



Above: Removing sediment at the Helen Benson restoration project near Ong. **Right:** Aerial view of Helen Benson's wetland, featuring the largest goose ever seen in the basins!



Helen Benson Wetland Project

Helen Benson has 40 acres of wetland habitat on her property in Clay County which had never been very productive for cropping. In 1983 she enrolled the wetland into the US Department of Agriculture Waterbank Program on a 20 year agreement. The Waterbank Program was a federal program, which provided financial incentives for setting aside wetlands with adjacent upland cover. A drawback of the program was that the landowner was not allowed to use the wetland for most agricultural purposes including cultivation, grazing, or haying during the lengthy agreement period.

Mrs. Benson's Waterbank Program contract expired in 2003, prompting her to contact the Rainwater Basin Joint Venture offices about wetland conservation programs that would apply to her property. The RWBJV is an organization that partners with other area organizations in an effort to improve wetland habitat.

Twenty years of non-management had left the wetland in poor condition and in need of restoration work. There were two re-use pits located within the wetland that were part of a tail-water recovery system still being used to irrigate nearby cropland. As long as the pits were still needed, attempts to restore the wetland would be in vain.

Eventually, Mrs. Benson replaced her tail-water recovery system with pivot irrigation, which meant that the pits were no longer needed. She was then able to enter into a 10-year Wildlife Extension Agreement (WEA) from which she would receive a per/acre land use payment for each year. The 10-year agreement included restoring the wetland through removing accumulated sediment and filling of the reuse pits. An agreement was made with the tenant to graze the wetland once the grasses and vegetation became re-established, which will help manage the vegetation while providing a financial asset to the landowner.

The project received funding through grants from the Nebraska Environmental Trust and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, as well as Ducks Unlimited and the Fish and Wildlife Service. Ducks Unlimited also provided the engineering and the RWBJV helped coordinate the project.

The Benson Wetland Restoration is visible on the north side of Highway 74 between Ong and Schickley. As the wetland receives more water in the future, those with a good imagination may be able to make out the shape of a goose that was engineered into the wetland's sediment removal. Crop circles in England have nothing over the wetland near Ong that's shaped like a flying goose!