



The Long View

A Newsletter for Practical Preservationists

4th Annual Edition - April 2011

Rewarding Conservation: An Initiative Both Sides Can Agree On

During these lean times, many Federal and State conservation programs are being cut to balance budgets. One initiative that continues to receive support from both the Democratic and Republican parties is land conservation. Through the Farm Bill, the Federal Conservation Tax Incentive has been extended through the end of this year, 2011. This incentive provides significant income tax breaks for agricultural and non-agricultural landowners who donate conservation easements. This year is truly a golden opportunity for any landowner who is considering a conservation easement to forever protect their land. If you would like to help us spread the word and send information to your friend or neighbors, contact the SWMLC office.

2010 Conservation Easements Year in Review

In 2010 we completed a total of 8 projects conserving 541 acres; the majority (5) of those were conservation easements. We completed three conservation easements along Prairieville Creek, further protecting the water quality of Gull Lake, including two 20-acre easements completed by Craig Shumaker and one 183-acre easement completed by Jim and Alice Fish. In Barry County, we also worked with Nick and Claire Wolterstorff to complete a 77-acre conservation easement along the naturally beautiful Guernsey Lake Road. Last but definitely not least, in Calhoun County we worked with Sandra Kuhn to complete a conservation easement on her 42-acre property along Rice Creek.

Welcome to these new members of our conservation easement landowner community!

Conserving and Preserving Farmland

Owning farmland is not only a privilege reserved for a relative few in today's society, but an awesome responsibility. Over the years, as we have purchased land as our farming operation has expanded, we have tried to remember that we are the current caretakers of this land. Most of the land we have acquired over the past 35 years has been farmland in St. Joseph County, an area blessed with sandy loam soils and an abundant supply of water in a rather shallow aquifer and many lakes and streams.

Although the soil's water holding capacity is low compared to the many fertile soils of the Midwest, with the advent of modern irrigation technology the area has become a magnet for specialty crops, such as seed corn, and many vegetable crops.

The well-drained characteristics of these sandy soils, however, also presents a challenge in that it has the potential of leading to contamination of the ground water in the shallow aquifer if adequate care is not exercised in the use of fertilizers and pesticides. As a landowner, it is my responsibility to not only maintain the fertility and quality of the soils and the quality of the underlying aquifer, but to create conditions on this land which will not become a burden to society.

To this end, we have attempted over the years to implement practices that would contribute to conserving the productive capacity of these lands. We have found that the USDA offers many programs which help offset some of the out-of-pocket cost of some of the measures which we have implemented (see page 3). Over the years, we have installed grassed waterways and water control structures in areas where there is a propensity for soil erosion during heavy rainfall with the technical services of the NRCS.

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Perspective from a Practical Preservationist

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We have taken advantage of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) program to help protect nearly two miles of these sensitive areas with a grass mixture to protect these areas from runoff from crop areas. Another practice my late father used extensively and which we have continued to use is the practice of seeding a cover crop to protect the soils and build fertility following the harvest of the commercial crop. Among the benefits of this practice is erosion control, nutrient cycling, building organic content of the soil, production of nitrogen with legumes, and increased biodiversity and healthier soils. The cover crops and strip-till system we have adopted allows us to keep most of the soil protected with residue year-round.

To me the highest and best use of this land is for the production of the food and fiber that we as a people depend on for our continued well-being. I find the idea that this is farmland until someone is willing to pay a higher price to convert it to some other use as self-serving and short sighted. It pains me to see areas around the country where some of the best soils in the areas have been sold off to the highest bidder for “development,” usually meaning McMansions built miles from the work places, shopping centers, and sometimes utilities or requiring major public investment to extend public services.

Having watched, with interest, the farmland preservation movement utilizing the concept of the purchase of development rights, we decided that there probably was not adequate political support to get a robust program in play to make it a part of our long-term plan for our properties. Working with Brad Neumann, an educator for MSU Extension in St. Joseph County, and as a member of the Farm Land and Open Space Preservation Committee, we became aware of some of the tax benefits of making a donation of development rights. We decided this was an approach that would work for us to preserve the character of our land.

We were able to utilize the expertise and services of SWMLC to protect our farmland and natural areas along the Portage River in Park Township and the St. Joseph County Preservation Program to protect the farm land in Lockport and Florence Townships. It gives us a great deal of peace of mind to know that our land will remain productive farmland for the foreseeable future.

— Henry Miller



This vegetative buffer strip on land enrolled in CRP filters runoff flowing from the farm field on the right into the Portage River which is just beyond the trees on the left side of the picture.

Photo by Tim Peterson.



Painting the beautiful landscape on the Conway Conservation Easement early this spring.

Photo by Pamela W. Larson.

