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Broken Clouds



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Governor sees farmers' water quality improvements

Jean Caspers-Simmet, simmet@agrinews.com May 3, 2016



DYSART — Gov. Terry Branstad saw what farmers in the Middle Cedar Partnership Project are doing to protect water quality during a Soil and Water Conservation Week tour.

Branstad visited Valley Lane Farms near Dysart last week. The farm is operated by John and Kathy Weber and their son, Brian. With pouring rain outside, a group of 30 met in the machine shed to talk about accomplishments.

The Benton/Tama Nutrient Reduction Demonstration Project and the Miller Creek Water Quality Improvement Project are two Middle Cedar partners.



John Weber took Branstad on a brief driving tour to see their rye cover crop and their saturated buffer. Tile water is diverted through a control structure into a perforated tile that seeps into a CRP native grass buffer along Rock Creek. The native grass removes nitrate from the tile water before it flows into the creek. Iowa State University is monitoring nitrate removal.

Weber sees the saturated buffer as a relatively inexpensive nitrate removal method, and he's considering installing another one.

The Webers raise seed corn and seed beans as well as conventional corn and soybeans, and contract finish hogs for Cargill Pork. Brian runs a Pioneer seed dealership. Weber is president of the National Pork Producers Council.

They're in the "Pioneer triangle" between Dysart, Reinbeck and Toledo where a lot of seed corn is grown, Weber said. Because it's harvested earlier than conventional corn, there is an extra month in the fall to grow cover crops.

"We've had a great opportunity to experiment with cover crops," Weber said. "We get good fall growth, which protects our soil."

The Webers spray herbicide on cover crops in spring and then no-till drill soybeans.

"That's the easy part," Weber said. "Cover crops in conventional tillage is a little more challenging with a shorter season."

Grassed waterways, buffer strips and changes in nitrogen applications are other practices employed by the Webers.

"We're firm believers in the voluntary approach of the nutrient reduction strategy," Weber said. "Farmers do need incentives to try new technologies, but long-term it doesn't need to become an entitlement program for agriculture. Farmers are very competitive, and when they see their neighbors having success, it spreads."

Weber is amazed at the growth in cover crops and other water quality improvement practices in his watershed.

Three years into the nutrient reduction strategy, Branstad is encouraged by what he's seen.

"I'm trying to learn as much as I can," Branstad said. "There's nothing like getting out and seeing first hand how things work."

The governor's top legislative priority this session was to provide long-term, reliable funding for the nutrient reduction strategy. Unfortunately, legislators failed to agree on a proposal.

"We recognize farmers can do a lot but there needs to be incentives especially for things that really benefit water quality but don't necessarily provide a lot of benefits to farmers themselves," Branstad said.

Shannon Mitchell, coordinator of the Benton/Tama project, said the watershed includes 92,000 acres in the Pratt Creek, Rock Creek and part of Wolf Creek watersheds.

"We have a lot of innovation," Mitchell said. "A couple of guys converted their hi-boy sprayers to plant cover crops in the fall. Farmers in the area are leading the state if not the nation in their conservation practice adoption."

Dysart farmer Al Schafbuch, installed a saturated buffer system with three control structures controlling nitrates the entire width of his field. A cover crop proponent, Schafbuch brought pictures showing how he planted corn into a rye cover crop this spring.

Shane Wulf, Miller Creek Water Quality Improvement Project coordinator, told Branstad about the 42,000-acre watershed project in Black Hawk County. Saturated buffers and bioreactors have been installed and many acres of cover crops, no-till, strip-till and nitrogen management practices implemented. The project has done edge of field tile water monitoring as well as Haney soil health testing. A four-acre prairie strip has been installed.

"It's not like nothing happened before our project was here," Wulf said. "There were thousands of acres no-till and strip-till established. This has been going on for a long time. We're just increasing the speed of implementation."

Both Mitchell and Wulf are excited to be part of the Middle Cedar Partnership Project with Cedar Rapids and other partners to improve water quality on the Cedar River.

Branstad praised Cedar Rapids' efforts to work with watershed farmers.

"It makes sense to work in a collaborative, cooperative way," Branstad said. "What bothers me about the Des Moines Water Works attacking three little northwest Iowa counties is that it divides people and creates controversy. What you're doing in this area is what we want to encourage throughout the state."

It was an honor to have Branstad visit his farm, Weber said.

"All of Iowa agriculture needs to be proud of the leadership by this governor, Iowa secretary of agriculture Bill Northey and U.S. ag secretary Tom Vilsack. They advocate for agriculture."