

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*

## Easement Ensures Family Farm Preserved

by Jason Johnson, Public Affairs Specialist

A unique wetland north of Charles City is helping to filter out upland sediment and other chemicals from ag runoff flowing into the Little Cedar River, and fulfilling a family's goals by preserving the land and providing a wildlife haven on their farm.

Landowner Carol Savage, who lives in the Kansas City suburb of Stilwell, Kan., has owned the 200-acre northeast Iowa property for about 30 years. The land, however, was in her family long before that – her parents moved there in the 1940s.

To preserve the family farm, Savage enrolled a large portion of it – 140 acres – into a permanent easement through USDA's Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) in 2009. WRP is a voluntary program administered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) that offers landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on their property.

Savage is the oldest of seven Hughes siblings who grew up there. "It was very important to me and all my siblings that the farm stayed in our family in good condition," said Savage. "WRP is a wonderful program."

Through WRP, landowners can select from a handful of contract options. Savage chose a permanent easement option where USDA pays 100 percent of the easement value and up to 100 percent of the restoration costs. The family retains the right to control access, quiet enjoyment, and undeveloped recreational use.

### Restoration Work

Through WRP, NRCS provides technical and financial support to help landowners with their wetland restoration efforts. The program's goal is to achieve the greatest wetland functions, along with optimum wildlife habitat, on every acre enrolled.



*Mike Jung kneels in the unique fen, which is an upland wetland area fed by cool, mineral rich groundwater. Jung purchased the farmhouse and adjoining acreage from his aunt, Carol Savage.*

Savage recently sold the farmhouse and acreage that sit adjacent to the easement to her nephew, Mike Jung, who grew up spending his high school and college summers with his grandparents on the farm. "He wanted to live there since the day after he was born," Savage said of Jung. "That's where his heart is."

Jung oversees much of the restoration work, and takes care of the management practices on the property. The most visible aspect of the wetland restoration so far is a 12-acre pool of water that attracts waterfowl and other migrating birds and nesting animals. The pool includes a dike and water control structure, so Jung can adjust water levels. The pool is fed by old agricultural tile lines that were either cut or rerouted. Other completed restoration work includes:

- » Establishment of four acres (10,000) of trees and shrubs.
- » Timber stand improvement covering 14 acres, which includes thinning out trees and shrubs to allow underbrush to thrive.

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- » Nine acres of warm season grasses (Northern Wet-Mesic Tallgrass Prairie) seeded around a unique, 10-acre natural fen wetland. Much of the wetland area was already seeded to native grasses through CRP.
- » Brush removal around the fen wetland.
- » 2,000 feet of fence perpendicular to the Cedar River along the easement's north and south borders.
- » Two maintenance mowings in 2011 and 2012.



*Newly planted hardwoods along the Little Cedar River will provide scores of habitat for wildlife.*

## **Unique Fen**

Prior to Savage enrolling the property into WRP, conservationists identified a wetland fen on a continually-wet hillside on the east portion of the farm. "When I was growing up, I remember my dad saying there is something going on up there on the hill. It's different," said Savage. "We knew something about it was special. We just didn't know exactly what it was back then."

A fen is a wetland that forms in upland areas, which are fed by cool, mineral rich, oxygen poor groundwater. This promotes the formation of a peat soil that may be many feet thick, often floating on a bed of water.



*This 12-acre constructed wetland provides wildlife habitat for migrating waterfowl and a nesting area for animals.*

Fens often house numerous rare and unique plant and animal species. Jennifer Anderson-Cruz, a biologist with NRCS in Des Moines, visited the fen site with five other conservationists in October 2008. The group identified 32 native Iowa plant species, including the White Turtlehead – a perennial plant that often attracts one of Iowa's Threatened butterflies – the Baltimore Checkerspot.

"We typically find threatened and endangered species on fen and remnant wetlands once we spend a little more time there," she said.

To learn more about WRP, visit your local NRCS office.