



COURTESY PHOTO

Lee Gravel serves as coordinator of the Headwaters of the North Raccoon River watershed project, which includes about 100,000 acres in northwest Iowa.

Watershed project leaders seeing bump in cover crop use, interest

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Iowa Farmer Today

STORMLAKE — Watching a new project come together is pretty exciting, says Lee Gravel.

“It’s so rewarding to go out and work with an individual and to see them try a new practice, and then ask what they can do next,” he says.

Gravel serves as watershed coordinator for the Buena Vista and Pocahontas Soil and Water Conservation District in northwest Iowa. He coordinates the Headwaters of the North Raccoon Water Quality Improvement Project and was recently named 2018 Iowa Watershed Coordinator of the Year by the Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance.

The project, which began in April 2015, covers 100,000 acres primarily in Buena Vista and Pocahontas counties, with a few acres in Clay and Palo Alto counties as well.

Gravel began working with the project in September 2016.

He says the project ba-

sically utilizes all practices outlined in the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy. Those include no-till, strip tillage, saturated buffers, cover crops, bioreactors and wetlands, he says.

Gravel says educating farmers and landowners about the program has been successful.

“We’ve done a lot of outreach and field days and other things to educate people about the projects and what’s available to them,” he says. “Once the stakeholders in the watershed see the benefit of a certain practice, they are more than willing to try something new, and to learn about the management that’s involved.”

For example, Gravel says roughly 9 percent of the watershed’s acres have been planted to cover crops. The watershed also has a high rate of edge-of-field practices, primarily bioreactors and saturated buffers, he says.

Iowa’s farmers are making progress when it comes to reducing nutrient loss,

says Sean McMahon, executive director of the IAWA.

The alliance was created in 2014 by the Iowa Soybean Association, the Iowa Corn Growers Association and the Iowa Pork Producers Association.

He says the alliance has been able to build a network of public and private entities in the effort to implement the state’s nutrient reduction strategy.

The Midwest Water Quality Partnership Program is a \$48.5 million project with 47 partners.

The funding includes \$10 million in USDA money and \$38 million in non-federal partner match. Funding is used in five watershed projects, including Gravel’s project, that have been targeted as priority watersheds for improvement.

“We saw such a huge increase in cover crops with the Raccoon River project that we ran out of funding,” McMahon says.

“We are seeing an increase in edge-of-field projects also. The needle is really starting to move.”

He says providing technical assistance may be the biggest limiting factor when it comes to implementing new practices.

McMahon says with the smaller watersheds, it is much easier to see progress when it comes to measuring nitrate levels.

“In the Elk Run watershed, for example, they have been able to measure reduced nitrate concentrations,” he says.

“For the bigger watersheds, it’s a bit more difficult, but progress is being made.”

Gravel says more than 70 farmers and landowners have been involved over the past three years in the program. He adds the grant that funds the project was recently renewed for another three years.

“Most were management programs until last fall,” Gravel says.

“But we should have 11 edge-of-field practices in place by the end of this spring, and we anticipate many more farmers and landowners becoming involved as we move along.”