

Think different

Iowa farmer Blake Hollis knows:

- ▶ Improving water quality is a learning process, and every field is different.
- ▶ The vast majority of farmers want to be good citizens and good neighbors.
- ▶ There is a segment of farmers who will need “the stick rather than the carrot” to truly motivate them.

Get proactive on water quality

Iowa farmers, ag organizations and cities learn to partner and find solutions.

By Jim Ruen

Iowa farmer Blake Hollis prefers to be part of the water quality solution. While the Des Moines Water Works lawsuit on farm-sourced nitrogen in watersheds that lead to the Raccoon River has drawn controversy, efforts to the east where Hollis farms are drawing praise — and money.

This spring, the Middle Cedar Partnership Project (MCP) announced a \$4.3 million effort focused on doing more of what Hollis, a Waterloo, Iowa, area farmer, and others in his local watershed are doing already.

“This year we planted cover crops,

did some pattern tiling, and installed some tile drain water-level regulators and a denitrification bioreactor,” says Hollis. “We’re also experimenting with different forms of nitrogen management, and converted some fields from 20-inch rows with minimum tillage back to 30-inch rows with strip till.”

While Hollis admits to an innate desire to save soil, that wasn’t the driving force in trying all these practices. “The local Natural Resources Conservation Service office pulled together a group of producers from our Miller Creek Watershed for input on how to initiate change,” recalls Hollis. “They said they see the threat of regulations on the horizon and wondered if we were willing to participate proactively, rather than sit back and wait for dictates.”

Farmer’s voice important

As a hog producer, Hollis has been down the regulatory road before with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources and experienced both the carrot and the stick. He took the message seriously and decided he would rather get involved and have a voice in what has become the Miller Creek Water Quality Improvement Project.

The 42,421-acre project that covers two adjacent watersheds has a three-year goal of establishing 4,500 acres of cover crops, 4,000 acres of no-till, 18 acres of buffer strips and three drainage-water management systems. Intensive monitoring, including nitrate and phosphate sampling of tile water by the Iowa Soybean Association’s Environmental Programs and Services, will estab-



Farmers participating in soil and water conservation demonstration projects share and showcase their practices at field days such as this Cedar River Watershed Coalition Bus Tour. The Middle Cedar Partnership Project has pulled together \$4.3 million in grants to leverage such watershed efforts to encourage farmers to improve water quality and reduce runoff voluntarily.

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