

Conservation program gets ^{1/30/00} boost from county landowners

By **DOUG NEWHOFF**
Assistant Sports Editor

WATERLOO

A little over a year ago, Black Hawk County conservationists embarked on an ambitious project to enroll at least 1,000 acres of marginal farmland in the Conservation Reserve Program.

With larger tracts of CRP land going back into crop production, the idea was to offset those losses by encouraging county landowners to take advantage of the CRP's continuous sign-up program that targets smaller parcels of land that typically aren't agriculturally productive.

With the Department of Natural Resources, the Black Hawk Soil and Water Conservation District, the Black Hawk County Conservation Board and Pheasants Forever providing the impetus, Black Hawk County joined some 50 counties across the northern half of the state that hired a representative to visit with county landowners, explain the benefits of various buffer practices, and encourage them to enroll eligible land.

"Our goal was to get 1,000 acres enrolled," said Larry Weigle of Waterloo, Black Hawk County's buffer strip specialist. "I think we'll sign up another

50 to 60 acres in January, so it looks like we will get to 1,000. I'm very pleased."

It's been an acre-by-acre process, Weigle added.

"Most people are enrolling fairly small pieces of land probably averaging about 4 or 5 acres," he noted. "We have had some who have a lot of farm ground putting as much as 50-60 acres into it."

The benefits of buffer practices have been widely documented.

Riparian buffer strips, filter strips, grassed waterways, shelterbelts, windbreaks and contour grass strips provide excellent wildlife habitat, help control soil erosion, and filter sedimentation. Many experts see native prairie grasses as a benefit to water quality, as well, believing the grasses pull nitrates from the soil before they can leach laterally through the soil into creeks and streams. The CRP's continuous sign-up program pays landowners a modest fee for "idling" those acres.

Weigle said most landowners are well aware of the program's benefits. They just need to be reminded. He estimated he'll spend about one more month contacting landowners for the first time before returning to visit those he missed along the way.

"I believe in the program as much

now as I did when we started, and I think we're going to make a difference," he said.

Approximately 90 percent of those who have established buffer strips have planted them in native prairie grasses, mostly switchgrass.

The USDA pays 50 percent of the expense for seed and seedbed preparation. In addition, Pheasants Forever of Black Hawk County will cover 100 percent of the planting costs and 25 percent of the seed or seedling costs for Pheasants Forever members.

For more information about seeding costs or assistance, contact Mike Wallace or Bill Brownell at the Black Hawk County Conservation Board (266-0328). For more information about the continuous CRP sign-up program and buffer strips in general, contact Weigle at 296-3262.