

Clean Water Starts with Us

IN THIS ISSUE:

- 1 Residue Matters campaign reaches out to farmers
- 2 New basin coordinator to assist Des Moines, Raccoon efforts; Apply for funds to repair storm-damaged practices
- 3 Groups testing new planning guidebook
- 4 Time-of-transfer septic law
- 5 New study on water quality and fertilizer bans; Empathetic farmers more likely to no-till; NRCS' nutrient management specialist
- 6 Get people on the water to build local support

clean water
starts with you.

WATERSHED IMPROVEMENT IN IOWA

DNR ♦ DSC ♦ NRCS

FALL 2009

Residue Matters campaign reaches out to farmers to help save time, money and soil

Second in our "economics of conservation" series

A new campaign aims to show farmers the importance of what's left over after harvest by focusing on what's important to them.

value of residue as they make management and tillage decisions.

"In these volatile economic times, knowledge is

tillage.

The goal of the campaign – created by a group of 12 partners (see box below) – is to increase the acres of conservation tillage in 15 northwest Iowa counties by 25 percent within the next five years.

However, watershed groups from across the state can use the campaign's resources.

"When we began preparations for this campaign, we worked with commodity groups and Ag Partners, a co-op based in Albert City, to identify farmers' concerns," said Bill Ehm, DNR water policy coordinator.

Based on that research, the campaign identified soil quality and soil erosion, the value of crop residue, and profitability as the three main issues farmers were asking about in northwest Iowa.

"In response, our main theme is that crop residue saves money, time and soil," Ehm said. "Ag Partners' input ensures that we are

Continued on page 4



The economics of conservation are especially evident in residue and conservation tillage. A new campaign uses research to reach farmers by tailoring messages to what matters most to them.

Call it stover, residue, cobs or stalks – crop residue plays an important role in building soil quality, reducing soil erosion, improving water quality, saving time and increasing long-term profitability.

The "Residue Matters" campaign kicked off this month at the Clay County Fair, urging northwest Iowa producers to consider the

key for crop producers to make the right decisions for both short and long-term profitability," said Bill Northey, the Iowa Secretary of Agriculture. "Knowledge about residue's value and its management can help producers make the right choices for their operation."

The campaign also has value for watershed groups promoting conservation

Residue Matters: resources for watershed efforts

www.residuematters.org

Focus area counties: Buena Vista, Calhoun, Cherokee, Clay, Dickinson, Emmet, Ida, Lyon, O'Brien, Osceola, Palo Alto, Pocahontas, Plymouth, Sac, Sioux

Campaign partners: Ag Partners headquartered in Albert City, the Agribusiness Association of Iowa, Conservation Districts of Iowa, Iowa Certified Crop Advisors, Iowa Corn Growers Association, IDALS-DSC, Iowa DNR, Iowa Environmental Council, Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, Iowa Soybean Association, Iowa State University and USDA-NRCS.

New basin coordinator to assist Des Moines, Raccoon efforts

Watershed groups in the Des Moines and Raccoon River basins will soon have a new resource to help them improve their rivers.

This fall, the DNR will hire a fourth regional basin coordinator to support the watershed improvement partnership between DNR, DSC, NRCS and Soil and Water Conservation Districts.

"Creating and filling this position is the first step toward fulfilling the partnership's vision of expanding the basin coordinator staff and realigning their responsibilities around the ma-

ior basin boundaries within the state, rather than by geopolitical boundaries," said Allen Bonini with the DNR's Watershed Improvement Program.

"This will help reduce the workload and area covered by each of our three existing basin coordinators and reinforces the need to focus on water quality improvement by following the water, not county lines," he added.

A DNR customer service survey in 2008 indicated that watershed project coordinators highly valued basin coordinators' help

in addressing water quality problems and securing funding, but recognized that there were many demands on their time.

