



IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Iowa DNR News

Conservation and Recreation

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Pollinators, wildlife benefit from landowners bringing prairie back to the landscape



A monarch caterpillar feeds on a milkweed on Mark Wetmore's reconstructed prairie in Woodbury County. Reconstructed prairies are returning to the landscape across Iowa, which is good news for wildlife from pollinators to songbirds, deer, pheasants and more. Photo courtesy of the Iowa DNR.

Virginia Ekstrand is always in motion. From taking 'ology trips out west with her grandkids to learning how to become a master naturalist, this retired school teacher never stops moving. On this late August morning, she is firing on all cylinders when talking about her latest project of reconstructing a 16-acre prairie on her heritage farm in Henry County.

Reconstructed prairies feature a variety of native Iowa prairie flowers that benefit pollinators in general and various milkweed species that benefit monarchs in particular. The Eastern monarch population has declined by more than 80 percent over the past 20 years primarily due to habitat loss, including reduced milkweed required for reproduction and fewer nectar plants.

Across Iowa, private landowners who are establishing prairies are helping the monarch by getting more pollinator habitat on the ground to provide fuel, and milkweeds to grow more monarchs.

Joined by her loyal four-legged companions Tess and Lily, Ekstrand leads a guided tour complete with side anecdotes and future plans on battling invasive plants, tree thinning and pond reconstruction on the way to see the young prairie.

Her connection to the farm began when she and her husband moved back from Alaska in 1967 to take over the operation that had been in her husband's family since 1839. The original homesteader's certificate signed by President Tyler hangs on the dining room wall.

They enjoyed a connection to the outdoors through their interest in hunting big game while making a living farming the land. After he passed, Ekstrand wanted to make some changes.

"It has always been my dream to take this back to 1839," she said.

The process started when she began restoring two small fields that together were about 16 acres. The farm equipment had gotten too large to be used on these small parcels, she said, so Ekstrand worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to enroll her prairie in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) CP42 pollinator habitat program and she planted it with prairie seed, a mix of native grasses with a dozen species of flowering plant, from Pheasants Forever.

The first year, the transition looked like a mess. This spring – its second year – didn't look much better, Ekstrand said.

"I thought 'Oh God, there went \$4,000 in seed,'" she said. "But after this spring, I've been thrilled with what's going on."

Monarchs, bumblebees, silver spotted skippers, common green darners flit and flutter above the goldenrod. The young prairie is just starting to express itself.

"I really like the feeling that I'm contributing to the balance," she said. "There really is nothing like it."

She has a forestry plan and is planning to use the NRCS's Environmental Quality Incentives Program to complete brush removal of invasive species and plant a mix of native trees and shrubs along edges to compliment her pollinator planting.

She used Soil and Water Conservation District loan program and NRCS assistance to rehab pond behind house which solved part of water issues she was having.

Across Iowa, private landowners have been telling a similar story of their personal satisfaction from establishing a prairie on the land that means so much to them.

Mark Wetmore, of Vermillion, S.D., owns 80 acres in eastern Woodbury County that his great grandfather homesteaded after the Civil War.

"For a long time, I'd thought about using it to recreate a parcel of tallgrass prairie to honor the old pioneers and to permanently return a bit of natural habitat to the community," said the former City of Minneapolis budget director.

In the fall of 2015, the corn stalks were disked and on Feb. 1, 2016, they used a broadcast seeder to plant 60 species of native prairie grasses and flowers. The seeding conditions were perfect. It was warm, the ground was soft and moist, and that night there was a heavy snow.

Wetmore returned in the early spring expecting to see a growing prairie. What he saw was nothing. Panic - \$60,000 down the drain. But later that spring, he and his companion, Jeanette Williams, returned to see native species coming up in abundance.

It took the site a while to fill in, Wetmore said. There were bare patches the first two years. In 2017, he added new species in the drainage areas that were more tolerant of moist soil. In the end, this prairie has 90 different flower species and 24 different grasses.

"Prairie people tell me not to worry," he said. Prairie needs time to fully mature and it's an adventure just to see the different stages it goes through.

Today, after four years, his prairie is filled with butterfly milkweed, Virginia mountain mint, goldenrod, hoary puccoon, swamp milkweed, spiderwort, rosinweed, partridge pea, cup plant, compass plant, Canadian milk vetch and more.

It's alive with grasshoppers, monarchs, bees and so much more diversity. Seemingly every milkweed has a monarch egg planted under a leaf. Upland sandpipers have shown up. So have dickcissels, meadowlarks, red-winged blackbirds, deer and pheasants. He was surprised how quickly the mammal dens appeared. The site is surrounded by crop fields on three sides, with a county road on the east. Because Wetmore lives more than an hour away, he has hired a neighbor to help with the mowing and maintenance and, along the way, that neighbor has become an advocate for the prairie in the community.

Wetmore worked with the NRCS to enroll his prairie in CP42 pollinator habitat program.

Wetmore's advice? Plan ahead. Work with a pro on the seeding and prep work, try to control Canadian thistles, if there are any, early in the process and generally, try to stay on top of things.

