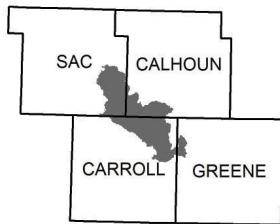




Farm to River Partnership

The Farm to River Partnership, a nearly \$3 million Iowa Water Quality Initiative (WQI), began in 2018 to increase conservation farming practices on the land for improved water quality in the North Raccoon River watershed.



The project area covers Sac, Calhoun, Carroll and Greene counties, with the goals of adding cover crops to 11,500 acres, edge-of-field practice installation including 15 bioreactors and 15 saturated buffers, and construction of two targeted wetlands.

The Farm to River Partnership uses a unique approach to helping farmers implement conservation practices by collaborating with NEW Cooperative, Nutrien Ag Solutions and Landus Cooperative and their agronomists located within the project area. The WQI project is administered by Agriculture's Clean Water Alliance (ACWA), an organization of ag retailers and support companies — including the three involved in this project — that collaborate to improve water quality in the North Raccoon River watershed.

Current progress for 2020 includes more than 6,300 new acres of cover crops enrolled. The goal of 11,500 new cover crop acres was met last year, with more than 7,000 new acres enrolled in 2019.

A total of eight edge-of-field practices have been installed, with three more to be completed. Edge-of-field practice goals have been slower to achieve, but the processes for installing a bioreactor or saturated buffer are also more involved. The edge-of-field practices are 100 percent paid through the Farm to River Partnership. The good news for farmers interested in these kinds of practices is this project helps coordinate all the pieces for getting the work done, including siting and design expertise and coordinating financial assistance paperwork.

Proving water quality improvement

One of ACWA's long-standing accomplishments is water monitoring of streams and edge-of-field locations, which continued this summer at 20 sites in the project area. Since the Farm to River Partnership launched in 2018, there has been a steady decline in nitrogen concentrations. As aggregate water samples were reviewed from the area over last decade, a positive indication is showing nitrogen concentration levels are reducing to lower than the early declines in 2008-2010.

New personnel and work protocols

Conservation Agronomist Joseph Wuebker joined the Farm to River Partnership in August and immediately began to work toward the project goals. It has been a challenge trying to conduct visits and meetings during the Covid-19 pandemic, but Wuebker is making it work.



"In my outreach to farmers, landowners and ag retail staff, I'm adjusting to their level of comfort," Wuebker says. "I'm willing to use formats where people are most comfortable — whether it's in-person with masks and being socially distanced, or over the phone, through a Zoom call, by email or even text messages."

Outlook for the future

The three-year WQI for the Farm to River Partnership with Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) will end in March 2021, but the commitment of those involved remains strong. Several groups have contributed to the Farm to River Partnership in various ways including providing monetary support, communicating news of the project, and hosting meetings. Organizations involved beyond the three ag retailers include: Carroll, Sac, Calhoun and

Greene Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, the Coalition to Support Iowa Farmers, Practical Farmers of Iowa, Iowa Corn Growers Association, Iowa Pork Producers Association, Iowa Cattlemen's Association, Iowa Soybean Association, and Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance (IAWA).

"We want to ensure those who have participated in the Farm to River Partnership maintain and grow their conservation efforts," says Roger Wolf, ACWA executive director. "For example, if they tried cover crops because of this partnership, I hope they expand their usage and even become advocates for conservation agriculture."

Leaders of the organizations involved are beginning to formulate what the future may look like for this key area. The sub-watersheds in the Farm to River Partnership are in the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) area, a national initiative that will begin early next year supported through the Natural Resources Conservation



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Service (NRCS). This will be taken into consideration as future goals take shape.

In the meantime, Wuebker and the ag retailers will continue to search for possible edge-of-field sites and encourage farmer and landowner participation. To discuss possible sites for a bioreactor or saturated buffer, contact Wuebker at: 712-790-1415 or email: jwuebker@iasoybeans.com.

Below: A bioreactor is installed near Lake City as part of the Farm to River Partnership. This edge-of-field practice can remove nitrate from tile-drained water before it travels downstream. The team lays a barrier at the base prior to filling the trench with wood-chips, which is where the denitrification takes place.