"Our customers encouraged expanding these resources to help

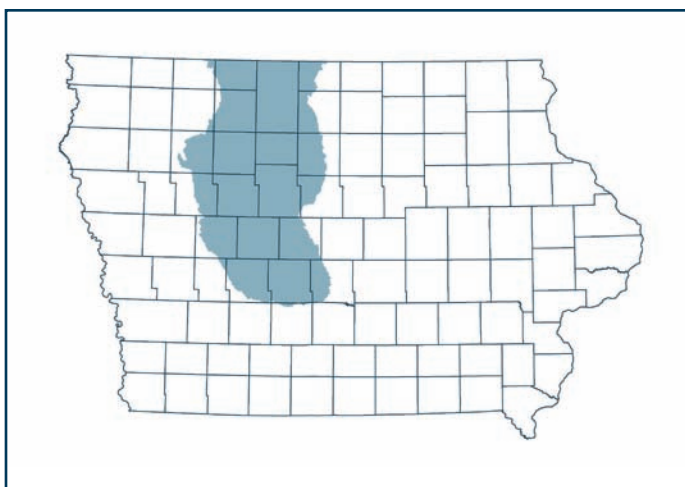
local groups improve their ability to be successful," Bonini said.

When the new basin coordinator starts, he or she will help a yet-to-be-named regional public comprehensive planning organization develop a water quality master plan for the Raccoon River Basin using stimulus funds allocated to Iowa by EPA for water quality planning purposes.

At the same time, the coordinator will support other ongoing and prospective local watershed projects within the Raccoon and Upper Des Moines basins.

The coordinator will be a DNR staff position based in the Wallace Building in Des Moines and will serve the Raccoon and Des Moines river basins upstream of the confluence of the Raccoon and Des Moines rivers.

For more information regarding the new coordinator position, check www.iowadnr.gov/employment/ later this fall.



The new basin coordinator will work with groups in the area shaded at left – the Des Moines and Raccoon basins above the two rivers' confluence.

Apply for funds to repair storm-damaged practices, address flooding

New funding is available from the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) to repair storm-damaged conservation practices and to focus on water quality, flooding and erosion control in targeted watersheds.

"The legislature directed these funds to the Department to address conservation practice repair and watershed projects and we are excited to make the funds available and get projects on the ground that will help improve water quality, reduce erosion and potentially address flooding," said Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey.

Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) can apply for \$3.5 million for watershed projects that

address water quality improvement and/or flood and erosion control. Watershed improvement committees, public water supply utilities, county conservation boards, cities and counties are invited to work with their local district if interested in participating as a partner in applying for funds. The maximum cost share rate for practices will be 75 percent from all sources. The initial project application deadline is Sept. 30.

"A survey we did following the flooding last year showed more than \$40 million in damages to conservation practices across the state and unfortunately there are still projects that need to be repaired," Northey said. "I encourage farmers

with practices that need repair to work with their local Soil and Water Conservation District office."

Individual farmers may apply for the \$3 million set aside for repairing conservation practices that received damage from storm events. Projects damaged during the 2008 flooding as well as other natural disasters are eligible to apply for up to 75 percent of the repair costs. All applications must be submitted to the local SWCD office by Dec. 31. Only repairs of conservation practices, not maintenance, are eligible for funding.

"Each year we have more demand for conservation funding than we have available and hopefully these funds will help address some of the backlog," Northey said.

Groups testing new watershed planning process, guidebook

Solid planning creates a road map for your project, heading you in the right direction, letting you know what's ahead and guiding you when there's a detour. That's why the DNR is working on tools to help watershed projects create the best plans possible.

"Planning is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it now." - Alan Lakein

One tool is the watershed management plan (WMP) guidebook - a step-by-step booklet to help you create a WMP. Four watershed groups are currently taking the guidebook for a test run: Duck Creek in Scott County, Price Creek in Iowa and Benton counties, Rapid Creek in Johnson County and Silver Creek in Clayton County.

These four groups are working with their communities, partners and the DNR to develop goals and a plan for their watersheds.

"Have a plan. Follow the plan, and you'll be surprised how successful you can be." - Paul "Bear" Bryant

Representatives from all four watershed groups met with the DNR in Des Moines, and will provide feedback as they move through the guidebook.

"We've asked these four groups to test the guidebook so we can improve it for the next generation of users as we move forward in the program," said Jeff Berckes with the DNR's Watershed Improvement Program.

"Good plans shape good decisions." - Lester Robert Bittel

It depends on the waterbody and watershed how much time a WMP will take to complete, but three of the test groups should have a working plan in the next year. The fourth will take about 18 months to complete.



