

Lyon SWCD presents award to Marshall area contractor ~ Alan Forbes

Almost a half century of conservation improvements is represented in the career of Marshall area contractor Alan Forbes.

Forbes has been named by the Lyon Soil and Water Conservation District for its 2007 Community Conservationist Award. The annual award goes to a local community member who has made outstanding contributions toward environmental protection. Forbes was chosen both because of his experience as a contractor and his consistently effective working relationships with conservation staff.

He began to work in the construction industry in 1959. The start of his career coincided with the nationwide effort to build four-lane interstate highways. As a member of interstate road crews, he was part of a group that shared an enthusiasm for the future and a sense of helping to modernize America.

"Those were fun times," Forbes said. "I have a lot of friends because of the work we did back then. We knew that we were building something important for society."

Forbes decided to go into business for himself a decade later, when a contractor from Arco decided to retire. His first equipment purchase from the retiree was a drag line that could be used to dig water pits in pastures. Within the next several years, he added enough equipment for other projects such as terraces and waterways.

A large percentage of his business has always involved farm and conservation contracting. He has worked in a four county area near his home in Sodus Township south of Marshall; with projects in Lyon, Lincoln, Murray and Redwood counties. At times he has hired seasonal employees, but he also has often worked on his own.

He said conservation work is different from many other types of construction. On the one hand, there can sometimes be flexibility as to the exact shape and appearance of the finished project. It is still necessary, however, for the contractor to make responsible choices.

"It's usually not as cut and dried as other situations," Forbes said. "We often don't have the same kind of exact specifications that go with something like building a road. Conservation projects get to be a skill. The contractor has to know the best options for how to create slopes and where to place dirt."

Forbes plans to sell his business and retire in about a year. Two of his last projects are among the most memorable of his career since they involve adjacent Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program water management structures in Rock Lake Township in southern Lyon County.

"They're useful projects, especially since they're close together," he said. "It's going to have great habitat for wildlife."

Some of his other favorite projects include the construction of a large farm pond on Duane Pagel's property in 1977, the recent modernization of another pond that he helped to build in 1960, and the construction of terraces on Louis Wewetzer's property in Lynd Township west of Marshall. The terraces, called push-up terraces because of how they created flat land at the bottom, are based on a construction style that was popular at the time but not widely used in the 21st century.

Throughout his career, Forbes has believed that good communication with customers and conservation staff is important. At first, it was usually a simple process. It wasn't unusual for a standard project like a waterway to be built within several days after it was designed. In 2007, there is more to consider with both the review of project plans and with state or federal funding.

“There’s more that has to be lined up,” he said. “A contractor has to be ready to work through those processes. Other than that, it’s the same kind of business. You have to do the best work you can and enjoy it. I especially like the satisfaction of knowing a job was done well. It’s added up over the years. When I drive by one of my old project sites, I think about when it was built.”

Lyon SWCD administrator Rose Anderson said Forbes is an ideal choice for the SWCD Community Award because of his years of success in his conservation role. She added that he has been an advocate for the environment because of his willingness to help landowners evaluate their options and his desire to promote conservation opportunities.

“Alan has worked with many different conservation staff members, and he’s worked effectively with all of them,” Anderson said. “It’s exactly the kind of partnership we want with contractors. He makes sure things go well for us and for the landowners.”