

# NRCS and the Ho-Chunk Nation work together to restore prairies and streams at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve



Dan Chroninger, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician and Randy Poelma, Ho-Chunk Water Quality Specialist at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve prairie restoration site.

When it comes to land stewardship, who knows better than the Ho-Chunk Nation? And when it comes to “Helping People Help the Land” by putting conservation on the ground, that’s the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). A tour of a portion of the Kickapoo Valley Reserve shows how NRCS programs have improved, restored and enhanced several parcels of land owned by the Ho-Chunk Nation on the Reserve. The areas are now beautifully restored prairies and a stretch of a productive trout stream is now stabilized, thanks to the working partnership between the Ho-Chunk Nation and NRCS.

The Kickapoo Valley Reserve is nestled in the hills of Vernon County in southwestern Wisconsin. The area is rich in prehistoric archeological sites with artifacts dating back to the Paleo-Indian Tradition (10,000 BC). Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Upper Kickapoo Valley Prehistoric District is significant to the Ho-Chunk Nation.

## *Prairie Restored*

Randy Poelma, of the Ho-Chunk Nation’s Department of Environmental Health and Dan Chroninger, NRCS Soil Conservation Technician explained how the areas that are now restored to prairie were once row cropped and showed signs of significant erosion. Dan was instrumental in planning, coordinating and implementing the conservation practices used on the project. Under the USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) the area was taken out of production and seeded to prairie and now maintained using prescribed burns through EQIP.

These restorations are a long-term approach to land management that includes the assistance from partners from the Vernon County Land Conservation Department and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. An access road was constructed from these upland prairies through the valley down to the stream area.

## *Keepers of the Water*

Through EQIP, a stream stabilization project on Billings Creek was undertaken when severe flooding inundated the area. The streambank became unstable, eroding and sloughing into the creek. Utilizing NRCS engineering expertise the streambank was graded back and ripped to prevent further erosion. Fish habitat is enhanced by “lunker” structures that are buried deep within the banks supplying the fish with sought after cover. Monitoring by the Ho-Chunk on the stream has since shown improvement in the fish populations.



Restored streambank of Billings Creek with fish habitat improvement structures “lunkers” installed.

Sam Skemp, NRCS District Conservationist in Vernon County has been working with the Nation since 1996. He says “I have enjoyed working with the Nation for the last 15 years, working towards the common goal of natural resource protection on the land.” Reflecting on the mission of land stewardship, common to the partnership, Randy said “The Ho-Chunk Nation have been land managers for thousands of years. Protection of the natural resources not only benefits tribal and non-tribal communities today but assures the use for future generations.”