



Louis Beck, second from right, discusses his cover crop planting with Henry Shepard, left, Kristi Heffelmeier and Nick Meier on Beck's farm in the Miller Creek watershed. Conservation practices are flourishing in the watershed, which is in southern Black Hawk and northern Tama counties, as farmers share real-world knowledge about best management practices. PHOTO / GARY FANDEL

CONSERVATION SPREADS FARM TO FARM

Farmers share knowledge as they boost efforts to improve water quality.

By Dirck Steimel

Around the Miller Creek watershed in northeast Iowa, conservation and water quality knowledge is spreading the tried and true way: neighbor to neighbor, farm to farm in the watershed that feeds into the Cedar River.

Farmers in the 42,000-acre watershed in southern Black Hawk and northern Tama counties are sharing real-world information about the best management for conservation practices, such as cover crops, bioreactors

and saturated buffers. They are comparing their experiences of practices that have worked and haven't, and are sharing knowledge gleaned from seminars and internet research. And they discuss plans for adding additional conservation practices as they continue to take on the challenge of improving water quality and reducing soil loss.

"It's really tough to know everything about these practices just on your own," said Henry Shepard of La Porte City. "That's

why getting support from each other is so important."

Nick Meier, also of La Porte City, agreed. "It's tough to try these things because they are all pretty new. So you need support from your neighbors," he said.

Louis Beck, a high school ag instructor who farms at the headwaters of Miller Creek, said peer-to-peer information sharing is essential. "It's really important to have others to

■ SEE MILLER CREEK ON PAGE 2

MILLER CREEK

■ FROM PAGE 1

talk to and to see what worked and what didn't," he said.

Local experiences of how different conservation practices are working helps convince both farmers and others of the value of conservation practices, said Kristi Heffelmeier of Buckingham, who farms with her father, Chris Foss.

"We have other people to check information and experiences against, which is really important when you are trying new things," Heffelmeier said. "And it also helps us to talk with our landlords about conservation measures. If they hear about other farmers trying conservation practices, they are usually more receptive."

The farmer-to-farmer approach to spreading the adoption of conservation practices is working in the Miller Creek watershed, said Shane Wulf, project coordinator of the Miller Creek Water Quality Improvement Project. "We have a lot of farmers who have stepped up to be champions of conservation and water quality," he said. "And that's helped us get engagement from a broad range of farmers, along with agribusinesses and others in the community."

Backed with funding and expertise from state and other sources, the approach is also

working around the state, conservation officials say. The most recent report on the progress of the state's water quality initiative, which is focused on implementing the practices outlined in the



Wulf

Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy, showed that the initiative reached more than 54,000 attendees at field days, informa-

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SHANE WULF

tion meetings and other events to spread the word on conservation.

GAINS ACROSS THE STATE

Those events have spurred significant gains in conservation practices across Iowa. Farmers planted cover crops on 760,000 acres during the fall of 2017, almost 22 percent more acres than a year earlier, according to a new survey by the Iowa Learning Farms. The Iowa Nutrient

Strategy's annual report also found a six-fold gain in the acres covered by Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) wetlands since 2011, as well as significant gains in other conservation practices.

That momentum to adopt conservation and water quality practices has been very apparent in the Miller Creek watershed, one of 16 projects around Iowa that have been established by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship to help spread conservation knowledge and practices.

Farmers and landowners in the Miller Creek watershed have

planted cover crops on some 20 percent of all acres in the watershed, well beyond the demonstration project's goal, Wulf said. Several farmers have also installed bioreactors or saturated buffers, and some are looking at building wetlands, he said.

In fact, farmers in the Miller Creek watershed are implementing conservation practices so quickly that their efforts are outgrowing the amount of local, state and federal funds available

for cost share, Wulf said during a press conference at the Iowa Capitol led by Gov. Kim Reynolds and then-Iowa Agriculture Secretary Bill Northey.

MIDDLE CEDAR PARTNERSHIP

The Miller Creek watershed is also part of the Middle Cedar Partnership. In the partnership, the city of Cedar Rapids is working with local conservation partners, farmers and landowners to install best management practices such as cover crops, nutrient management, wetlands and saturated buffers to help improve water quality, water

quantity and soil health in the Cedar River watershed, where it draws a portion of its drinking water.

