

Program gives some farmers chance to restore flooded land

By **BILL SLAKEY**
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Norm Walker waxes poetic about the piece of Cedar River bottom land he is helping to restore.

"I wish to leave a stream that's free, a plot of land where sanctity can be," Walker wrote. "Where deer can graze and beaver play, where wind can blow and grasses sway."

Walker, 72, of Vinton, is one of 34 Iowa farmers to give flood-damaged land back to nature this year under a federal flood disaster program.

The Emergency Wetlands Reserve Program allows the government to buy permanent easements on flood-damaged land rather than paying to help farmers restore it to productivity.

Although farmers agree to let the land alone, they retain ownership and control over how the land will be used.

Walker said his 158 acres, located south of La Porte City in Black Hawk County, were badly damaged in this spring's flooding. Some areas had deep erosion scars, while others were covered with a layer of river sand.

"It was pretty severe where the damage was, but some of the ground was still farmable," he said.

Walker had been thinking of restoring the land to its natural state even before the flooding. So when the chance came, he took it.

The plot of ground, which was the only one accepted in Black Hawk County, fit all the important qualifications, said Mike Webster, district conservationist for the Soil Conservation Service.

Located between the Cedar Valley Nature Trail and the river, the land adds to the county's natural areas, Webster said. An active bald eagle's nest is less than a mile away.

Parts of the land probably will be seeded to native grasses and trees, Webster said.

Throughout Iowa, the conservation service accepted 5,344 acres in six counties into the program, at an estimated cost of \$4.23 million. The largest plot was a 2,506-acre area in Louisa County that includes 13 landowners in a levee district on the

Iowa River.

Walker received \$697 an acre for the easement, Webster said. The price was set for 11 Northeast Iowa counties by a committee including land managers, appraisers, environmental groups and others.

Some 140 landowners were not accepted into the program. But state officials said most are likely to be accepted in a second round of funding later this month.

"We're encouraging them to stay interested in the program because we expect to get more funding by the end of March," said Jeff Vonk, state conservationist for the conservation service.

Farmers also may sign up this month for the regular Wetlands Reserve, a similar program that applies to land not damaged by flooding. The sign-up for the wetlands reserve program and the second round of the emergency wetlands program ends March 11.

Walker said retaining control of his land gives him a chance to try to earn a little from it, even though he will not be farming it.

"Since I still have to pay the taxes, I might try to lease the hunting and fishing rights," he said.

But the main thing is letting nature run its course again. As Walker wrote in his poem about the land: "I want to give an eagle's nest, a turkey haven of the best; and leave a moment of the past, and hope to God this place will last."