

CONSERVATION CORNER

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John Walter wants to improve soil health through sustainable management of the farm. One way to do that has been to establish a pollinator habitat and to use other conservation practices.

MAKE CRP PAY

ENROLLING LAND IN THE CRP CAN BENEFIT LANDOWNERS, OPERATORS, AND EVEN BEES.

John Walter of Ankeny, Iowa, doesn't enroll in conservation programs solely for the environmental benefit. He also enrolls for the economic benefit.

"On my family farm, we're trying to balance our land use to have some benefits for the environment and wildlife along with the people who farm the land," says the Nebraska landowner.

Walter evaluates every acre to determine the best use of it. He knows he can get a good payment for marginal land by enrolling in the continuous CRP. Paired with incentive payments, it becomes economical to identify areas well suited for CRP or other conservation programs. One example is a pollinator habitat initiative program in which he enrolled.

"I think one of the things we've done – and a lot of farmers can do – is use technology to identify the productive parts of the land and the lesser productive parts. Then, farm the best and conserve the rest," says Walter.

PARTIAL ENROLLMENT

"**O**ne of the things I think many landowners still think about with a conservation program like CRP is that they have to enroll the entire field into the program," says Pete Berthelsen, wildlife biologist for Pheasants Forever. "That's not the case. We can focus wildlife habitat in our management efforts on that farm and ranch like a laser beam."

Berthelsen and Walter agree that enrolling the least productive area of a field in a conservation program can improve the field's overall average.

This is a twofold opportunity. "I personally believe there's room for every farm and ranch in the country where wildlife habitat can increase farm and ranch income," says Berthelsen. "Identify those areas on the farm that are the least productive and put them into something that decreases the inputs and gives a steady income. We



John Walter

can create great wildlife habitat on the property."

Walter is currently considering a field with highly erodible land for enrollment in the continuous sign-up of the CRP. The average cash rental rate for his district in Nebraska, which is \$105 an acre, is down 5% from last year.

This particular field is also isolated from other row-crop fields, which

makes it an ideal location for wildlife and pollinator habitat. The CRP will pay \$122.20 an acre for that ground, plus cost-share and a signing bonus, says Walter.

BENEFITS OF CONSERVATION ENROLLMENT

Opting to enroll marginal land into conservation programs does three things, says Berthelsen.

- 1. Reduces input costs.** Inputs don't need to be purchased for land to be entered into conservation programs.
- 2. Curbs environmental losses,** such as slicing soil loss or improving water quality.
- 3. Allows landlords to receive cost-share.**

"Sign up in federal, state, or local conservation programs that will provide cost-share to establish the habitat and, in many cases, an annual rental payment," says Berthelsen. "Reduce the input costs, and you get an annual income. As a result, you increase your farm and ranch income."

SUSTAINABILITY

"**W**e're trying to keep the land used in ways that are sustainable," says Walter, who says he inherited his conservation ethic from his grandfather.

"Long term, it feels right – not economically but ethically – to manage a farm that way," he says. 