Phyllis Kimball agrees.

Kimball, of Creston, enrolled 160 acres in CRP pollinator mix in Ringgold County. Kimball had been away from the farm for more than two decades but returned to manage the day to day operations after an agreement with a local farmer was voided. What she found upon returning was failing terraces and trees that had taken over the valley. She stopped on the gravel road and cried at seeing what had happened to her land.

Over the next five years, Kimball would sink \$100,000 toward clearing trees and fixing the terraces so it could be farmed again and right before the 2015 planting season, she lost her tenant.

Kimball's longtime neighbor in Creston suggested she go to the local NRCS office to inquire about CRP. She was hesitant – didn't CRP mean weeds and brush? Reluctantly she went and after the meeting. Afterward, her NRCS contact called Helga Offenburger, with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. The parcel would be a good fit for the

Iowa Habitat and Access Program, he said, and the program had money to enroll her 160 acres and it could coordinate the whole project.

Converting to prairie takes time. The first year or two, Kimball made a few calls to Offenburger and they'd meet at the field for a thistle pulling therapy session. "Helga just kept reassuring me," she said. "This has been such an educational experience to see this thing happen."

Now in year four, the prairie is established. Kimball drives an hour just so she can set out on a lawn chair to listen to the birds and watch the sky fill with butterflies. That's a change from when it was farmed, she said.

"I'm totally, totally pleased with what has been done. I highly recommend it to anyone considering it. I'm 100 percent pleased with the program," she said. "When you have something like this and can see this, it's hard to put into words what we have here." Kimball plans to maintain the prairie in perpetuity if she can.

Kimball worked with Farm Services Agency to enroll prairie in continuous CRP pollinator program and with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Prairie Partners to add wildflower species beneficial to monarchs and other pollinators to the new seedings. She enrolled her prairie in the Iowa DNR's Iowa Habitat and Access Program which allowed for habitat improvement on the area in exchange for allowing hunter access.

These landowners are helping Iowa to meet the goals set forth by the [Iowa Monarch Consortium](#) in the [Monarch Conservation Strategy](#) for the state. The Consortium includes Universities, State Agencies, Conservation and Agriculture organizations all working together to ensure a healthy future for monarch butterflies in Iowa and nationwide.

Media Contact: Stephanie Shepherd, Wildlife Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 515-230-6599.

Trout stocking at Big Lake postponed

Council Bluffs, Iowa – The trout stocking scheduled for this Saturday, Jan. 18 at Big Lake has been postponed due to unsafe ice conditions.

The stocking will be rescheduled as soon as there is safe ice or open water this spring.

Media Contact: Bryan Hayes, Fisheries Biologist, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, 712-769-2587.

CRP signup has begun

The U.S. Department of Agriculture is opening general signup for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) through February 28, 2020. Farmers and ranchers who enroll in CRP receive a yearly rental payment for voluntarily establishing long-term, resource-conserving plant species, such as approved grasses or trees (known as "covers") to

control soil erosion, improve water quality and develop wildlife habitat on marginally productive agricultural lands.

CRP has 22 million acres enrolled, but the 2018 Farm Bill increased the cap to 27 million acres. This means farmers have a chance to enroll in CRP for the first time or continue their participation for another term. Signup for continuous CRP is ongoing.

By enrolling in CRP, producers are improving water quality, reducing soil erosion, and restoring habitat for wildlife. This in turn spurs hunting, fishing, recreation, tourism, and other economic development across rural Iowa.

CRP Enrollment Options

General Signup

CRP general signup will be held annually. The competitive general signup will now include increased opportunities for enrollment of wildlife habitat through the State Acres For Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) initiative.

Continuous Signup

While some practices under SAFE will remain available through continuous signup, CRP continuous signup will focus primarily on water quality within the Clean Lakes, Estuaries, and Rivers (CLEAR) Initiative. The 2018 Farm Bill prioritizes water quality practices such as contour grass strips, filter strips, riparian buffers, wetlands and a new prairie strip.

USDA will also be working with Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) partners to relaunch CREP continuous options in each state under new statutory provisions. CREP will continue to target high-priority local, state or regional conservation concerns.

Grasslands Signups

CRP Grasslands signup helps landowners and operators protect grassland, including rangeland, and pastureland and certain other lands while maintaining the areas as grazing lands. A separate CRP Grasslands signup will be offered each year following general signup. The sign-up period for CRP Grasslands in 2020 runs from March 16, 2020 to May 15, 2020.

Previously Expired Land

Land enrolled in CRP under a 15-year contract that expired in September 2017, 2018 or 2019, may be eligible for enrollment if there was no opportunity for re-enrollment and the practice under the expired contract has been maintained.

CRP Rates and Payments

FSA recently posted updated soil rental rates for CRP. County average rates are posted on the CRP Statistics webpage. Soil rental rates are statutorily prorated at 90 percent for continuous signup and 85 percent for general signup. The rental rates will be reviewed annually. Under continuous signup, producers also receive incentives, including a signup incentive payment and a practice incentive payment.

To enroll in CRP, contact your local FSA county office or visit fsa.usda.gov/crp.

