

WATER QUALITY: IN THE ROUND

Watershed coordinators discuss achieving Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy goals

By Matthew Wilde



The Iowa Soybean Association (ISA) recently held a roundtable discussion with five water quality project coordinators — key implementers of the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy.

Coordinators shared opinions about the past, present and future progress of the initiative to improve water quality. And, what it will take to achieve the strategy's goal — a 45 percent reduction of nitrogen and phosphorous loads entering waterways from point and nonpoint sources.

Participants included:

Diane Ercse — ISA watershed coordinator/resource management specialist — Elk Run Watershed Project

Adam Rodenberg — Middle Cedar Watershed Management Authority Project

Cara Morgan — East and West Nishnabotna Watershed Management Coalitions

Tracy Church — Rock Creek Watershed Project

Shane Wulf — Miller Creek Watershed Project

ISA: Why is the watershed approach the best way to meet the goals of the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy?

Ercse: "Utilizing a watershed approach to improve water quality is important because farmers and Iowans grasp water as a bigger issue than whether or not it runs through their yard or field. It encompasses a lot of people."

Morgan: "It's more of a holistic approach rather than shotgunning projects. As project coordinators, we can help determine projects that will provide the biggest bang for the buck and make the most impact for flood and nutrient reduction. It allows county supervisors, soil and water conservation districts, and cities to come together to make the best use out of tax dollars and determine what projects are the priorities."



Diane Ercse

ISA: What are the key attributes of a successful watershed project and why?

Church: "The biggest thing that works in our area is farmers who have implemented practices talking to their neighbors. Partnerships are also very important. We work with the ISA on edge-of-field practices and The Nature Conservancy helps with oxbow restorations. If you keep projects fresh and implement new things, it keeps people engaged."

ISA: What are your biggest challenges and successes in improving water quality and why?

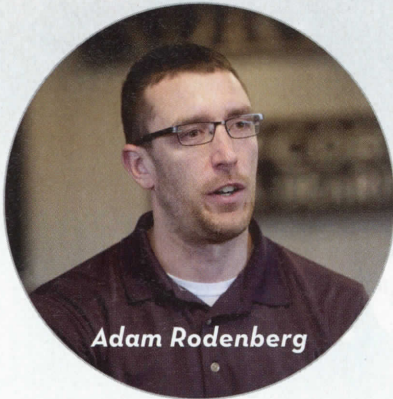
Morgan: "One of the challenges, not just unique to us but also statewide, is funding for practices. The success is early involvement. All my county boards of directors are committed to watersheds and moving forward with plans. Just because something isn't within their county, they see the importance of helping the county or city next to them."

Church: "Our biggest challenge is we're at a point that everyone who wanted to participate initially has jumped on board. Now, I must figure out how to reach the next group and get them involved; helping them overcome the hurdle of should I or should I not. One of our biggest successes is we're still relevant four years into a 25-year project and ahead of five-year goals. For example, over 10 percent of the watershed is in cover crops and six edge-of-field practices have been implemented."

ISA: How will the new water quality bill help bolster current and future watershed projects? Is it the answer or a step in the right direction?

Rodenberg: “There are lot of unknowns with the bill. It’s a slice of the pie. More funding will help, but a substantial, long-term funding source is needed to meet the goals of the Nutrient Reduction Strategy.”

Wulf: “It’s a step in the right direction, but not necessarily the answer. I hope funding will go to a lot of watershed projects. Continuing to build the statewide water quality initiative program is important.”



Adam Rodenberg

ISA: Why is engagement of landowners and farmers crucial to meeting the goals of Iowa’s Nutrient Reduction Strategy?

Wulf: “Those are the decision makers who are putting practices on the ground. Finding early adopters is easy. We’re trying to find the middle adopters — a person not coming in the Natural Resources Conservation Service office all the time but is open to a conversation on the farm. Having a farmer champion to talk to farmers in the middle about how engagement impacts their operation and me talking about available programs goes well together.”



Cara Morgan

ISA: How do you get reluctant farmers and landowners to participate in watershed projects?

Morgan: “I don’t think we will ever have 100 percent buyin. If the reluctant landowner can understand what conservation and water quality work can do for them, a lot of times that will encourage buyin to try something.”

Church: “Sometimes it takes an aha moment. I had one farmer say he loved plowing and making a field turn black. He went to a field day where an inch of rain fell an hour before and they went out to a strip-till field with cover crops. When he got back to the building, he couldn’t believe there was no mud on the ground. That farmer switched and bought a strip-till rig.”



Tracy Church

ISA: Why is it important farmers and landowners invest time and money in improving water quality and soil health even though grain margins are tight to nonexistent?

Ersce: “I think you have to show that it’s a long-term investment. There are assistance opportunities to transition to more sustainable farming practices. Funding is uncertain, so take advantage of opportunities while they’re available. You can’t argue the value of soil health.”

Rodenberg: “The long-term commitment to conservation practices will ultimately save money. Many practices allow farmers to cut back on inputs and field passes. Many can have long-term benefits.”



Shane Wulf

ISA: Is there enough progress improving water quality to show Iowa is on the right track?

Ersce: “I think we’re making progress. We can be proud that the wheels are in motion, but we need more engagement from the private sector, farmers and landowners.”

Wulf: “We’re off to a good start, but we need to pick up the pace and scale of implementation of conservation practices.”

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The 5-year-old Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy

is the state’s road map to curbing water pollution. Conservation practices highlighted in the strategy proven to work include cover crops, bioreactors, oxbows, wetlands, conservation tillage and more.