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UPSTREAM solutions

Farmers, city
partner to
improve water

By Corey Munson

Iowa Farmer Today

LA PORTE CITY, Iowa — Standing in a field surrounded by other fields as far as the eye can see, it's easy to forget how quickly runoff makes its way to the out-of-sight rivers and streams that jog through farm country.

Their presence, however, is not lost on Nick Meier, who farms near La Porte City, Iowa, in the Middle Cedar River watershed. He is part of a growing

See page 3: **Partner** ▶



IFT photo by Corey Munson

Nick Meier, who farms in the Middle Cedar River watershed north of Cedar Rapids, works with the city as part of the Middle Cedar Partnership Project, which helps farmers and landowners install best management practices.

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Measuring PROGRESS

Watershed project leaders see bump in cover crop use, interest

By Jeff DeYoung

Iowa Farmer Today

Watching a new project come together is pretty exciting, says Lee Gravel.

"It's so rewarding to go out and work with an individual and to see them try a new practice, and then ask what they can do next," he says.

Gravel serves as watershed coordinator for the Buena Vista and Pocahontas Soil and Water Conservation District in northwest Iowa. He coordinates the Headwaters of the North Raccoon Water Quality Improvement Project and was recently named 2018 Iowa Watershed Coordinator of the Year by the Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance.

The project, which began in April 2015, covers 100,000 acres

primarily in Buena Vista and Pocahontas counties, with a few acres in Clay and Palo Alto counties as well.

Gravel began working with the project in September 2016.

He says the project basically utilizes all practices outlined in the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy. Those include no-till, strip tillage, saturated buffers, cover crops, bioreactors and wetlands, he says.

Gravel says educating farmers and landowners about the program has been successful.

"We've done a lot of outreach and field days and other things to educate people about the projects and what's available to them," he says. "Once the stakeholders in the watershed see the benefit of a certain practice, they are more than willing to try something new, and to learn



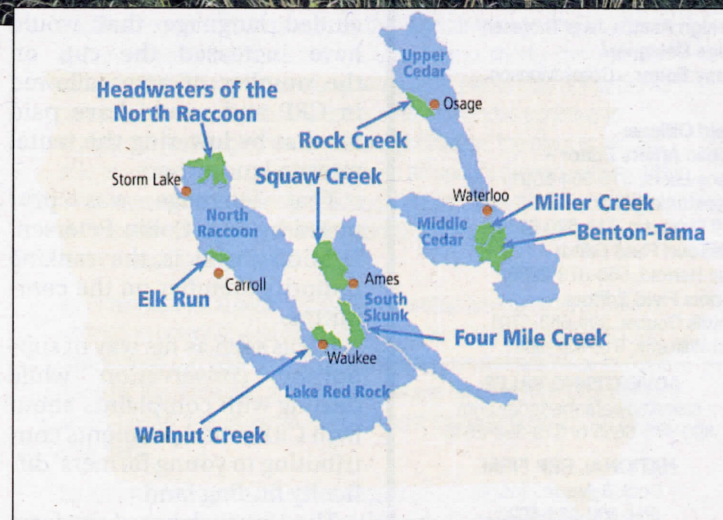
Photo courtesy Lee Gravel

Lee Gravel serves as coordinator of the Headwaters of the North Raccoon River watershed project, which includes about 100,000 acres in northwest Iowa.

about the management that's involved."

For example, Gravel says roughly 9 percent of the watershed's acres have been planted to cover crops. The watershed also has a high rate of edge-of-field practices, primarily

See page 6: **Watershed** ▶



Map courtesy Iowa Ag Water Alliance

▶ Partner: From page 1

number of farmers working with local governments and regional water authorities to reduce nitrates in municipal water supplies.

"I started no-till about 30 years ago and went to strip tilling a few years after that," Meier said. "When we had heavy rains, it really bothered me to see the soil loss. I wanted to try to change that. Once you see that soil go, it's gone forever."

In addition to strip tilling, Meier also uses cover crops on his fields to improve soil structure and reduce runoff. On the edge of his fields he installed bioreactors and saturated buffers.

He also sits on the Miller Creek Watershed board, a waterway that feeds into the Cedar River. The Cedar then runs downstream about 60 miles through Iowa's second largest city, Cedar Rapids. The city's well lies close to the Cedar and is affected by what's in

the water. Nitrates are a major concern.

The Middle Cedar Partnership Project — of which Meier is a partner with the city — works 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.

"When you marry the two local initiatives, you see a holistic approach to what we're doing here," said Tariq Baloch, manager of the Cedar Rapids Water Utility Plant.

Baloch said his team is addressing water quality issues in several ways, including reducing the quantity of contaminants in the river by slowing water runoff.

"The No. 1 partner in all this are the producers and land owners up stream," Baloch said. "As we help them, we'll see

gradual improvement."

Two key events encouraged action of this issue. In 2008, Cedar Rapids experienced major flooding from the Cedar River, which impacted much of the center of the city. And in 2015, the Des Moines Waterworks attempted to take three north-central Iowa counties to court in hopes of forcing them to reduce nitrate runoff from area fields.

Both served as learning experiences for the city, Baloch said. He said one goal of the MCPP is to work with farmers and landowners, rather than litigating the issue.

"In my opinion, there was some skepticism from our neighbors to the north," Baloch said. "We had to communicate properly — wanted to show we were there to help."

MCPP launched as a five-year initiative in 2015. Meier receives financial and technical support for many of his conservation efforts through MCPP and

other regional programs.

"Without funding from these projects, I'd still practice strip till, but I wouldn't use cover crops," Meier said. "Since the economy is so tight, I would not be able to put in cover crops because, depending on what species you use, it can get kind of expensive."

Baloch said as of now the program's funds are fully invested, meaning it's ahead of schedule and not accepting new participants. This is a good thing, he said.

What will happen after this program ends in 2020 is still unclear. For now Baloch is focused on the present.

"We value our friends in the ag sector," he said. "It's important that if there's any need for data, there are staff here in Cedar Rapids to continue the outreach and continue the education. We appreciate that farmers need to do certain things to remain viable, but we think there's a balance to be struck."