

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*



## **Bensinks' Stewardship Pays Off**

*Jason Johnson, Public Affairs Specialist, January 2011*

More than four decades of conserving soil and attracting wildlife is paying off for the Bensink Family of rural Pleasantville. The Bensinks signed a five-year contract in 2010 to receive payments through the USDA's Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) to further enhance their environmentally-friendly 468-acre farm.

The CSP provides financial and technical assistance to help land stewards further conserve and enhance soil, water, air, and related natural resources on their land. The program, administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), encourages producers to address resource concerns by undertaking additional conservation activities and improving and maintaining existing conservation systems.

The Bensinks moved to their original 400-acre farm in 1965. Today, Jack Bensink – a Marion County Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioner – farms about 320 cropland acres. The rest of the farm is in CRP, timber, switchgrass, or housing for pheasants, chukar, and quail they raise for the Bensink Farms Hunting Preserve.

CSP applications are ranked in eight separate natural resource areas: soil quality, soil erosion, water quality, water quantity, air quality, plant resources, animal resources, and energy. Local NRCS District Conservationist Jay Jung says Jack and his father, Henry, ranked high overall because of the diversity on their land and their resource protection activities over the years.

"They have a relatively small operation, but what makes them unique is that they try to get value out of every acre," said Jung. "That value comes in their hunting preserve, along with good stewardship on their cropland. This includes limiting compaction, erosion control practices, and also renewable energy practices."

Henry says they have no-tilled all of their cropland for



**Jack Bensink of Pleasantville holds up a Chukar Partridge. He raises these birds, along with pheasants and quail, to be hunted on his hunting preserve.**

about 25 years. In addition, they have applied erosion control practices like contour buffer strips, terraces, field borders and grassed waterways. He says there is no doubt these practices help reduce soil erosion and improve soil quality, but he says those aren't the only benefits. "It's an advantage in the long run on your bottom line," he said. "It takes less machinery, less fuel, and less time to farm."

Many of these practices, like contour buffer strips and filter strips for water quality, also provide good habitat for birds. "It's great for hunters," said Henry. "They can walk around in a clean soybean field and the dogs can work in the grass."

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***The Bensinks estimate they have 36 acres of contour buffer strips that trap sediment as it tries to move down the hillside with runoff.***

Jack also believes strongly in renewable energy. He recently received grants through the USDA Rural Development's Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) to install a wind turbine and solar panels. The wind turbine is already hooked to the electrical grid, and the solar panels will be soon. He said he wanted to in-

stall a wind turbine years ago, but he was just recently able to get his energy company on board. "The wind blows a lot here all of the time and I thought we were wasting an opportunity," said Jack.

Iowa NRCS CSP Coordinator Tom O'Connor says the Stewardship Program rewards farmers who are already making good conservation decisions, but Congress also requires program participants to take additional conservation measures.

These measures are called enhancements, and there are more than 100 of these measures available through CSP. The Bensinks are choosing an animal enhancement activity called Shallow Water Habitat, which is basically a small pond or wetland to hold water seasonally. The Bensinks feel they have the perfect five-acre site for this practice that will attract wildlife that needs shallow water areas to lay eggs.

NRCS engineers are designing the new shallow water area, set to be completed in 2011.

For more information about CSP, visit your local NRCS office or go online to [www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/ConservationStewardshipProgram.html](http://www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/ConservationStewardshipProgram.html).



***The Bensinks hope their new five-acre shallow water habitat, when completed, will be a new attraction for migrating birds and prospective hunters.***