



Staff photo by Fritz Busch

Gary Rathman stands in a field of switchgrass, which has taken the place of corn and soybeans on much of his farm near Comfrey. Rathman has enrolled much of his acreage in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, which gives the government a permanent conservation easement. The program's intent is to improve the quality Minnesota River by taking marginal land out of crop production.

Comfrey farmer enrolls hundreds of acres

By FRITZ BUSCH
Journal Staff Writer

COMFREY — You know you're not on the average farm when a great blue heron slowly takes to the air and flies in front of your car, 15 feet off the ground in a wetlands which is the source for Wood Lake.

The bird took wing as he was headed to the farm and when he left it.

In case you don't know, herons are graceful birds with long, pointed bills that seem to extend right into their eyes. Most herons have narrow heads, long slender necks, and sticklike legs similar to those of cranes and storks.

Sometimes herons stand for a long time with their heads drawn between their shoulders. They may look like they are asleep but they are actually waiting for fish, frogs, crayfish and other small animals.

When its prey is spotted, the heron quickly catches the victim with its spear-like bill.

Gary Rathman's farm is near the northwest arm of the lake, a shallow, man-made lake in Mulligan Township, at the southern edge of Brown County.

Most of his acreage, nearly 600 acres, is enrolled

Rathman

Continued on page 8C

Full funding of CREP will help farmers help Minnesota River

ST. PAUL — With a vote of 115 to 17 in the Minnesota House of Representatives and 57 to 0 in the Senate, the state's bonding bill was passed early Saturday, June 30, paving the way for the state to move ahead with the final implementation of the Minnesota River Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program.

The bonding bill contained an appropriation of \$51.4 million earmarked for CREP. That is the amount needed for the state to fully match the \$163 million in federal money available for the program. Gov. Ventura signed the bill Saturday, June 30.

CREP is a combined state and federal program that pays landowners in the Minnesota River basin to take marginal cropland out of production as a way to improve water quality and wildlife habitat. With the full funding, the target goal of enrolling 100,000 acres can now be reached and the critical match will be secured.

"We're thrilled to see the final passage of the bonding bill and thank the Legislature and the Governor for their commitment to the program," said Ron Harnack, executive director of the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources. "This is the single most important initiative we have to clean up the Minnesota River and reclaim its heritage. This funding will mean that the Minnesota River basin will be significantly enhanced and revitalized."

Harnack commended the work of legislators who took the lead in carrying legislation for CREP funding. He noted the work of chief authors Senator Dennis R. Frederickson (R-

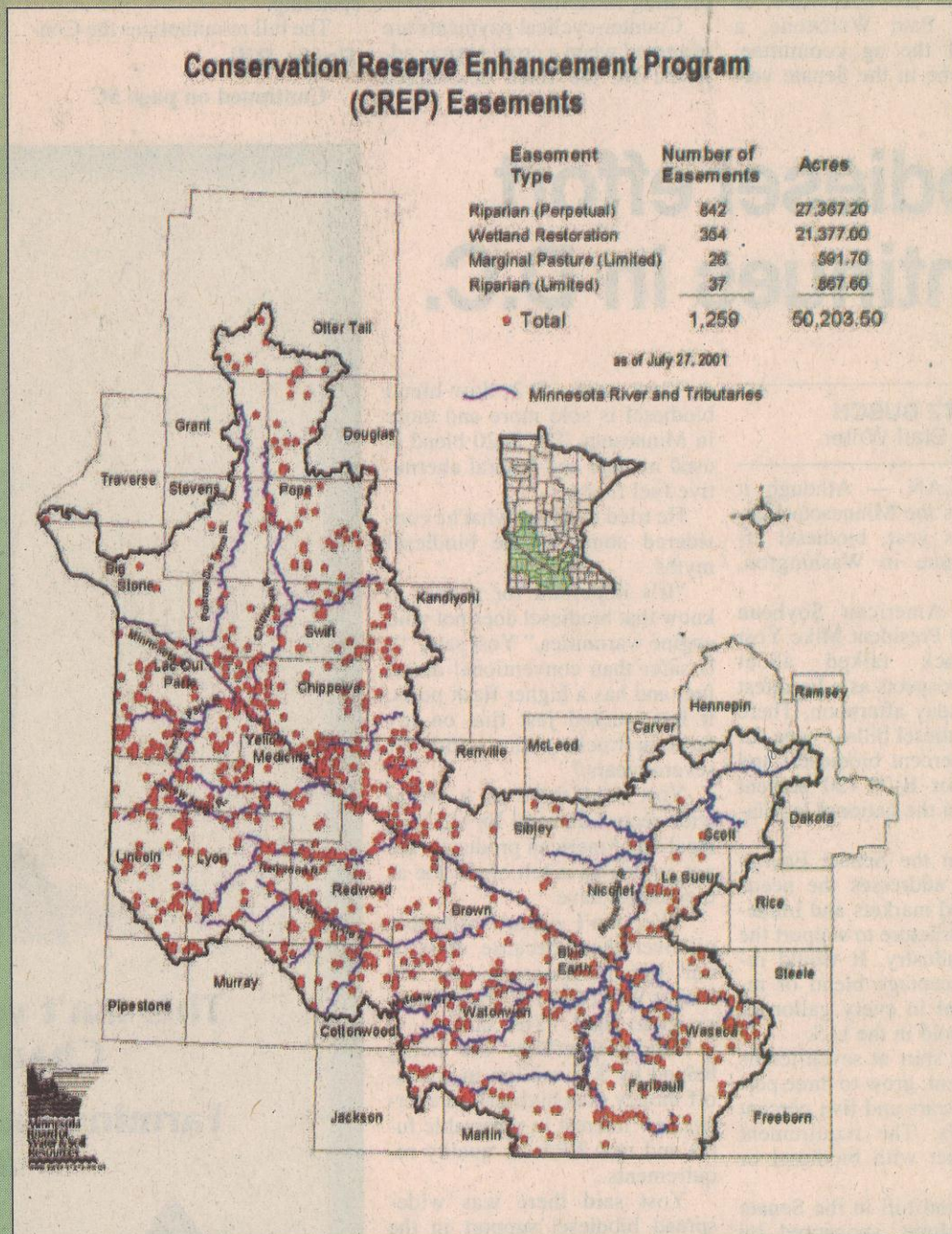
New Ulm), Senator John C. Hottinger (DFL-Mankato), Representative Elaine Harder (R-Jackson), and Representative Henry J. Kalis (DFL-Walters).

The initiative was supported by a broad-based coalition of 100 state and local conservation groups, environmental organizations, and local units of government from the Minnesota River basin. "This is indeed a historic accomplishment," said Judy Erickson, CREP Coalition coordinator. "The funding was the last piece of the work needed to move ahead with final implementation. We're relieved and thankful that the Legislature came through."

"Members of the coalition provided testimony, attended CREP events at the Capitol, and worked hard at driving the message home. It was an extraordinary effort by the coalition."

As of mid-June, 42,237 acres are enrolled in the program, according to figures from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources. An additional 23,893 acres are in process or pending approval at Soil and Water Conservation District offices.

CREP is administered at the state level by the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources. Soil and Water Conservation Districts in the basin administer the program locally. Federal partners are the USDA Farm Service Agency and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Landowners interested in more information about CREP should contact their local SWCD office.



The map above shows the location of CREP acres that have been signed up into the program. CREP's aim is to improve the quality of the Minnesota River by paying easements to farmers to enroll marginal farmland in strategic areas, remove them from cultivation and plant them in native grasses.