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Cover Crop Benefits, Challenges Explored at Field Day

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Area producers who gathered at Louis and Pat Beck's farm in rural Buckingham to learn more about cover crops last week discovered there is no magic formula or recipe that guarantees results from one farm to the next.

In his introductory remarks, Beck was candid about his work with the conservation practice the past two years, describing himself as an "avid student" of cover crops. Like many of the farmers gathered at the Field Day sponsored by Iowa Learning Farms and the Miller Creek Water Quality Improvement Project, Beck's motivation to work with cover crops stems from a desire to improve soil health,

reduce erosion and nutrient runoff, as well as to preserve the land that has been in his family for more than 100 years. The Becks are in a unique position in that Miller Creek originates on their land. While the nitrate runoff levels measured at that location register somewhere in the “middle of the pack,” Beck stated, “We can do better.”

Using cover crops as a nutrient reduction strategy on the hilly terrain that feeds into the watershed, Beck admitted he was disappointed with the amount of growth his cover crops have achieved since they were planted in late August. While disappointed, Beck is far from discouraged, noting that while there is a lot to learn about the conservation strategy, he is committed to making it work.

As the Field Day participants got a closer look an applicator equipped with a 120-foot boom, Blake Hollis of Lanehaven Farms addressed the number of variables that impact cover crop results. Seed-to-soil contact, solar penetration and the timing of the application of cover crops are all factors that can affect growth of the stand. Producers also need to consider what kind of seed mixture is best for their operation, as a crop that naturally terminates in winter presents different management than a perennial crop terminated via herbicide.

Simply stated, he said, “There is still much to learn.”

Area producers interested in learning more about cover crops and other conservation practices designed to improve the quality of Iowa’s water are encouraged to contact Shane Wulf, Coordinator of the Miller Creek Water Quality Improvement Project at 319-296-3262, extension 305. For the latest information about the Project’s events, visit the Miller Creek Water Quality Improvement Project’s Facebook page.