Wulf, who became coordinator for the Miller Creek demonstration project soon after it was formed in 2014, said enthusiasm for conservation and water quality continues to grow in the watershed as neighbors see the success of the early adapters. The drive to improve soil health and concern about tough-to-control weeds have also spurred more interest in cover crops and other conservation practices.

TRADE

■ FROM PAGE 1

Reynolds said.

"Iowa has benefited from our long-standing relationship with China by establishing new and expanded opportunities for not only our ag commodities (and) feed ingredients, but our agricultural equipment as well," she said.

The governor said she has also shared her concerns with U.S. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue and former Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad, now serving as U.S. ambassador to China.

The Trump administration is working on a plan to mitigate the impacts of market disruptions that may negatively impact farmers due to the trade dispute, although details are still being worked out, she said.

"I can just tell you they're working on it and that the secretary's assurance to me is that it can be done through USDA," Reynolds said. "They don't want (farmers) to be a casualty in this trade dispute."

Restrictions on farm aid were lifted during the recently passed omnibus appropriations bill, but U.S. congressional leaders said any relief package would be tricky to implement in an equitable manner for farmers across the country.

FARMERS WANT MARKETS

Farmers simply want open markets and the opportunity to sell their products on a level

playing field, said Gregg Hora, president of the Iowa Pork Producers Association and a Webster County Farm Bureau member.

"We hope that we would



Hora

continue to have open relationships with trade so that we can continue to move our excess pork products and soybean products overseas," he said. "Iowa pig farmers look forward to helping tackle the challenges that we can impact in these difficult times and decisions with outcomes that we, hopefully, will all be proud of."

Farmers recognize there are legitimate trade issues with China's theft of intellectual property, but are hopeful that the dispute can be resolved without targeting food, said Iowa Soybean Association President Bill Shipley of Nodaway. He invited Trump to visit his farm during the upcoming planting season to see first-hand how trade worries are affecting Iowa farmers.

"China's proposal to add tariffs to soybeans adds to uncertainty U.S. farmers face right now as we head into this planting season," Shipley said. "If allowed to take hold, it could jeopardize the ability of U.S. farmers to do business in China for generations. Trade wars involving food are lose-lose."

GEARING UP TO PLANT



Steve Kuiper, a Marion County Farm Bureau member, took advantage of a rare warm day to apply anhydrous ammonia last week on a field near Knoxville. Kuiper was one of the few Iowa farmers able to do field work, as continued cool and wet conditions kept most farmers out of the fields. PHOTO / GARY FANDEL

HOUSE PASSES UPDATED SAVE MEASURE

Tax proposals continue to make their way through the legislative process. Along with a reduction of tax rates, Farm Bureau will continue to focus on key components of the tax reform discussions including: Section 179 asset expensing and the qualified business income deduction pass-through. In addition, Farm Bureau will work to protect tax credits important to agriculture.

House File 2481, which would extend SAVE (Secure an Advanced Vision for Education), the statewide school infrastructure sales tax, passed the House



ISSUE UPDATE

and was sent to the Senate. The bill states that a portion of SAVE revenues would be required to go to the Property Tax Equity Relief fund as well as increasing the foundation percentage for property tax relief.

The bill would terminate current Revenue Purpose Statements in 2030 (except for bonding debt) and would require new Revenue Purpose Statements to be passed for uses that cur-

rently must be approved by voters. Additionally, any projects funded by SAVE that include an athletic facility would require a public hearing and be subject to a reverse referendum. Farm Bureau will work with legislators on changes to SAVE.

The House Ways and Means Committee passed House File 495, designed to help beginning farmers by extending the ag assets transfer tax credit for taxpayers renting or leasing land to qualified beginning farmers. Farm Bureau supports the measure, which now goes to the House floor.

E15

■ FROM PAGE 1

the primary driving season in the United States. Renewable fuel advocates have strongly criticized the E15 restrictions.

Iowa lawmakers who attended the April 12 meeting with Trump, including Gov. Kim Reynolds and Sens. Charles Grassley and Joni Ernst, also applauded Trump's comments on E15.

While they cheered Trump's

plan to allow year-round E15 sales, renewable fuel advocates vowed to defend the Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS) by pressuring the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to stop granting compliance exemptions to refineries. "President Trump's announcement that he will direct EPA to allow the sale of E15 year-round is welcome news, but EPA's practice of giving away secret hardship waivers to the country's biggest oil refining companies needs to stop," Grassley said.