



Conservation Agronomists: Setting the Standard for the Future

The term conservation agronomist is not common in the agriculture industry, but ACWA members are advocating for it to become a standard position in Iowa ag retail businesses.

With the Farm to River Partnership Water Quality Initiative (WQI), managed by ACWA, the position of conservation agronomist was vital to the project's success. This position pivots from the traditional field agronomist staff found at most ag retailers. The conservation agronomist carries the same knowledge as field agronomists, but they focus their time on environmental agriculture issues such as nutrient runoff and erosion control.

"The topic of conservation practices is exploding this year in regular conversations," says Michael Fritch, western Iowa conservation agronomist with Heartland Cooperative. "Iowa Agriculture Secretary Mike Naig is really promoting cover crops and edge of field practices. And we're available if a farmer wants more information about them."

There are several conservation agronomists working across state and in different capacities. Fritch and fellow conservation agronomist Ruth McCabe are employed at Heartland Cooperative, one of the first ag retailers to include the position as part of the staff.

"For Heartland Cooperative to come out and say 'we want you to be part of our employee base,' I think it bodes well for the cooperative system," says Fritch. "We provide a

service to our growers. It's been a challenge to figure out what this looks like, but it's working out very nice. I think this will be a solid position in the future."

The other conservation agronomists are Ryan Johnson, who works for Iowa Soybean Association and is embedded with Ag Partners in northwest Iowa; and Joseph Wuebker is with the Farm to River Partnership. He works with Landus Cooperative, NEW Cooperative and Nutrien Ag Solutions offices in Sac, Calhoun, Carroll and Greene counties.

ACWA is no stranger to innovative concepts. The organization of ag retailers have kept water quality a priority for more than 20 years and have overseen stream monitoring for nitrate since 1999. ACWA introduced the conservation agronomist concept to the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) as part of the Farm to River Partnership and it was met with a willingness to experiment with the position.

"We've altered and molded this position as the Farm to River Partnership continued and I believe we've arrived at a good place," says Roger Wolf, ACWA executive director. "The ag retailers involved in the project contributed their ideas as well to help evolve this position and other ACWA members are coming on-board. IDALS is discovering how valuable conservation agronomists are becoming."

The conservation agronomists are getting their feet wet — all were hired in the fall of 2020 — and they have been busy building relationships with the agronomists they work with, county NRCS and Soil and Water Conservation



Ruth McCabe



District (SWCD) staff, and farmers. But the Covid-19 pandemic has made this more difficult.

“Because of the Covid environment, I’ve not been able to get out easily and meet people,” says Johnson. “The Ag Partners offices have been open by appointment only. But I’ve managed to have more than 150 conversations with farmers either over the phone or in person, however they feel most comfortable.”

And each of conservation agronomists have been well-received by farmers. McCabe, who concentrates on eastern Iowa, says the farmers she’s been in touch with have been very excited about her position and has received only positive feedback.

Johnson approaches the concept of adding a conservation practice slowly with some of the farmers who have been less eager to try.

“Cover crops is a simple one to start with,” Johnson says, “as there have been articles in almost every ag publication around. So, I suggest planting cover crops in a wash-out area where they’ve seen some erosion problems, just to introduce the concept onto their farm.”

These four professionals are setting a precedent for how ag retailers may work in the future. McCabe and Fritch are literally writing the manual on how to make this new relationship work.

“Heartland Coop has a goal of creating a framework that we can present to other cooperatives on how to make the conservation agronomist position viable and valuable,” says McCabe. “Michael and I are fleshing that out

now. Every week there’s something new we can do or a new potential partnership to explore.”

All of the conservation agronomists see the potential for these positions to stick. Ag retailers could become the one-stop shop for their customers’ needs. When a producer can turn to the same resource for seed, fertilizer, and conservation practice expertise, it could build trust and peace of mind.

“As a former retail agronomist, I know the workload they have,” says Johnson. “We’re helping to take some of the burden off their shoulders. The staff agronomists have someone trustworthy to turn to with questions about conservation practices they may not be as familiar with, and I can help them understand why it’s important — it helps us all.”

McCabe has had a similar experience. She has built a great rapport with her agronomists, communicating with them regularly.

“They tell me if a grower has a question, and I provide answers and materials to help them; or they set up a meeting with me and the grower, or I contact the grower directly,” says McCabe. “The agronomists and I communicate a lot, so there’s never a surprise when I contact a grower.”

Whatever the model for the conservation agronomist — an ag retail employee, staffed through an external or non-profit agency, or even a self-employed consultant — this position will be integral to bridge the relationship between agriculture and the environment to increase farmer profitability, improve soil health and water quality.



Photo: Joseph L. Murphy/Iowa Soybean Association