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First buffer 'alternative practice' approved in Mower County *Gebhardt family's farm conservation work proven to satisfy new state law*

AUSTIN, Minn. – Friday, Jan. 13, 2017 – Mower County now has a farm – possibly the first in the state – certified for having “alternative practices” providing water-quality benefits that satisfy the state’s new law for vegetative buffers.

A study determined the conservation field practices in place for the past three decades on a 150-acre parcel of the Gebhardt family’s farm operations in Waltham Township benefit water quality more than what would be provided by a 50-foot buffer required by the new law on public waterways. Those practices include five sediment-and-water control basins; several grass waterways; and two pieces of land enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

Mower Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) worked with the Minnesota Board of Water & Soil Resources (BWSR) recently to confirm that the study’s findings meet the intent of the buffer law for the parcel along Roberts Creek north of Brownsdale.

“We were happy to work on this study because the Gebhardts have a high number of basins there and the land is much steeper than most Mower County cropland,” said Aaron Gamm, Mower SWCD’s buffer coordinator. “Only a small percentage of our landowners could even be considered for this but we’re willing to look into it with them.”

Minnesota Soybean Research & Promotion Council led the study with assistance from Houston Engineering Inc. (HEI) to develop a framework for use in determining whether landowners are or can become compliant with the buffer law through alternative practices. To prove the framework is viable, the soybean group sought a farmer willing to work with a local SWCD and use the framework to get alternative practices approved.

The Gebhardt brothers – Jim, Mike and Bob – agreed to participate in the study and are members of the Soybean Growers and Corn Growers associations. They grow corn and soybeans on 118 acres of the parcel in the study. The land was identified as needing more buffer along Roberts Creek, which flows into the Cedar River north of Austin.

That parcel, however, had earned their father, Bill, the Conservation Farmer of the Year Award in 1985 from Mower SWCD due to the number of conservation practices implemented on it. Those practices still are functioning properly 31 years later.

Back then, basins weren’t common in the area and were viewed only as a way to reduce soil erosion but since have proven also effective for flood reduction, said Jim Gebhardt, a long-time board member for Mower SWCD and Cedar River Watershed District.

“We were losing tons of soil every year on that land before we put in the basins and grass waterways,” Jim Gebhardt said. “It’s great to have those projects recognized for their water-quality benefits but alternative practices to buffers won’t work for everyone. You need to have the right slope of ground to make it work.”

According to BWSR, a combination of practices might be used to provide a sufficient level of water-quality benefits and, when proven to that standard, additional buffer might not be necessary under the state law. Some level of buffer will be required for bank stabilization. Alternate approaches can be pursued via assistance, review and validation, if requested by the local SWCD.

Jim Gebhardt wanted to work with the Mower SWCD to show how landowners can be compliant with the buffer law while using conservation practices that fit the way they farm and providing significant water-quality benefits.

HEI teamed with Mower SWCD to complete a technical analysis of the water-quality benefits of Gebhardts’ existing conservation efforts compared to what the 50-foot buffer would provide using the Soybean Growers’ alternatives framework.

The results showed that the Gebhardts’ practices were reducing sediment erosion into Roberts Creek by more than three times the level that would be provided by a 50-foot buffer, said Drew Kessler, of HEI. That is without considering the conservation tillage system the Gebhardts have used for many years on the parcel, he added.

Also, the Gebhardts’ 15-foot minimum width buffer on the parcel – more than 250 feet wide in some areas – is providing adequate streambank stability and treatment of stormwater runoff reaching the creek while complying with state policy, he said.

Along with addressing water-quality concerns, the Gebhardts are achieving water-detention benefits from the upland storage provided by the basins, helping reduce downstream flooding and issues with altered hydrology, Kessler said. The analysis indicated the basins could hold more than 800,000 gallons of stormwater.

The Gebhardts’ story, Kessler said, shows how alternative practices under the buffer law potentially could provide win-win opportunities for landowners and Minnesota’s water quality concerns.

Alternative practice under buffer law

Who: Gebhardt family farm; Mower Soil & Water Conservation District; Minnesota Soybean Research & Promotion Council; and Houston Engineering, Inc.

What: Confirmed first farm in Mower County with alternative conservation practices providing enough water-quality benefits to satisfy new state buffer law.

Where: Waltham Township in Mower County.

When: January 2017.

Why: Special study to create framework for determining if alternative practices on specific parcels put a landowner in compliance with the law.

Online: bwsr.state.mn.us/buffers

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Mower Soil & Water Conservation District

Since 1953, Mower SWCD has provided land and conservation services to Mower County landowners to help manage lands in a way that promotes a sound economy as well as sustains and enhances natural resources that are key to the state’s environmental health. Mower SWCD is one of Minnesota’s 91 SWCDs each are governed by an elected board.

