

Orlan Love



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Updated: 30 December 2013 | 10:52 am in [Health](#)

Nutrient reduction strategy set to enter next phase

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Eight watershed demonstration projects covering 606,000 acres have been selected to receive \$4.1 million in funding through the Iowa water quality initiative over the next three years.

The projects — the next phase in the state's nutrient reduction strategy — will familiarize farmers with effective means to curb the excess runoff of nitrogen and phosphorus that is polluting water from Iowa to the Gulf of Mexico, said Matt Lechtenberg, water quality initiative coordinator with the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship.

Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey said the demonstration projects will encourage more farmers to adopt water quality practices.

In the initial phase, the state provided \$2.8 million in cost-share funding this fall to help farmers implement nutrient reduction practices — mostly cover crops — on their farms.

The eight watershed projects were selected not only on their ability to cut pollution but also on their “outreach potential,” said Lechtenberg, who was appointed to the post in October.

“We’re going to plug some leaks” in Iowa’s inherently porous agriculture system “and show others how to do it,” he said.

“This may be our last chance to make voluntary conservation work. We have to start bringing down the volume of nutrients leaving farm fields,” said Corey Meyer, who is coordinating one of the projects targeting four Turkey River tributaries, primarily in Winneshiek County.

In addition to the \$4.1 million in state funds, the projects will generate another \$8 million in matching funds to support water quality improvements.

The eight projects, selected from 17 applications, are within the large priority watersheds prioritized by the Iowa Water Resources Coordinating Council. Five of the eight are in Eastern Iowa — two on the middle Cedar River, two on the Turkey River and one on the Skunk.

“We’re not reinventing the wheel. We are developing demonstration plots that will showcase practices that work,” said Meyer, a watershed coordinator for the Winneshiek County Soil and Water Conservation District, the lead agency for westernmost of the two Turkey River projects, which has been awarded a \$498,000 grant.

Meyer said Northeast Iowa Community College in Calmar, located within one of the targeted watersheds, will serve as a hub for highlighting project components.

Through field days and other promotional means, farmers will be able to make informed decisions on the practices that will work best for them, he said.

For the other Turkey River project, the state has awarded \$207,000 to help demonstrate nutrient reduction systems in two tributaries in northern Clayton County.

Project coordinator Eric Palas said goals include establishing 1,500 acres of cover crops, motivating 20 farmers to adopt no-till systems on continuous corn and building 20,000 feet of terraces on slopes near Roberts and Silver creeks.

“By demonstrating these practices, proving their effectiveness and promoting their benefits, landowners and farm operators throughout northeast Iowa will be motivated to adopt sustainable nutrient reduction systems for their farms,” Palas said.

As with most of the eight projects, an initiative on Miller Creek, a Cedar River tributary in Black Hawk County, focuses on “education, encouragement and engagement of producers and operators to get their buy-in to conservation as their going-forward business operating model,” said Jeri Thornsberry, chairwoman of the Black Hawk County Soil and Water Conservation District.

The Miller Creek project, which intends to reduce nutrient loss on 16,000 acres in a 42,461-acre watershed, has been awarded \$499,530 for a project with an estimated cost of \$751,501.

“We are putting a lot of emphasis on getting early adopters to demonstrate which practices work best in varying field conditions,” she said.

A \$468,000 grant has been awarded to the other middle Cedar River project, which targets seed corn producers in Benton and Tama counties.

“They typically harvest a lot earlier than regular corn growers and leave behind less residue, which makes their fields more vulnerable to erosion,” said project coordinator Jim Brown.

Cover crops will be the main focus on 7,000 targeted acres, he said.

The fifth Eastern Iowa project has been awarded a \$484,250 grant to develop and promote proven nutrient reduction practices along the West Fork of Crooked Creek, a Skunk River tributary in Washington and Keokuk counties.

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