



# SOIL MATTERS

## Helping Farmers Protect Wetlands and Prairies

BY DUANE HOVORKA, IWLA Agriculture Program Director

Sixty-one percent of our nation's land is privately owned. More than 40 percent (915 million acres) is farmland. Water and wildlife know no boundaries. That makes conservation efforts on private land — particularly farmland — critical to improving water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, and outdoor recreation opportunities.

Farm Bill conservation programs help farmers and ranchers protect and restore wetlands and conserve native prairie across the country.

### Working Wetlands

Neil Bien owns a cattle ranch in the heart of the Prairie Pothole Region, an area dubbed “North America's duck factory” because its wetlands hatch more than half of North America's waterfowl. This entire region — which includes large swaths of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota as well as smaller portions of Iowa and Montana — was once speckled with wetlands like those that dot the Bien ranch.

However, more than half of the wetlands in the Prairie Pothole Region have been drained and converted to cropland, mostly to grow row crops such as corn and soybeans. The result has been the loss of not only critical wildlife habitat but also flood protection for farmers and other residents. “We've all seen the disadvantages of taking wetlands away,” says Bien. “The Red River Valley is just north of here, and the valley is really prone to flooding, because most of the wetlands there have been drained. If you add all that water to the river, what do you expect?”

For generations, the Bien family has protected and restored wetlands as part of their South Dakota farming operation. They appreciate the wildlife and flood protection benefits wetlands provide. As important, they see direct benefits to their business.

“Protecting wetlands is almost in our genes,” says Bien. “My grandfather came to this country and homesteaded



Cattle and wetlands on the Bien ranch

in 1889. On our original land, we have never drained a wetland.” As the Bien family acquired new parcels, they used Farm Bill conservation programs to restore wetlands that had been drained. Through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service pays a large share of the cost of restoring farmed or converted wetlands.

“Without [this] cost share, there would be far fewer wetland projects done,” says Bien. “Even better than the cost share is the technical assistance they give us. We are not wetland experts.”

“We haven't counted, but we must be way into the hundreds of wetlands on our land, both large and small. We raise cattle and horses, but we know if we have healthy soil and healthy wetlands, we will also have healthy wildlife populations.” The Bien family farm is now about 8,000 acres, including 6,000 acres of grassland. In the spring and early summer, wetlands and prairies provide ideal nesting for ducks. By mid-summer, the shallow wetlands have turned into lush pastures that provide nutritious forage for cattle well into the fall.

The pastures created by these many wetlands allow Bien to move his cattle frequently from one area to another.



Lyle Bien (Neil's brother)

The grasses have plenty of time to recover in this kind of rotational grazing system, allowing Bien to raise more cows per acre.

The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program also funds conservation easements on wetlands and native prairie. “We've protected most of our wetlands and a good share of our grasslands with easements,” says Bien. A conservation easement is a legal agreement in which the owner sells or donates the right to develop a piece of land. The easement typically prohibits putting up new buildings and could prohibit the destruction of a wetland or native prairie. The easement is attached to the land, so it remains in effect when the land is sold or inherited.

Conservation easements can also be used to protect the last remnants of America's native prairie.



Sunny Brook Ranch

Roy and Steve Breuklander

### Conserving Native Prairie

Sunny Brook Ranch in northern Nebraska sits in a unique biological crossroads where six different ecosystems come together. Tallgrass prairie plants such as big bluestem and switch grass native to wetter areas mingle here with mixed-grass prairie plants including little bluestem and blue grama. Ponderosa pines grow here at the eastern limit of their range, mixing with bur oak, black walnut, and American elms from hardwood forests that reach their western limit in the Niobrara River Valley.

The ranch overlooks the Niobrara River, one of America's best rivers to canoe and kayak. Small tributaries feature more than 200 waterfalls, where groundwater from the plain seeps through rock layers bound for the river. The quiet, scenic beauty is marked by ducks, geese, and other waterfowl and a mix of prairie and woodland birds, deer, wild turkey, and other wildlife.

It's no wonder that the Breuklander family, longtime owners of Sunny Brook Ranch, fielded offers from developers for far more money than the ranch's value as working land. But the family's connection to the land and river runs deep. The great-grandparents of Steve Breuklander, the ranch's current owner, homesteaded in Cherry County in the 1880s, and Steve's family started (and still runs) one of the first canoe outfitting businesses here in the 1970s. So it's no surprise that the Breuklanders turned down offers from developers looking to carve up the land to build houses and cabins along the river.

When Steve's late father Roy was ready to retire, he was looking for a way to keep the ranch intact, but the increase in area land values — driven in large part by developers — made the ranch too expensive for Steve to buy. They solved the problem through a USDA easement program (predecessor to the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program) that covered half the cost of purchasing a conservation easement. The other half was funded by the Nebraska Environmental Trust with support from the Nebraska Land Trust, which holds the easement. Easements available through Farm Bill conservation programs help farmers and ranchers to continue working their lands while conserving resources for the future.

Dave Sands, executive director of the Nebraska Land Trust, said the conservation easement on Sunny Brook Ranch "helped pave the way for the family to pass the ranch to the next generation. Thanks to funding from USDA and the Nebraska Environmental Trust, the easement became a cornerstone of the family's estate plan, protecting the ranch from subdivision and preventing the demise of this working ranch while conserving wildlife habitat and scenic views on a national scenic river."

The easement provides permanent protection for 1,124 acres of native prairie and woodland in canyon land along the Niobrara, including 1.3 miles of river frontage. The land remains in the hands of the Breuklander family and stays on the tax rolls. Steve says the flexibility built into the easement allows the family to continue ranching and Steve's sisters to continue operating Prairie River Outfitters and Sunny Brook Camp, their canoe outfitting business on the river.

Steve's sister Twyla Graham says, "It's nice to know the area will be protected from development forever."

### Funding Conservation Through the Farm Bill

Since 1990, easement programs through the Farm Bill have protected more than 4 million acres of wetlands, native prairie, and other farmland. But wetland loss has accelerated at the same time that Congress has cut funding for Farm Bill conservation programs.

The Izaak Walton League supports increasing funding for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program in the 2018 Farm Bill to at least \$500 million per year. That would allow USDA to address the large backlog of farmers interested in restoring wetlands and obtaining conservation easements on wetlands, native prairie, and other farmland.

And we need your help. Please let your members of Congress know that you strongly support conservation programs in the 2018 Farm Bill. For more information, visit [iwla.org/agriculture](http://iwla.org/agriculture).