



Restoration Leads to Flourishing Wetlands

Jefferson County Landowner Brings Wildlife Home

Above: (L to R) Ohne Raasch, of Lake Mills, Wis., and Mark Steinfest, Elkhorn Area Civil Engineering Technician, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), view the restored easement on the Raasch property.

When land floods more often than it grows crops, why not let it go back as nature intended, to a flourishing wetland. Ohne and Karen Raasch, of Lake Mills, Wis., had goals to do just that with a property they purchased. Since the age of 12, Ohne grew up hunting on the land they acquired from a farmer friend in 2010. Karen also got her first buck 40 years ago on the 155-acre farm. The Raaschs had always loved the land and wanted to own the property. They had many goals and aspirations for the land. “When Ohne and Karen were able to acquire the farm, they really wanted to restore the property to its original beauty as a wetland,” said Mark Steinfest, Elkhorn Area Civil Engineering Technician, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Ohne had built a working relationship with NRCS through the Farm Service Agency’s Conservation Reserve Program and through NRCS cost share assistance, providing for installing tree and shrub plantings in the past. Most recently, NRCS partnered with Ohne to acquire a permanent easement through the former Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), now known as Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE), and then completed the restoration through a long-term agreement. With WRE, NRCS offers 30 year or permanent easements to landowners who want to maintain or enhance their land in a way beneficial to agriculture and the environment. “The land was previously being cropped; part of the farmland was showing signs of erosion; some conservation needed to be done,” explained Ohne. “I didn’t know much about the logistics of WRP when I started,

but working with NRCS, I was excited about the opportunity to restore my land.” Ohne has always had an interest in conservation and restoring land to bring wildlife back. “I started by putting out duck houses with my neighbor and it grew from there. At first I had 15, and now I have 350 on multiple properties! I’ve been involved in conservation organizations over the years and realize the importance of making good decisions for our natural resources,” said Ohne.

The local Elkhorn NRCS Service Center worked with Ohne to develop a restoration plan for their property. A plan is completed so owners know what to expect throughout the easement process. “We even worked together to figure out different soil types and what I could plant where, that would work best,” said Ohne. “There are some changes along the way as needed, but we work together to come up with a preliminary easement management plan that is best for the land and landowner,” said Mark.

The restoration started by Ohne seeding highly eroded fields with native, local seed. Then, excavators dug and scraped 13 shallow ponds to remove sediment deposited from the upland crop fields. “This is really wet soil, so trucks had tracks instead of wheels on them. They moved the soil from the scrape ponds to the ditches that needed filling in. The soil was placed in the ditches in layers so it would push the water out and seal well; the ditches were also built up for settlement. The specialty equipment kept the disturbed areas minimal,” said Mark. They filled in 4 ditches and a small diversion;



Below: Ohne's grandson, Jace, approves of the newly restored wetland.



Above: (Left) A pond is dug in a lowland area of the Raasch property during easement restoration construction. (Middle) A newly created shallow scrape is thriving and filled with water after construction in a lowland area on the property. (Right) Blooming prairie after restoration.

holding that water on the cropland and halting runoff. "Wetland restoration also helps to eliminate invasive species, like reed canary grass, by putting water on it. Something unique about the property, there are lowland and upland areas on the easement," said Mark. Lowland areas are now restored wetlands with open water areas that will soon revegetate with wetland plants. Upland areas were seeded, oak and cherry hardwood trees were planted, and two small food plots for wildlife, including corn and soybeans, were also planted. Those crops are left over winter, to provide food and shelter for wildlife. "The hardwoods planted, give great habitat for roosting birds like songbirds and doves and hold up to future management tools, like the use of fire," explained Mark. Ohne comments further, "The restored wetlands filled in really quick with water; they have never been close to drying out. I've seen a lot of increased wildlife recently; I've seen many more geese, Sandhill cranes, ducks and turtles." The Raaschs love seeing the results of what their efforts can do. They've seen an abundance of pollinators and beneficial insects also. "When I walk around the restored prairie, I've seen an increase in bees and many other bugs I've never seen before," said Ohne. Since the restoration, NRCS Farm Bill Biologists visited and are excited about seeing many native species establishing on the easement.

Ohne took ownership during the construction process and worked to keep every step as conservation minded as possible. "Ohne has really gone the extra mile; he was out there dragging the land and seeding it to add a temporary cover; he also planted trees, and worked to plant seeds on any disturbed areas as the contractor worked on wetland restoration," said Mark. There were no disturbed soils during the project for more than a week because of his proactive seeding of areas. Ohne worked with local neighbors, family & friends, and Madison Audubon volunteers to collect and plant native seed in the area. Some of the Raasch fields have over 60 native varieties of seed, including prairie grasses and forbs. "This project was really a team effort and Karen and I are so

thankful for the financial and technical assistance we received from NRCS, family and friends, neighbors and partners," said Ohne.

Although the easement restoration was completed in the fall of 2015, Ohne still proactively works on the property, fighting invasive species like reed canary grass, buckthorn and box elder. "After spraying, we collect and spread out native seed over the invasive areas, working on the areas one by one," explains Raasch. "Ohne's been proactive, and I recognize his efforts for taking care of the land and working to combat invasive species," said Mark.

Easement restorations through WRP/WRE take time, so landowners need patience and commitment to the process. Mark explains, "The Raaschs were just that, the perfect, proactive landowners to be involved in the process." "The superman, Mark from NRCS, flew in and really helped me through the whole process. I knew the results would far outweigh the time commitment," said Ohne. Ohne and Karen are happy with the results and excited to continue managing their land in the future. "You open up a wood duck house and see it's occupied and eggs have hatched; it makes you feel really good, like you are making a difference. Any habitat work done to make an improvement is our thing. We are so glad we were able to get the farm and really restore the wetlands on it. The NRCS office is exceptional considering the small amount of staff they have and how much workload they complete, including my restoration," said Ohne.

For more information about Wetland Reserve Easements, contact your local USDA Service Center or visit www.wi.nrcs.usda.gov.

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