

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*



## Conservation Partners Help Boeck Fix ‘Ugly Mess’

Nearly two decades after purchasing what he calls “an ugly mess,” Bob Boeck of rural Black Hawk County is finally getting his money’s worth. With assistance from three conservation partners—the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Pheasants Forever—Boeck has 80 acres of priceless wildlife habitat.

Boeck, a semi-retired lieutenant with Waterloo Fire Rescue, purchased 80 acres of poorly managed Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) land in 1991 as a potential acreage site. Just two months after he bought the land, however, he received a registered complaint from a neighbor about the weed problem.

As a result, he decided an extreme makeover was in order. Boeck disked most of the 80-acre prairie and dried up wetland and, with cost-share assistance from Pheasants Forever, re-seeded it to native prairie grasses. “[Pheasants



*Bob Boeck*

Forever] came through for me in a big way,” said Boeck. He re-seeded with five tallgrass prairie grasses, which included Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Indian Grass, switchgrass and Sideoats Grama.

Following the heavy rains and flooding of 1993, Boeck finally had surface water on a portion of the land. So in 1995, Boeck placed 33 acres into a permanent easement through the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), which is administered by the NRCS. Boeck received financial assistance to restore, protect and enhance the 33-acre wetland area in exchange for retiring this marginal land from future agricultural use. Participants in WRP retain private ownership of the land, but voluntarily sell a conservation easement to NRCS that limits future development on the land. NRCS works with landowners, through technical and financial assistance, to restore wetland habitat.

Boeck said it was the right time to place the 33 acres in WRP. “I followed my own advice to not look to tomorrow or yesterday. If it fits your need now, and you qualify and the numbers are okay, sign the papers and walk away happy,” he said. “That’s what I did.”



*Boeck’s wetland benefited from heavy August rains. The water level control device allows him to lower the water level, if need be.*

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And Boeck hasn't looked back. The wetland stayed mostly dry in 1997 and 1998, but back-to-back six- and seven-inch downpours in 1999 overflowed the dike, and even outmanned the water control structure. It sounds bad, but it was actually what Boeck wanted—surface water in the wetland to provide scenery and attract wildlife.

Boeck took advantage of the situation to plan for his future home. “When water was overflowing into the spillways, I walked the entire perimeter with survey markers and noted the high water marks,” he said. Boeck and his wife built their home on the land in 2002. “I made sure when we built the house that my basement slab was 18 inches higher than that water level,” he said.

Before moving to his acreage, Boeck and his family lived in town. He said they never envisioned what they have now. Programs like CRP, WRP, the Private Lands Program through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and cost-share assistance through Pheasants Forever “allowed this land to become what it is today, instead of rows of corn,” said Boeck.

He said it is hard to put a price tag on all the enjoyment they get out of their wetland. “The prairies are fun, but the wetlands are so neat in their wealth of flora and fauna that come in naturally,” said Boeck. “When my wife and I first noticed the spring peepers, toads and frogs, we were inside our house watching TV with all of the windows closed. My wife thought the dryer was running, but it was actually the frogs and toads...it was that loud.”

Several conservation groups tour Boeck's property each year, including an Applied Ecology and Conservation class from the University of Northern Iowa, led by Professor Laura Jackson, Ph.D. “Bob is good at explaining how watersheds work, the size and type of wetland that is possible on his site, and he provides good information about soils,” she said. “He has always been a wonderful host with colorful stories to tell.”

From a recreational standpoint Boeck says the pheasant population on his land is high. He says



*Boeck's prairie and wetland area is called “Prairie Ridge Marsh.” The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Pheasants Forever and USDA-NRCS were major contributors to the project.*

he's not a “hard core” hunter like he once was, but has hunters out on special occasions. “Because of the pheasant population, this is a great place for youngsters to start hunting, so we've had some young people out here,” he said. “Occasionally I'll take my wire haired pointers out to get a bird.”

“I've had farmers in the area thank me because they're seeing birds now, where they hadn't seen them before,” said Boeck.

He said it's work to maintain the wetland, but well worth it. “I keep an eye on the land the way a farmer does a crop,” said Boeck. “I always try to see what's good and bad out there.”

To learn more about WRP and restoring and enhancing wetlands, or other conservation programs to assist your needs, visit your local NRCS office and go online, [www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov).

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