

Business & Farm

SECTION D

Nancy Raffensperger, Managing Editor / News Pat Kinney, Business Editor

An act of restoration



Waterloo firefighter Bob Boeck, shown standing on a newly constructed 5-foot dike, has spent five years restoring a 30-acre wetland north of the city. When the snow melts next spring, the water contained by the dike will be three to four feet deep. The structures at right are connected to an underground spillway and enable Boeck to control the water level, so that the area does not flood.

Man turns 30 weed-choked acres into wetland

By CARI NOGA
Courier Staff Writer

WATERLOO

Wetlands may be a taboo subject to some of Bob Boeck's farmer neighbors, but he speaks the word almost with reverence.

"So many farmers become instantly enraged when you even mention the word wetlands, because of what they see as government involvement in their farms," Boeck said. "I'm kind of a wetlands nut. I'm a swamper. I feel if you hunt, you should put something back in your hobbies."

To fulfill that philosophy, Boeck, a firefighter by trade and an outdoorsman at heart, has voluntarily restored 30 acres on his farm north of Waterloo to wetlands. For him, what looks now like a well-worn, sunken football field spotted with puddles is an achievement that's been five years in the making.

He and his wife, Desiree, bought the 80-acre farm in 1990.

"It was quite a mess," Boeck said. "It was just nothing but weeds. It was an eyesore, from all the years of atrazine use."

But, envisioning a day when the former cornfield would be a home to ducks, geese, pheasants, deer and other wildlife, he worked against the residual chemicals and applied for the government's first Wetlands Reserve Program signup in 1992. He tried to enroll 30 acres — and was rejected.

The program had proved far more popular than the government imagined. Amid the intense competition, Boeck's application fell short in some areas beyond his control, such as the project's proximity to others and what

species the habitat would host.

He was rejected again in 1993. The WRP wasn't offered in 1994, and the last Boeck heard on his 1995 application, the program had run out of money.

So Boeck turned to other sources to help him with the \$5,000 project. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Pheasants Forever together came up with between 65 and 75 percent of the cost. Their contributions were not taxpayer dollars, however, Boeck said.

"I basically provided the place, and they provided the dollars. It's a partnership," he said.

Getting the funding was only part of the battle, however. Boeck also needed to get permission and approval from several layers of bureaucracy: the Department of Natural Resources, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency.

"There was almost a two-and-a-half-year paper chase," he said, adding the agencies' input did prove valuable to the finished project.

When paperwork was finally all in place this summer, Boeck had to wait again, this time for Mother Nature.

"It was just (waiting) for the water table to get low enough for the equipment to get in," he said.

In early September Boeck's contractor, Jesup Land Equipment, finally got onto the property. Building the 1,000-foot long, five-foot high, 10-foot wide dike took three and a half days. About 5,000 yards of fill were removed from the site.

Next spring, fed by a 250-acre watershed, the dike will contain 20 acres of surface water three to four feet deep,

punctuated by a few islands Boeck hopes will become nesting sites for birds.

"We actually overconstructed the dike so we would not have to worry about flash flooding," Boeck said.

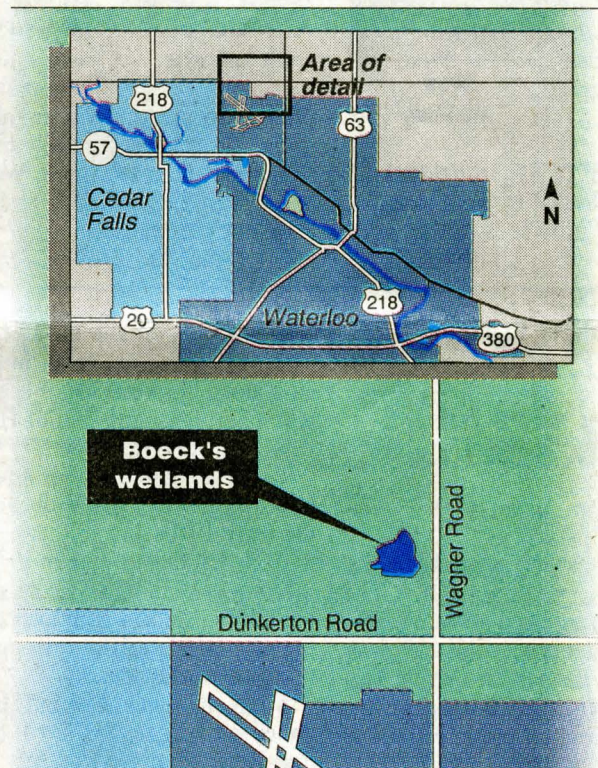
The wetland also has an emergency spillway and a structure to control water level.

It is one of about five restored wetlands in Black Hawk County, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, which provided technical advice. Statewide, there are currently about 35,000 acres of natural-state wetlands, said Shawn Dettmann, a wetland restoration specialist for the NRCS. Over the next several years, more than 52,000 acres are expected to be restored to wetlands.

"It'll keep increasing, I would guess," Dettmann said. Wetlands are valuable projects because they hold back floodwaters, improve water quality by acting as filters, and also serve as wildlife habitat, he said.

"Wetlands on an acre-per-acre basis have as much biodiversity as an acre of rain forest does," Dettmann said.

"I think people are realizing the importance of the wetlands," said Mike Webster, district conservationist at the Black Hawk NRCS. "We're really trying to promote the voluntary restoration."



COURIER graphic

Reaction from his farmer neighbors has gone from caution to curiosity to cooperation, Boeck said.

"When you start to back up water, it becomes a very sensitive area in the agricultural community," he said. That sensitivity was heightened during the 1993 flooding.

"Two or three of them approached me in almost a lynch mob fashion, wanting to know what my plans were for the area," he said.

After outlining the plan, however, his neighbor to the south, realizing the wetland would help to drain his farmland, loaned his equipment to the project. The top of the dike also functions as a road he and Boeck will share to access

See WETLANDS, page D2