

*Jim Fettkether, Dunkerton*

RIPPLE EFFECT

MOMENTUM BUILDING TO IMPROVE WATER QUALITY IN THE HEARTLAND.

By Matthew Wilde

The Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy is still in its infancy, but the initiative is growing up fast.

The strategy — a science-based effort to reduce nitrate and phosphorous loads in Iowa waterways by 45 percent from point and nonpoint sources — will turn 2 in May. Even though some critics say it's doomed to fail because it mostly relies on voluntary efforts of farmers and landowners to adopt conservation practices to reduce nutrient runoff and soil erosion, supporters contend there's plenty of evidence that momentum is building.

Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey is like a proud papa when he talks about his maturing “baby.”

“I’m very optimistic the goal will be achieved,” he says. “Over the last year farmers have engaged to a greater degree.”

Iowa’s ag leader says grain and livestock production and exports are no longer the dominant topics when he speaks to agribusiness and farm groups. Instead, producers and input suppliers want to learn more about improving water quality and soil health and how they can get involved.

Attendance at meetings to learn about conservation practices and associated government programs has dramatically increased, farm leaders and conservationists say. Standing room-only events are the norm.

For the most part, Northey says soybean and corn growers believe agronomic and environmental performance are no longer mutually exclusive.

Here’s proof. For the second year in a row, the Black Hawk County Corn and Soybean Association invited the county’s Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to be part of its annual meeting and awards banquet. Instead of a keynote speaker to provide information to help producers increase yields and hopefully profits, Sean McMahon, executive director of the new Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance (IAWA), talked about water quality efforts.

“That shows me engagement

continues to ramp up,” Northey says. “People are asking questions at the end of meetings. We have more folks talking and wanting to share their experiences.

“It’s a ripple effect,” he continues. “Farmers are learning from each other and the more they get involved trying cover crops, nutrient management and other practices, the more others will get involved.”

The Iowa Soybean Association (ISA), Iowa Corn Growers Association and Iowa Pork Producers Association created the IAWA to increase farmer awareness of the strategy and the adoption of science-based practices proven to have environmental benefits and meet the strategy’s goal. Cover crops, grass waterways, bioreactors, nitrification inhibitors, conservation tillage, wetland restoration and saturated buffers are just a few of the dozens to choose from.

A recent ISA soybean checkoff-funded survey shows awareness of the strategy is on the rise and farmers are implementing conservation practices.

Sixty-nine percent of the 353 farmers surveyed said they were familiar with the strategy, up sharply from just 39 percent in 2013. When asked what environmental practices they use, 89 percent of respondents said grassed waterways followed by conservation tillage (69 percent), no-till (61 percent) and terraces (57 percent). Buffer strips were used by 53 percent of respondents, while 21 percent said they’ve planted cover crops.

Like Northey, McMahon is traveling the state talking about the strategy, stressing farmer and landowner engagement and the importance of water quality. He says the joint meeting in Black Hawk County is an excellent model of collaboration between farmers and conservationists.

“By working together they can fulfil mutual interests,” McMahon says. “There’s a lot of great momentum as of late, especially with the three new state WQI (Water Quality Initiative) projects.”

The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship announced in March the Elk Run Watershed Water Quality Initiative Project (Sac, Carroll and Calhoun counties), Headwaters North Raccoon River (Buena Vista

and Pocahontas counties) and Leading a New Collaborative Approach to Improving Water Quality in the Squaw Creek (Story, Boone and Hamilton counties) will receive \$1.4 million in the next three years. Project partners like ISA, IAWA and Agriculture’s Clean Water Alliance will fork over matching funds and in-kind support.

The new demonstration projects cover nearly 275,000 acres. The goal is to implement and demonstrate the effectiveness of practices outlined in the strategy.

“It’s important to increase awareness, which is already occurring,” McMahon says. “Once farmers see a benefit by documenting economic and environmental benefits, it will really help scale up adoption.”

The new projects join 13 other targeted WQI demonstration projects throughout Iowa. The state has provided \$6 million in funding that’s been leveraged with an additional \$10.3 million from partners and landowners.

McMahon says it will take time, possibly decades, to achieve the strategy’s goal. But he’s confident it will happen because of collaboration in Black Hawk County and other parts of the state.

According to Dunkerton farmer Jim Fettkether, it’s good business to keep up on the latest agronomic and environmental practices. Focusing on water quality and mingling with SWCD officials just made sense.

“We’re just not here to grow corn and soybeans, we have the long-term viability of the land and water in mind,” says Fettkether, president of the Black Hawk County Corn and Soybean Association.

Shane Wulf, Black Hawk County SWCD watershed coordinator, updated farmers about cost-share opportunities available and the Miller Creek WQI project south of Waterloo.

He’s noticed more interest in water quality projects, especially from large operators, a key to success. Two bioreactors and a saturated buffer are scheduled to be installed in the area this year.

“I think when that happens, neighbors will see and that will really get the ball rolling,” Wulf says.



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