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COURTESY PHOTO

A field at the farm of Mark Recker, a Fayette County-based soybean and corn farmer and director of the Iowa Corn Growers Association.

GREEN ACRES

Farmers save money while saving water, soil

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Farmers are investing in two prime ingredients of their business success: water and soil.

As that happens, and programs like the Iowa Water Quality Initiative and the Iowa State University-developed nutrient reduction

strategy gain critical mass, one question pertinent to every farm's bottom line is beginning to replace another. Instead of wondering if they can afford to invest in cover crops or new tilling methods, farmers are beginning to wonder if they can afford not to.

"One thing in our office that we take into consideration is to make sure it fits into their operations and finances, to make sure they can afford to purchase equipment or rent it

out," said Shane Wulf. He's project coordinator with the Miller Creek Water Quality Improvement Project and with the Black Hawk Soil and Water Conservation District. That includes more than 42,000 acres in south-central Black Hawk and northeastern Tama counties.

The Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship selected Miller Creek as a project because the area is 89 percent row-cropped, has high sediment erosion in county ditches and is a priority watershed in the Middle Cedar River area.

One practice to improve water quality and preserve soil nutrients gaining momentum is cover crops.

Cover crops can vary widely and require an investment from the farmer — generally around \$25 per acre for non-winter plantings and \$35 for winter-hardy crops, according to figures the Miller Creek project provided.

"Cover crops seem to be the hot thing — we promote that as an investment, building soil health,"

Wulf said. "All those things are going to save you money in the long run."

Putting exact dollar figures on conservation measures is tough, Wulf noted, but common sense indicates some practices save farmers money.

"Things like strip- and no-till require less passes and save time and money," he said.

A MAJOR TREND

Projects like the Miller Creek Watershed are proliferating. Wulf reported the number of acres in Miller Creek with cover crops had jumped from 1,051 in 2014 to 2,703 in 2015. Strip-till/no-till farming rose from zero to 1,097 acres in the same time frame. A number of other practices went from nothing to something in that time as well, and momentum is building for further expansion.

Such efforts cover the state. The Midwest Agriculture Water Quality Partnership, led by the

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Conservation Q&A

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Karl Gesch is watershed coordinator and resource management specialist with the Ankeny-based Iowa Soybean Association. He discussed how farmers can fit water and soil conservation measures into their businesses.



Karl Gesch

Q. What kind of investment does it take?

A. Farmers, communities and businesses across Iowa have used their own dollars along with cost-share funds to adopt on-farm practices that have off-farm water quality benefits.

Iowa soybean farmers are fully committed to supporting the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy to achieve its goals. In fiscal year 2015, ISA invested \$1.2 million in soybean checkoff funds, which was leveraged with federal, state and local funding to support 36 active ISA-led water quality projects, involving more than

350 farmer participants.

Q. What's the quickest way to achieve higher water quality?

A. Two things can greatly accelerate water quality improvement. First, watershed plans should be developed to target conservation practices and maximize water quality benefit per dollar invested. Second, reliable funding is required to finance water quality improvement practices such as cover crops, bioreactors and wetlands.

Q. How can you convince farmers to invest in such efforts?

A. Farmers should share what they learn. As farmers try and adopt new conservation practices, telling friends and neighbors about the successes and challenges on your operation can have a big impact.

Q. How does it affect your business in the long run?

A. Many conservation practices that improve water quality also have on-farm benefits such as increased productivity and profitability, better soil health and improved wildlife habitat. We need to capitalize on such win-win opportunities.

Acres

From 5

Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship and the Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance will work with farmers to boost water quality efforts in watersheds within the North Raccoon, South Skunk, Lake Red Rock, Middle Cedar and Upper Cedar watersheds. In Illinois, the Precision Conservation Management project engages producers to make conservation an integral part of daily farm management.

