



GREG BROWN / Courier Staff Photographer

Waterloo's Larry Weigle stands on Conservation Reserve Program ground, which is part of his mother's property. Weigle planted switch grass which will grow to six feet in height.

Big plans for small land

■ **County conservationists point to benefits of the Conservation Reserve Program.**

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As far as Black Hawk County Conservationists are concerned, good things can, indeed, come in small parcels.

That's the philosophy behind an effort to encourage county land owners to enroll small tracts of marginally productive farmland in the Conservation Reserve Program's continuous sign-up.

Beginning soon, Waterloo farmer Larry Weigle will begin calling on land owners around the county to explain the soil, water, conservation, and financial benefits provided by various forms of buffer strips.

"In Black Hawk County, we have not had much success getting big acres enrolled in the general CRP program," explains Mike Webster, district conservationist with the area's Natural Resources Conservation Service.

"We've really taken the other approach and said, 'Let's target these real critical areas where we can still get a lot of benefit.'"

The NRCS is one member of a partnership that includes local Pheasants Forever chapters, the Department of Natural Resources, Farm Service agencies, Soil and Water Conservation District offices and, in some cases, county conservation boards and supervisors.

Fifty counties across north central and east central Iowa have been offered the new program, which is cost-shared by the various partners. The DNR and PF put up a thousand apiece in each county, which is then charged with matching that contribution, typically through its NRCS or SWCD offices, and hiring a representative to deliver the continuous sign-up message.

Eligible buffer practices include riparian buffers, filter strips, grassed

waterways, shelterbelts, field windbreaks, and contour grass strips, among others.

In Black Hawk County, there are thousands of acres adjacent to streams and creeks that are ideal for grass buffer strips.

"We'd like to see an area up to 100 feet wide of grass seeded, preferably to native prairie grass," says Webster.

"Prairie grass provides excellent wildlife habitat, it helps control soil erosion, it filters sedimentation, and many experts believe it can improve water quality by pulling nitrates out of the soil before they leach laterally through the soil and into the streams."

In addition to those environmental benefits, land owners receive a yearly payment from the government for taking, or keeping, that land out of agricultural production.

It's also easy to enroll a few acres in the continuous sign-up program.

"You can come into our office at any time and sign up for these continuous practices," notes Webster. "We can approve these contracts right here at the local county level, and you are pretty much guaranteed acceptance."

Once land is enrolled, PF and other groups will help the land owner seed those acres.

"The initial investment is actually being covered pretty much by a variety of different sources," says Mike Wallace local PF official and deputy director for the Black Hawk County Conservation Board. Wallace adds that buffer or filter strips make good business sense for land owners, besides creating an edge effect that attracts wildlife.

"During a wet spring like we've had, those low areas next to streams and creeks aren't going to produce any crop whatsoever," he explains. "If they are signed up for this program, at least there would be some income coming in from those areas."

In Weigle, the local organizations behind the continuous sign-up initiative have someone who can speak from experience.

"I believe in this program, and I plan to do my best to get this job done," says Weigle. "Where I live (on a farm just south of Waterloo which

belongs to his mother, Alberta Weigle) we have four small tracts of land in the CRP program.

"I think this is something we need. The savings we get environmentally from CRP is really something. The rental part of it is going to be fairly competitive with what's going on now, and I will talk to people in the sense, too. I just think the climate is right so that maybe this type of thing is attractive for the farmer."

Based on successful efforts in Carroll and Winnebago counties, where PF laid the groundwork for the expanded continuous sign-up effort, a goal of 1,000 new CRP acres has been established for most of the 50 participating counties.

"Winnebago County actually hired a young man for a year to push the continuous sign-up program," says Matt O'Connor, regional PF director. "Their NRCS office had so many other things to do, they were basically waiting for people to come to them, and their PF chapter wanted to be more proactive."

"In the first months of the program, they went from 37 continuous CRP contracts to 197 contracts. A lot of land owners know about the program, they just need somebody to get out there and explain it to them."

O'Connor and others hope the one-on-one, neighborly type contact helps ease some of the ill-will that has developed because so many northern Iowa acres were denied enrollment in the last CRP general sign-up.

"A lot of farmers say they went out and did what they thought was fair, and when they got their results back they weren't anywhere close to getting into CRP," says O'Connor.

"It's going to take a little bit of coaxing to get them back in. There's another general sign-up in October and by getting some people out there talking to them there's a chance we can get some of them back for that sign-up."

"Things have changed in the general CRP sign-up that have made it a little better for Iowa and I think this next sign-up will be a little better yet."

In the meantime, conservationists will take it one acre at a time.