

Cashing in on Conservation

How one Ike turned an unproductive farm into a hunter's paradise.

By Mark Fitzgerald

Published: April 2, 2002

Trees and wildlife don't mix well with construction sites. Even after the bulldozers have long rolled away it's difficult—if not impossible—for the ecosystem to revert back to its former harmony. After all, shopping centers and housing developments don't offer much to a spruce or a doe.

But farms might. Especially if you plant thousands of trees or dozens of acres of prairie grasses on them. Throw in some wetlands, food plots, and a fishpond and you might have yourself a regular wilderness.

That's what Tom Steinberger, a member of the League's Cass County Chapter in Indiana, did with his 100-acre farm. Frustrated with urban sprawl and the limitations it placed on him as a hunter, about four years ago Steinberger enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), a program in the federal Farm Bill that pays farmers to convert marginal cropland to wildlife habitat.

One of his goals was to restore hunting opportunities that were being lost to development in and around his hometown of Logansport. But he also enrolled because of the program's profitability. "I would have been crazy not to," he says. "I can make more money growing weeds than corn."

Based on his soil type and the specific plantings he agreed to under the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (a particular practice and subprogram of CRP), the property is now more valuable than it was as farmland. For conservation practices, such as establishing wetlands and planting and maintaining trees, shrubs, and native grasses, Steinberger says the government pays him \$100 per acre—\$15 more than he was making from renting his land to farmers. Plus, he adds, "Uncle Sam reimburses you for half the planting costs." What's more, now he can pursue one of his favorite pastimes on the privacy of his own land. "It's great for hunting," he says, noting the remarkable proliferation of pheasants and quail.

The government initiated CRP in 1985 under the Farm Bill in order to address the growing concern of soil erosion, a major national problem estimated to cost the country billions of dollars each year. Farmers accepted into the program enroll in CRP contracts for 10–15 years. But selection is competitive: eligible cropland must be environmentally sensitive or highly erodible and is ranked according to the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI), a scoring system that estimates the expected environmental benefits to soil, water, wildlife, and other natural resources.

“What makes [Tom’s] land so terrific for wildlife is its diversity,” says Tom Hewitt, a district biologist for the Indiana Department of Natural Resources who helped Steinberger with the plantings. “I’d sure like to have a hundred or so acres like that to play with.” According to Hewitt, most of the trees planted were pines. “Because Indiana is so flat, large blocks of pine trees provide excellent windbreaks and screens, especially for the bigger mammals.”

Fruit and seed shrubs, another essential part of the farm’s conversion, are also expected to attract diverse animals. “Food and cover are the two most important things for wildlife,” explains Hewitt. Although the food plots are still in the experimental stages, patches of clover and alfalfa have already begun to flourish and are likely to spread out significantly over the next several years.

Ruth Montgomery, an employee at the Natural Resources Conservation Service who helped Steinberger enroll in the program, says one of the main reasons he scored so well on the EBI was that he was able to implement key features of the program. “Tom had agreed to three of the major components: wetlands, trees, and native prairie grasses,” she explains. Another reason for his success may have been that he started out modestly the first time he signed up, offering only 18 acres for enrollment. Once that was accepted, he proposed another 62 acres, which promptly followed suit.

According to Montgomery, there seems to be a steady demand for CRP in Cass County and throughout the rest of Indiana. “About 20 to 30 farmers come through here each general signup,” she says. “More, maybe, in other parts of the state.” Since its inception, CRP’s national success has been extraordinary. About 33.7 million acres of cropland have been converted into wildlife habitat—providing a secure source of income to farmers whose land might otherwise be unproductive.

At the end of 2002, CRP, along with the rest of the Farm Bill, will expire. While Congress is taking the necessary steps to extend the program, conservationists, the League, and the farming community are working hard to increase the amount of land committed to the program, which at last count encompassed only about one-tenth the amount of this nation’s total farmland.