Combined, these two programs will make available millions of dollars to support Iowa's water quality and conservation efforts, said Bill Northey, Iowa agriculture secretary. His department, along with the Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance, received \$9.5 million in federal funds leveraged by \$4.75 million in state funding and \$33 million from the private sector.

The Illinois Corn grant for \$5.3 million will offer farmers in Iowa, Illinois and Kentucky tools to apply precision conservation technology to their farm business decision making. Each project has over 30 partner organizations, making use of tremendous private sector investments, Northey said.

"The Illinois part has record-keeping services for members, and we're hoping to integrate that system, where they track yields and inputs and integrate it with application process, so you can pull that info from your records," said Ben Gleason, sustainable program manager with the Iowa Corn Growers Association. "The field print calculator takes yields, inputs and crop rotation and gives you a score and compares you to the state average for water use, energy use and wildlife habitat and adjust."

Pilot programs in Illinois later will cross the river for use in Iowa, Gleason said.

"These partnership initiatives are built upon the strong history of collaboration in Iowa among organizations representing government, growers, nonprofit, economic development and higher education," said Northey, who grows corn and soybeans near Spirit Lake. "They will help leverage private sector precision agriculture tools to deliver conservation and water quality improvement. As a farmer, I am working every day to improve soil health and to leave this land better than when I started farming it. Programs like this will help provide better educational tools and resources for adoption of conservation and water quality



COURTESY PHOTO

The Mark Recker farm in Fayette County finds gains in conservation efforts.

practices."

SAVINGS

From a cost-benefit standpoint, conservation measures are ideal tools for improving a farmer's bottom line, Gleason noted.

"Since yield monitors, it's easier to see what parts of the field are performing better than others, and that creates opportunities for adjustments, or maybe they need to do some soil building or something like that to improve

that situation," he said.

Retailers are getting a lot more involved, as well, he said.

"It used to be product sales and pounds of fertilizer were what they were looking at; now, they're looking at servicing the customer," Gleason said, listing cover crops and crop termination tools among those services.

"It's going to cost you more to produce less, so you might reduce inputs and become more efficient," Gleason

"Iowans are all in the same boat. We all depend on good water and strong soils for economic prosperity and improved quality of life."

Wayne Fredericks

said. "Efficiency leads to profitability, and efficiency in fertilizer application is a water-quality benefit."

The Iowa Soybean Association has been active in water and soil conservation as well.

Wayne Fredericks, the association's president and a farmer from Osage, recently praised recommendations from Iowa's Soil and Water Future Task Force to improve the environment.

"They are in keeping with Iowa Soybean Association policy supporting the creation of dedicated and reliable funding for implementing the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy," Fredericks said. "They also underscore the importance of collaboration by emphasizing public and private partnerships, an approach long championed and exemplified by Iowa's soybean farmers and their association."

The report adds momentum to programs that prioritize making "gener-

ational improvements" in Iowa's land and water resources.

"Iowans are all in the same boat," he said. "We all depend on good water and strong soils for economic prosperity and improved quality of life. We are hopeful that the task force's recommendations return attention to the individuals and organizations truly committed to providing constructive, sensible and practical solutions to improving our water and soils."

Wulf said his organization is one of a number leading the effort by scheduling regular field days to educate farmers on what they can do to preserve soil and water quality and save money in the long term.

"I think field days are great opportunities," he said. "We like to have them hosted by producers if possible. I think producers feel more comfortable and open to going to events if they're at their neighbors' place."

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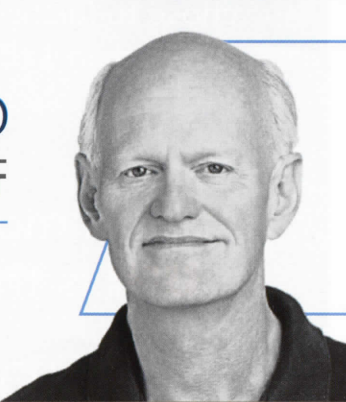
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