

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Flooding Victim Fights Back

As many farmers experienced this past spring and summer, it's tough to stay in farming when your cropland floods an average of four out of every five years, says Larry Beyer. He should know. It used to happen to him before 1993, but not any more thanks to state and federal groups working together to reduce the impact of flooding in the Iowa River Valley. Work that still benefits local farmers today.



Beyer, 68, farms 1,000 acres with his son Michael and his wife Nancy near Marengo. They grow corn and soybeans using conservation tillage.

One of the agencies Beyer credits for helping him fight floods is USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

"The 1993 flood put a lot of the state's land underwater and severely impacted the Iowa River Valley between Tama and Amana," said Steve Johnston, NRCS district conservationist in Williamsburg. "After the flood, we contacted many affected farmers, including Beyer, to talk about options. One of their choices was to retire flood-prone farmland and put it into the Emergency Wetlands Reserve Program (EWRP). EWRP and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) are NRCS easement programs which allow farmers to retain title to their land and get a payment to take it out of production."

Larry Beyer stands next to his wife, Nancy, holding the gavel he used as chair in the 1980s of the Iowa County Soil and Water Conservation District. The Beyers' worked with NRCS and other agencies to reduce flooding along the Iowa River.

After the 1993 floods, Beyer and 101 others in Iowa, Benton and Tama counties signed EWRP and WRP easements on 12,547 acres along the Iowa River corridor between Iowa City and Tama. Many sold their residual rights to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

Beyer put 142 acres of his most flood-prone bottom ground under easement. Like some farmers, he used the easement payment to buy land outside the floodplain to stay in farming.

During the easement process, Johnston said many people, including Larry Beyer, asked, "What do you do with all of this easement land? How should it be managed? How should it be used?" Johnston said Beyer was a leader encouraging others to help answer these questions.

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Beyer helped form the Iowa River Valley Corridor Corporation (IRVCC)—a non-profit citizen group that recommends management plans for the easement land. Beyer said the group talked to many people and looked at many options. “We didn’t want to build more dikes and levees,” said Beyer. “However, we did want to treat the land so it could be used in a way which would improve both the environment and the economy of the area.”

The recommendations called for planting native grasses, trees and shrubs to attract birds and increase wildlife diversity. Land was set aside for public hunting and wetlands were restored to attract migrating birds.

Johnston said their goals changed over time. “We first started with flood recovery work. We soon looked to improve the wildlife habitat for bird watchers, canoers, anglers and hunters. We installed conservation practices and plantings to increase the ability of the Iowa River Valley to store more water to reduce downstream flooding. It wasn’t just one thing, but it was all work to reduce the impact of future flooding and to improve the environment and people’s lives,” said Johnston.

Beyer says the flood waters of 2008 were a good test of everyone’s conservation work. He says they saw a few things that need to

change, but they are happy with their flood prevention work.

“The 2008 storms showed us a drainage ditch needs to be dredged and the county needs to make culvert changes,” said Beyer, “but we didn’t lose money in 2008 like we did in 1993. In ‘93, we lost 300 acres of planted crop. The plants were simply drowned and washed away. In 2008, our old bottom ground still flooded out, but it is now owned by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Our loss in 2008 was not being able to plant 110 acres of ground in the secondary floodplain because it was too wet. That wasn’t just our problem. It was a problem many Iowa farmers experienced regardless of whether the land was in a floodplain or not.”

Beyer added, “We really made some serious changes to the landscape after the 1993 flood. The work we did together after ’93 really helped us stay in the farming game. That’s why we have such admiration for Steve Johnston and his NRCS co-workers, Iowa DNR and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. We could not have done all of this as individuals.”

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*Dick Tremain, Public Affairs Specialist
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