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Easements aim to raise quality of river water

Renner couple first in county to put land in Big Sioux program

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A Renner couple are the first people to grant a conservation easement on land they own in Minnehaha County to protect the shoreline and improve water quality along the Big Sioux River.

Jerry and Carol Ward of rural Renner granted a 16-acre easement to Sioux Falls-based Northern Prairies Land Trust under the Big Sioux River Conservation Easement Program. The Wards agreed to limit certain uses on the land, including tilling crops or allowing livestock access to the river, which can affect water quality.

In return, they'll get paid to leave the land in a natural state, with trees and native grasses.

"This was the right thing to do for our children and grandchildren," said Jerry Ward.

The hope is to get all the landowners who border the Big Sioux and its major tributaries to sign on as well, said Roger Strom, watershed project coordinator with the East Dakota Water Development District. That would create miles of grassy buffer so that when erosion happens, silt and soils get trapped in the grass, leaving the water clean as it enters the river.

The Big Sioux suffers greatly from two water quality problems that can limit the waterway's beneficial uses such as swimming or paddling, said Pat Anderson, executive director of the Northern Prairies Land Trust. Suspended solids, including dirt from tilling too close to the shore and fecal coliform contamination from animal waste, can lead to water issues downstream. Sioux Falls taps the Big Sioux for its municipal water supply.

"In some cases, it can apply to feedlots that are too close to the bank as well," Anderson said. "Doing these deeds adds to the water quality of the Big Sioux."

The voluntary program uses federal money distributed by the South Dakota Department of Environment and Natural Resources to local sponsors. East Dakota Water Development District is the primary sponsor for the Big Sioux Watershed.

The money is used to buy perpetual and 30-year easements. The amount a landowner receives is based on a standard formula based on the assessed value of the land plus a county-by-county multiplier.

"It's a standard formula set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and I believe it's worth it for farmers to deed these strips of land," Anderson said. "We're not talking about big blocks of land here."

The easements are limited to a band of land that's about 100 feet wide, adjacent to the river or its major tributaries. This allows farmers and ranchers to keep working their land, yet improve water

quality by not disturbing the shoreline with livestock or allowing silt to enter the waterway through erosion.

The program started in 2005, and the Trust locked up its first easement in 2007 outside of Minnehaha County, Anderson said.

"It took us some time to work the bugs out," he said.

It's been very popular in Hamlin County, where seven Big Sioux River conservation easements are in place and several other applications are waiting to be processed.

"I think there will be more and more interest as we move forward," Anderson said. "Farmers are certainly talking about it."

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