

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*



## Restored Wetland Perfect for Migrating Ducks

Following the 2006 death of their mother, Carol, the Rasmuson Family of Britt decided to sell a majority of their century-old farm to be converted to wetlands. This was something their mother wanted, and would create habitat threatened nesting and migrating waterfowl needed.

Nearly 60 years ago, the Rasmusons drained a 30-acre lake on their property to grow corn and vegetables, such as string beans, onions, broccoli and cabbage. In recent years, the land was rented out to neighboring farmers to grow corn and soybeans.

Bob Rasmuson, one of five Rasmuson children, says it was difficult to farm the land and not always very profitable. "It was very wet, and we used electricity to pump water out of there constantly," he said. "We couldn't get in to cultivate when we needed to and the weeds grew fast."

With no family members interested in farming the land, the Rasmusons decided to enter into a conservation easement through the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in 2008. Through a three-way agreement, the Rasmusons sold 113 acres to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (INHF), who in turn transferred the property to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR), who will manage and maintain the easement.



*Bob (left) and Jim Rasmuson overlook the land they sold to be restored as a wetland. The brothers are confident their late mother would be happy with the new resting place for migrating birds.*

A large portion of the land will become a wildlife refuge for migrating waterfowl as part of the Eagle Lake Wetland Complex, which includes approximately 1,000 acres of wetlands, grasslands and timber. It was a win-win situation for all involved – the Rasmusons received more money per acre by allowing the INHF and DNR to purchase and manage the site, and the INHF and DNR have the wildlife refuge they were seeking.

Through the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), NRCS fully funded the easement and will continue to pay the restoration costs. NRCS designed the wetland, and is providing technical assistance to restore the easement.

Wetlands provide habitat for fish and wildlife, including threatened and endangered species. Wetlands also improve water qual-

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ity by filtering out sediments and chemicals, reduce flooding, recharge groundwater and protect biological diversity.

More than half of the 113-acre WRP easement is in timber, which is a major reason why the Rasmusons chose to sell it for a conservation easement. The Rasmusons used the timber for hunting and grazing – and even built small rental hunting cabins in the 1940s and 1950s on about 20 acres along the Eagle Lake shoreline. The family sold those acres to the Hancock County Conservation Commission in 1959, but kept about 60 acres for themselves. “We felt passionate about keeping the trees standing,” said Jim Rasmuson. “We knew that if we sold the land for cropland that the trees would eventually be cleared.”

The Rasmusons also feel strongly that their mother wanted the drained lake restored for wildlife use. “My mother was considering these things before she died,” said Bob, “and I know my parents and grandparents (who lived on the farm prior) would have wanted this for the land, too.”

Greg Hanson, wildlife biologist for the Iowa DNR, says there is a need for good resting



*Several Iowa DNR signs, like the yellow one seen here, are posted during the duck hunting season to keep hunters out of the wildlife refuge area. The public can access the area the remainder of the year.*

areas for migratory birds, including waterfowl, in clean, deepwater wetlands. He says the Rasmuson’s restored wetland will serve that purpose, particularly for threatened ducks like the Lesser Scaup and Canvasback.

Hanson says the wetland area will be open to the public, closed only during the Migratory Game Bird Season, Oct. 10 – Dec. 3. However, the Iowa DNR may open it up to the public once the water freezes, which is usually in mid-November. “The land will be open to public the rest of the year for outdoor activities, such as hiking, wildlife viewing and hunting,” he says.

The wetland restoration process began last spring, but much work still needs to be done. The open grass areas of the easement were seeded to native grasses and flowers, but Hanson says they still need to remove old drainage tile to establish smaller wetland pools. In addition, the Iowa DNR will remove the entire pumping system, power poles, and anything else in the area that is “unnatural.” Hanson says the long-term plan is to build hiking trails and wildlife viewing areas.

NRCS District Conservationist Jason Moore says this project has about everything for wildlife enthusiasts. “Particularly from a conservationist’s perspective, very few projects



*The Rasmuson Family Farm sits adjacent to the pool area; the family kept about 20 acres for themselves.*

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like this come along in a lifetime,” he said. “The Rasmusons did the right thing in protecting and restoring it through WRP.”

## **Rules Change, More Wetland Acres Available in 2008 Farm Bill**

The 2008 Farm Bill includes a few legislative changes to the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). For example, the process for determining easement value has changed. The USDA will now offer the lowest of:

- the fair market value of the land or an area-wide market analysis,
- the geographic rate cap as determined by the USDA, or
- the landowner’s offer.

Other important changes include:

- The total number of acres nationally that can be enrolled in the program is 3,041,200 – an increase of 766,200 acres, which means more opportunities for Iowans to enter land into the program.

- No easement can be created on land that has changed ownership during the preceding 7 years, except for land inherited by family members.
- Eligible acres are limited to private and Tribal lands.

More than 1.9 million acres are currently enrolled in WRP nationally, including 77,717 acres in Iowa. More than 133,000 acres of wetlands have been restored under all wetland easement programs in Iowa since 1992.

For more information about WRP, visit your local NRCS office, or go online: [www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/wrp](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/wrp).

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