predominant land use. Bakke and his partners share a \$35 per acre annual payment based on a predominant pasture use. The 2018 rates were \$50 an acre for cropland

and \$20 an acre for forestland.

Payments can help offset property taxes while taking marginal land out of production.

The Morrison County NRCS office continues to receive applications, and will notify landowners when the program is funded.

To be considered for the Water Bank Program, property must appear on the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's National Wetlands Inventory. NRCS gives the highest priority to cropland affected by flooding.

Hanson said some Morrison County land was a good fit for the Water Bank Program because it lies in the transition zone between cropland and forestland.

"There's areas that, since the precipitation went up in

the last (several) years, have gotten too wet for grazing or haying. It's better-suited to being a program where a wetland can do its wetland functions and it's not getting degraded," Hanson said.

"If you're grazing through this wet area, the cattle start ripping it up and packing it down and destroying the wetland vegetation that is used to filter out sediment," Hanson said.

Once his 10-year enrollment expires, Bakke said he would investigate what programs were available to benefit wildlife habitat. He planned to plant food plots on the 11-acre field he excluded from the Water Bank Program.

Meanwhile, Bakke applied for and received NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) assistance to establish pollinator habitat in most of the scattered fields.

"To me, this place is better off for the wildlife. I already do as much as I can for the wildlife here. If I can do a little more and utilize the fields that are here, and it's all right with these guys (NRCS), then that's what we're going to do," Bakke said.

"A lot of what I do has revolved around the deer. But the other wildlife benefits from that also."



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