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Partnership prevails in Cedar Rapids

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By: Matthew Wilde, ISA senior writer

It's a tale of two cities.

Cedar Rapids officials last Thursday announced the launch of the \$4.3 million Middle Cedar Partnership Project (MCP), a cooperative effort with the Iowa Soybean Association (ISA) and 14 other government, business and agriculture entities. The goal is to improve water quality, soil health and mitigate flooding in the Cedar River Watershed. The river directly influences the city's drinking water.

The Des Moines Water Works, on the other hand, took a vastly different approach to improve water quality in the Raccoon River, a primary source water for about 500,000 customers. Water works trustees on Jan. 8 voted to pursue a federal lawsuit against three northwest Iowa counties for high nitrate levels in the North Raccoon River, a tributary of the Raccoon.

"Like farmers, residents of both cities want safe, clean drinking water," said Sean McMahon, Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance executive director, shortly after a press conference at the Cedar Rapids Municipal Utility's headquarters.

"One chose confrontation and litigation, while the other opted for cooperation. Clearly, it's the latter approach that will result in clean water," he continued. "I'm very impressed by Cedar Rapids and the spirit of collaboration they are demonstrating to engage the ag sector."

The innovative partnership combines urban and rural sectors and public and private partnerships to fund practices farmers will implement to improve water quality.

The five-year MCP seeks to advance implementation of nutrient and flood reduction practices in targeted areas of the Middle Cedar Watershed, a 2,417-square-mile area covering 135,000 acres in Benton, Tama and Black Hawk counties. It's part of the larger Cedar River Watershed.

Funds will be used for conservation planning, assessment, education, water monitoring and provide cost-share assistance to landowners and farmers to install best management practices such as cover crops, bioreactors and saturated buffers, among others.

ISA's Environmental Programs and Services (EPS) team will assist with assessment and planning during the first year and in other phases of the project. EPS is already working in the Miller Creek Watershed, one of five targeted watersheds as part of the MCP, doing water monitoring and implementing conservation practices.

The ag community contends collaboration, not regulation is the best way to protect the environment. Roger Wolf, ISA's EPS director, said this is the opportunity for farmers to prove it.

"It's a call to action," he said. "It's time right now to take a look at your operation, what you are doing currently and what else you can do."

Leading the way

Cedar Rapids is the lead partner. Mayor Ron Corbett said the best way to reduce nitrates and phosphorous loads in the Cedar is to work with counties to the north.

"There are many people in this state who often talk about an urban and rural divide. This projects shows that urban and rural communities can work together for a common goal," Corbett said. "We all have a stake in seeing this succeed."

But that won't happen without action, he said, noting "Des Moines took a different approach."

The Des Moines Water Works issued a 60-day notice of intent to sue boards of supervisors in Sac, Buena Vista and Calhoun counties. According to documents, if 10 drainage districts under their control do not cease to discharge pollutants (nitrates) without permits or act to correct ongoing violations in the next 60 days, the water works will seek relief in federal court under the Clean Water Act and Iowa code. Ultimately, water works officials want regulations to solve the problem and require ag drainage districts to get National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System permits.

Nitrate concentrations in the Cedar River — Cedar Rapids' drinking water comes from shallow alluvial wells that are directly influenced by the river — are a concern, according to Cedar Rapids Utilities Director Steve Hershner.

But the city believes a two-prong approach is the best way to solve the problem: Work in watersheds upstream and efficient, cost-effective treatment when necessary. Cedar Rapids recently initiated a feasibility study on building its own nitrate removal facility.

"We really focus on partnerships," Hershner said. "We know our customers expect nothing less than the best tasting water that's safe. It takes a lot of different elements to make that happen."

Go time

Funding from the recently-announced U.S. Department of Agriculture's Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCCP) made the Cedar Rapids initiative possible. It is one of 100 projects across all 50 states that in total received more than \$370 million.

Marty Adkins, National Resources Conservation Service assistant state conservationist, said the MCP scored high. Only 20 percent of applicants were approved and none received their full request, but Cedar Rapids was close.

"It encourages strong public, private partnerships to bring solutions to nutrient challenges," Adkins said.

The Middle Cedar project will receive \$2 million in funding from RCCP and \$2.3 million from project partners. Cedar Rapids will contribute \$316,000 in financial and "in-kind" technical support, including project administration and monitoring.

"Our prize for looking beyond the boundaries of our city is doing our part to improve our precious environment," said Jeff Pomeranz, Cedar Rapids city manager. Des Moines Water Works is not interested in investing in upstream conservation work, CEO Bill Stowe told the ISA.

It's not surprising Cedar Rapids is willing to collaborate with farmers given its strong ties to agriculture, according to Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey. The city processes more corn than any other in the world, he said.

As the second largest city and water utility in Iowa, Northey said Cedar Rapids is "a champion" for the environment and sets a good example for Iowa communities to follow.

Adam Kiel, ISA's EPS state water resources manager, urged farmers to do their part as well.

"We need participation to show that partnerships like this work," he said.

For more information about the MCPP, visit www.cedar-rapids.org. Or, call Kiel at (515) 334-1022 or email at akiel@iasoybeans.com.



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