

# CONSERVATION *Showcase*



## Farmers Use Conservation Plan to Help Save Lake

Lizard Lake in Pocahontas County is dying and Bill Cirks and Dallas Janssen want to save it. They say the lake once had excellent water quality, but no more. They want the old Lizard Lake back and are fighting to get it by implementing a conservation plan experts say is helping to revive the dying lake.

Cirks manages his family's 120-acre farm on the shore of Lizard Lake for his sister Carol Stehling and brother Dennis. Janssen has been renting it for 25 years. Both Cirks and Janssen know the 245-acre lake near Gilmore City quite well.

Cirks, 70, grew up on the century farm. As a boy, he says he remembers the lake having very clear water and being very popular. He said the spring-fed lake with the white sand bottom drew many swimmers, anglers and boaters. Top bands led by Glen Miller, Guy Lombardo, the Dorsey brothers and Lawrence Welk played for crowds attracted to the lake.

He says water quality started to deteriorate in the 1950s and slowly the great fishing and large summer crowds declined. Now, Cirks says, the crowds are gone and the summer water is often choked green with algae and dangerous for swimming. He says, the shallow water lake is reported to be high in phosphorus, bacteria and nitrate which cannot support many species of fish.

"Lizard Lake is silted in and no longer a lake," Cirks said. "Some blame the lake's water deterioration on the building of a dam. Some say it is phosphorus and nitrate-laced soil eroding into the lake which feeds the green water algae bloom. Others say it is the collapsing shoreline choking the lake with sediment and severely reducing water depth."

Regardless of the cause, both men say they want their clean water lake back and are willing to do what they can on farmland they control to help it.

In 2007, they contacted USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and asked what they could do on their farm to protect the lake. District Conservationist Larette Kolbe and her staff drew up a conservation plan for their farm; the men agreed to it and started implementing it.

Kolbe says their plan is comprehensive. She also says their plan is helping Lizard Lake.

The Cirks/Janssen conservation plan calls for systematic soil testing, a corn/soybean crop rotation, and a nutrient management plan for fertilizer application and use. NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) offered financial assistance to implement nutrient and pest management practices which include planting 30 to 120-foot bird buffers and filter strips in 2008.

Kolbe says the native grass buffer and filter strips lie between crop fields and the lake and filter nutrients and sediment out of water runoff before it enters the lake. "The native grass plantings improve Lizard Lake water quality and provide bird and wildlife habitat," she said.

"I follow NRCS recommendations to stay eligible for farm programs and to protect Lizard Lake," said Janssen. "We run by soil tests. We put on whatever is recommended so there are no excess nutrients running into the lake. We split apply nitrogen and herbicide and save on field trips because we are not over applying inputs. We want to prevent nutrients and pesticide runoff from our farm."



*Dallas Janssen,  
Tenant Farmer*



*Bill Cirks,  
Landowner*



*Larette Kolbe,  
District Conservationist*

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Janssen says he has a vested interest to protect Lizard Lake. His family home is only a half-mile from the lake and Janssen says his wife's family farm is on the south side of Lizard Lake.

"I'm hoping we can clean up the water and have a recreational lake again," said Janssen. "I want to see people water skiing, swimming and fishing again like it once was.

Kolbe is closely following the implementation of the Cirks/Janssen conservation plan. "These men have one of the leading farms protecting the water quality of Lizard Lake. We want to do more. Any farmer or landowner can ask NRCS for free advice and we hope they do," said Kolbe. "We want to help farmers protect the environment, make money and revitalize area treasures like Lizard Lake."

## **Iowa State University study of Lizard Lake:**

<http://limnoweb.eeob.iastate.edu/dfweb/files/LizardLake02152007presentation.pdf>

**Lizard Lake website:** [www.lizardlake.net/](http://www.lizardlake.net/)

## **Lizard Lake Water Quality**

Sean McCoy, an environmental specialist with the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship's Division of Soil Conservation (IDALS-DSC), has a 1951 report showing Lizard Lake's water quality was exceptionally good. The researcher wrote Lizard Lake had a functioning ecosystem supporting millions of fresh water shrimp. McCoy says in the 58 years since that report was written, Lizard Lake water quality has deteriorated so badly that the fresh water shrimp are long gone and contact with the lake's summertime toxic cyano bacteria blooms could endanger the health of livestock, pets and humans.

Can Lizard Lake be saved? McCoy says yes, but it will take time. He says a watershed approach is needed. He says each farmer with



*Bill Cirks stands on a grass buffer strip in front of frozen Lizard Lake flanked by his farm tenant, Dallas Janssen, and NRCS District Conservationist Larrette Kolbe.*

runoff draining into a water body like Lizard Lake needs to ensure they have conservation practices are in place to reduce nutrient and sediment loading. "Using appropriate tools like grassed waterways, terraces and buffer strips can all help," said McCoy. "If everyone in the Lizard Lake watershed followed the lead of Bill Cirks and Dallas Janssen, water quality would improve and the lake's health could more quickly be restored."

## **Conservation Planning**

District Conservationist Larrette Kolbe says modern geographic information systems (GIS) tools help producers and NRCS staff with conservation planning. She says GIS computer programs can display aerial photos of individual farm fields and show producers how conservation practices can help fix resource concerns on their land. She says it often takes an hour for a soil conservation technician to write a plan and a half-a-day for the farmer to think the plan through. Once the producer agrees to the conservation plan, Kolbe says her staff works with various agencies to arrange financial assistance to help install the conservation practices to benefit the land and the producer.

## *Helping People Help the Land*

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