
Partnerships for Clean Water: The Norm or the Exception?

By [Steve Hershner](#) / On [October 21, 2015 5:59 pm](#)

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This year the City of Cedar Rapids and 15 partner organizations launched a \$4.3 million project focused on improving soil health, water quality and water quantity in Iowa's Middle Cedar watershed, a 2,417 square mile watershed which is part of the larger Cedar River watershed. The Middle Cedar Partnership Project, made possible thanks to funding from the USDA's Regional Conservation Partnership Program, is focused on working with local conservation partners, farmers and landowners to encourage widespread adoption of best management practices.

On Friday, Oct. 16, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack visited

Nick Meier's farm in rural La Porte City, Iowa, to see some of those practices in action. A third generation farmer, Nick has voluntarily implemented multiple conservation practices – cover crops, saturated buffers, ridge-till cultivation, and most recently a denitrification bioreactor. Nick has invested tens of thousands of dollars into helping protect soil quality and reduce nutrient runoff.



But as Secretary Vilsack articulated following his tour, water quality is everyone's issue and producers will need support at the federal, state and local level to implement these conservation practices on a larger scale. According to the Des Moines Register, "Iowa scientists estimate it will cost as much as \$1.2 billion annually over five decades for farmers to build the conservation infrastructure needed to offset the state's intensive farming." I'm proud the MCPP offers one avenue for technical and financial support for Iowans, but the reality is additional resources –

additional partnerships – will be needed to mitigate the water quality issues that have led to the Gulf of Mexico hypoxia zone.

The national recognition Cedar Rapids and the Middle Cedar Partnership Project has received and continues to receive wasn't anticipated when we began this journey. However, I am proud of what is being accomplished in Eastern Iowa through this project, and I am grateful for the opportunities I have had to tell this story. I'll have another chance to do just that on Nov. 2, at a congressional briefing in Washington, D.C., something none of us imagined when we announced the MCPP in January.

While each watershed is different and presents unique challenges, the Middle Cedar Partnership Project shows that urban and rural communities can work together for a common goal. Since we began this five-year project in June, funding has been awarded to plant more than 200 acres of cover crops, and producers in the watershed have been developing nutrient management plans with the support of partner organizations. Our hope is that the Middle Cedar Partnership Project will be the first step toward Cedar River watershed improvements that benefit our community and all other communities connected to the river.

Everyone has a stake in water and soil quality improvement, and opportunities to work together toward these common goals only make the overall efforts stronger.

In his position as Utilities Director, [Steve Hershner](#) is focused on the delivery of water, wastewater, and solid waste services to City of Cedar Rapids customers and industries. In various capacities, he has participated as a representative for municipal wastewater treatment or point sources during several statewide initiatives, most recently during development of the State of Iowa's Point Source Nutrient Reduction Strategy.

Steve earned his bachelor's degree from Iowa State University. In addition to his professional activities, he has served in a number of different leadership positions for several non-profit organizations.

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