The Plein Air Artists of West Michigan (PAAWM) have been out to paint on a few of our conservation easement properties. Let us know if you would like to invite them to paint on your property. The paintings of your property would then qualify for consideration in our *Painted Sanctuary* calendar.

Conservation Programs Available to Landowners

These conservation programs are available to landowners for extra incentives and can be written to be complementary with the conservation easement on your property.

EQIP – Environmental Quality Incentives Program – provides technical and financial assistance to farmers and ranchers who face threats to soil, water, air, and related natural resources

CSP or CStP – Conservation Stewardship Program – provides annual payments and cost-share to conduct conservation activities to address resource concerns in a comprehensive manner

WHIP – Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program – provides cost share up to 75% to develop and improve high-quality habitat that supports wildlife populations of National, State, Tribal and local significance

CRP – Conservation Reserve Program – provides rental payments and cost-share to plant long-term covers to improve water quality, control erosion, and enhance wildlife

AMA – Agricultural Management Assistance Program – provides payment support to develop and implement a management plan for conservation and environmental objectives

AWEP – Agricultural Water Enhancement Program – provides payment support to develop and implement a management plan that addresses water quality and water conservation.

HFRP – Healthy Forests Reserve Program – provides financial assistance in the form of cost-share for specific conservation actions to restore and enhance forest ecosystems.

QFP – Qualified Forestry Program – provides property tax reduction to landowners who manage their land for forestry; does not require the land to be open to hunting

FSP – Forest Stewardship Program – provides cost-share and resources to have a comprehensive forest management plan prepared to sustain health, vigor and ecosystem function of the forest

LIP – Landowner Incentive Program – provides advice, management plans, and funding to create and manage habitat for species that are rare and/or declining

To find out more information about one of these programs and learn how to enroll, contact your local Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), or Conservation District office. Phone numbers and addresses are listed below:

Allegan Service Center 1668 Lincoln Rd. Allegan, MI 49010-9410 (269) 673-6940
Hastings Service Center 1161 S Hanover St. Hastings, MI 49058-2579 (269) 948-8037
Berrien Springs Service Center 3334 Edgewood Rd. Berrien Springs, MI 49103-9553 (269) 471-9111
Marshall Service Center 13464 Preston Dr. Marshall, MI 49068-9683 (269) 781-4263
Cassopolis Service Center 1127 E State St. Cassopolis, MI 49031-9354 (269) 445-8641
Portage Service Center 1911 W Center Ave. Portage, MI 49024-5367 (269) 327-0940
Centreville Service Center 693 E Main St. Centreville, MI 49032-9603 (269) 467-6336
Paw Paw Service Center 1035 E Michigan Ave. Paw Paw, MI 49079-9464 (269) 657-7055



*Join Henry Miller's efforts to farm for the next generation of farmers by enrolling in one of these programs.
Photo by Emily E. Wilke*

If the program is not available from the service center, they can put you in touch with the correct organization to contact.

Completing an Easement is Just the Beginning

In each issue of *The Long View*, we highlight the most recent conservation easement projects and provide a perspective from a one of our conservation easement landowners highlighting the reason behind the donor's gift — their unique story — and what brought them to work with the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy (SWMLC).

As you know the signing and recording of the conservation easement to the deed is only the beginning of SWMLC's work. To ensure that the landowner's story becomes a legacy, SWMLC must annually visit each property to monitor and, if necessary, enforce easement restrictions. This commitment to the donor is our perpetual responsibility which we fully embrace and, as a qualified organization recognized by the IRS, requires substantive yearly documentation.

There are several measures of our conservation easement program's fitness. We must demonstrate that we visit each conservation easement on an annual basis, adopt policies and procedures on program management, and establish the financial resources necessary to support the costs of monitoring and, if required, legally enforce the easement's restrictions. These are all components of the Land Trust Alliance's Accreditation program that we must adhere to in order to receive accreditation. The Land Trust Alliance is the conservation community's national member organization which sets standards for governance and practices. SWMLC is applying for accreditation this year.

Our greatest challenge is developing the financial resources to support ongoing program management. That is why we ask donors of a conservation easement to consider making a financial gift to our monitoring and legal defense fund. The fund provides annual support for monitoring, servicing, and enforcement costs. The use of the fund is restricted to these activities for all SWMLC conservation easement properties.

Another option that SWMLC is exploring is conservation easement defense insurance, which will be available through the Land Trust Alliance some time in 2012. Defense insurance is a safety net that would protect us from future unforeseeable threats that would require expensive legal fees. The legal defense insurance policy as proposed will cost SWMLC somewhere between \$60 - \$75 per easement per year, which is expensive, but it is important that we have the funds to defend our easements if necessary so we will be able to look after your property for generations to come.

Please consider donating to the monitoring fund, if you have not already made a gift to support the costs of your easement.



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