A quarter-century of conservation

By DANA ROGGE

NE of the most successful federal conservation initiatives has reached the 25-year milestone in 2011. About 30 people took part in a June 23 tour in Montgomery County in east-central Missouri to acknowledge the impact the Conservation Reserve Program has had in Missouri.

The tour was a cooperative effort among the USDA Farm Service Agency, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Missouri Department of Conservation, Montgomery County Soil and Water Conservation District, and the Quail and Upland Wildlife Federation. The tour highlighted four landowners and showcased a variety of conservation practices implemented on their farms.

Gerald Hrdina, chief of Conservation Programs with Missouri FSA, described the evolution of CRP over the past 25 years. “When this program first started in 1986, the main objective was prevention of soil erosion,” Hrdina said. “Now, we see a variety of practices that not only help with soil loss, but also provide wildlife habitat and clean our water sources.”

The tour showcased a shallow water area for wildlife, a riparian buffer of trees along the Loutre River, a habitat buffer for wildlife, a riparian buffer of trees and clean our water sources.”

CRP began protecting our nation’s natural resources with the signing of the Food Security Act of 1985. The act provided for the establishment of CRP and for the protection of highly erodible land. The program was introduced at a time when soil erosion exceeded more than 3 billion tons per year, wetlands were being drained, water quality was deteriorating and wildlife populations were under stress due to declining habitat. Since its inception, CRP participants have restored grasses, trees and wetlands on more than 31 million acres and planted 2.7 million acres of trees, making this the largest federal tree-planting program in history.

How successful is CRP? According to Edward Hamill, Missouri USDA FSA executive director, since its inception in 1986, CRP acres have resulted in an 8 billion-ton reduction in soil erosion, restoration of 2 million acres of wetlands and adjacent buffers, vegetative protection of more than 200,000 stream-bank buffers and significant increases in upland wildlife numbers, which translates to recreational dollars for many rural economies.

CRP is a voluntary program that encourages agricultural landowners to convert highly erodible cropland or other environmentally sensitive acreage to vegetative cover. Landowners receive annual rental payments and cost-share assistance to establish long-term conservation practices on eligible farmland. To date, farmers and landowners have enrolled 31.3 million acres nationally in nearly 738,000 contracts. Missouri has 1.4 million acres enrolled in 37,000 CRP contracts, with 128,836 acres accepted during the most recent sign-up.

Landowners interested in enrolling in CRP should contact their local USDA FSA county office. More information on CRP can be found online at www.fsa.usda.gov.

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