



CONSERVATION *Showcase*

Wilson's Use WHIP to Follow Dream

Adapted from an article by Laurie Fritsch, Program Clerk, USDA Natural Conservation Service, Vermillion, SD

Jerry and Norma Wilson, landowners in Clay County, South Dakota, recently retired, yet they're working as hard as ever to restore their bluff ground to native prairie. When they bought their place in 1983, Jerry said it was infested with Leafy spurge, a noxious weed toxic to cattle and horses, brome grass and Eastern red cedar trees had choked out native grasses and threatened the existence of quality wildlife in the area.

Jerry, who grew up on a farm in Oklahoma says he and Norma have had terrific careers, but they feel what's most significant is that they're conservationists at heart.

Wilson's Recommend WHIP

When the Wilsons moved to the country, their primary goal was to build a solar home, and plant trees for a shelterbelt to keep snow from piling up in their driveway. The thought to nurture the native prairie back had not crossed their minds. The couple's interest to re-establish this bluff ground to native prairie



emerged after Jerry successfully restored a small experimental plot to native prairie shortly after they purchased the acreage. Following successfully re-establishing native prairie grasses on a four-acre plot in 1993, they were both hooked.

They continued to make improvements to their land and in 2005 decided to enroll 16.5 acres into the USDA Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) as a "panic measure" to prohibit cedar trees from taking over the native grasses on this tract of land.

WHIP is a voluntary

program that was created to encourage landowners to develop high quality wildlife habitats that support wildlife populations of national, state, tribal and local significance. Through WHIP, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) provides technical and financial assistance to landowners. NRCS District Conservationist Deron Ruesch, Vermillion, SD, worked with the Wilsons on a wildlife development plan. The information from this plan was also used to determine the cost-share agreement between them and the



NRCS from 2005 to 2009, at which time their contract expires.

The Wilsons then hired the Clay County Conservation District to drill grass seed on the bluff. Where brome grass, leafy spurge and cedar trees were once out of control, today 16 native species including seven grasses and nine forbs, and countless prairie remnants are thriving. Common species include switchgrass, Indiangrass, green needle grass, sideoats grama, little bluestem, big bluestem, Indian grass, black-eyed Susans, Indian blanket flower and prairie coneflower.

Following a recent quality check of the Wilson's acres, Ruesch explained, "With the exception of a little brome grass, it doesn't get much better than this."

WHIP has provided a tremendous new home for butterflies, turkeys, pheasant, deer and other mammals, according to Jerry. Birds have also come back in a big way. During last spring's nesting season, Jerry spotted 25 species within 200 yards of their house and seven species now nest on their property. Bird watchers will discover bluebirds, yellow-billed cuckoos, orioles, red-bellied woodpeckers, rose-breasted grosbeaks, brown thrashers, blue jays, the red-headed woodpecker, blue-winged teal, green heron and great blue heron.

Norma explains, "Every year I'm fascinated by what new plants sprout up, or what birds we see that weren't here before. It's just wonderful." Earlier this year she even caught a glimpse of a Whitetail doe with triplets.

Success Requires Teamwork

Restoration takes perseverance, team work and a lot of hard work. The Wilsons, several volunteers and a few neighbors have all worked together in the effort whether to remove cedar trees and weeds, or conduct controlled burns on selected plots each April, each individual has played a key part.

For certain, restoration takes a substantial financial investment. Jerry emphasizes, however, "The real "cost" is in manual labor, untabulated hundreds of hours." With his hoe in hand, he cut thistles and other non-native weeds. It took him an entire year to rid the 16.5 acres of hundreds of Eastern red cedars and do away with a plethora of noxious weeds.

Meanwhile, over the years the Wilsons have also planted hundreds of trees such as ash, maple, Russian olive, pine, lilac, honey suckle, locust, cottonwood, willow and several others to make up the windbreak north of their home.

To clean up their WHIP acres, some general costs they've incurred include

removal of cedar trees with a skid steer loader, reseeding the same ground, plus more to run and maintain the chainsaw needed to cut cedar trees at ground level. Other money they spend was for the cost of fuel to run the tractor used to move trees, mowing spraying and weed control prior to planting.

Post-emergence maintenance requires weekly chopping of various thistles and other noxious weeds. Jerry also tractor-mows thick stands of exotics including sweet clover on a few acres, and small patches of leafy spurge, false boneset and mare's tail.

Jerry's to-do list also requires expense to hand spray the worst infestations of thistles and leafy spurge in early spring, and again as fall arrives. Some of these costs recur because all restoration projects are put on a three-year rotation to undergo a burn each spring.

What's Next?

In all, the Wilsons have restored or rehabilitated some 50 acres of bluff land. They intend to do some more conservation work, and Jerry plans to continue to develop the wildflower nursery in an earlier vegetable plot. The seed will be harvested from this plot instead of buying it elsewhere, and broadcast about on their 140-acre homestead.