Assessing the watershed is just one part of creating a watershed management plan.

With completed plans, the groups can then apply for a DNR Watershed Project Grant (also known as section 319 funds) to launch the project and get practices on the ground. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency requires a WMP to receive 319 funding.

But a WMP is also great asset to launching and maintaining a long-term watershed improvement effort.

"We're talking about water quality problems that are going to take 15 to 20 years to fix in some instances, which is a completely different challenge than a three-year project," said Berckes.

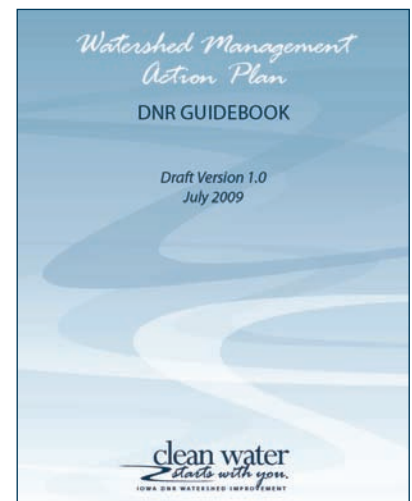
"These are working documents, meant to change and grow over the life of a project, to ensure we're always headed in the right direction," he added.

The planning process starts with creating goals that are important and meaningful to the community and local stakeholders, and determining the problems in the watersheds. It helps create an outreach plan, identify

practices in targeted areas, develop a roadmap to achieving water quality standards and project goals, and sets a timeline.

"By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail." - Benjamin Franklin

Watershed groups interested in creating a WMP for their local lake, river or stream can find assistance with the DNR's Watershed Planning Grants. While this year's applications were due Sept. 1, DNR staff and your regional basin coordinator are always available to answer questions about starting a watershed effort and applying for a planning grant in 2010.



You got to be careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there. YOGI BERRA

New time-of-transfer septic law can help water quality

If you have outdated or illegal septic systems causing problems in your watershed, a new law may help.

As of July 1, with very few exceptions, all homes and buildings using septic systems must pass an inspection prior to finalizing a sale.



“Over time, these inspections will help eliminate the more than 100,000 substandard septic tanks that are piped directly to a ditch or tile line,” said Daniel Olson, DNR’s septic system program manager. “This will help protect people, particularly children,

from coming into contact with raw sewage.”

It can also help improve water quality, as substandard septic tanks can raise bacteria levels and potentially kill fish and other aquatic life, because sewage uses up oxygen as it breaks down in a stream.

What the new law does

The law will ensure that septic systems have both a septic tank, and a functioning leach field, sand filter or other treatment device. Systems that do not have treatment following the septic tank are not grandfathered in. Instead, they must be upgraded when the property is transferred.

“For watershed projects addressing bacterial or nutrient-related impairments at least partially caused by inadequate septic systems, project coordinators should promote this new law and the low-interest loan program to help replace those systems,” said Steve Hopkins of the DNR’s Watershed Improvement Program.

“Rural homeowners often discount the pollution caused by their own septic system until they receive some education,” added Hopkins, also a former county sanitarian, “even if their system discharges untreated waste to a ditch, gully or even a well.”

Watershed groups and project

coordinators can encourage homeowners with septic systems in their watershed to have their tank inspected. Even if they aren’t planning on selling their home in the near future, they may want to address it now.

Low-interest loans available

Watershed groups may also want to promote funding assistance from the DNR’s Onsite Wastewater Systems Assistance Program (OSWAP) available for homeowners looking to upgrade inadequate septic systems.

Lenders issue the loans at interest rates of 3 percent or less, for amounts of between \$2,000 and \$10,000, for a maximum repayment period of 10 years. As of August 2009, Iowa had made 892 OSWAP loans in 78 counties for a total of \$6.1 million.

Olson advises homeowners to schedule an inspection with a certified inspector early in the sale process. If the system needs upgrading, it will not delay the sale but could affect the selling price as upgrades are negotiated.

There are some exemptions to the inspections: transfer from parent to child or between joint tenants, and in divorce settlements or foreclosures. For other exemptions and more information, including a list of certified inspectors, check

www.iowadnr.gov/tot.html.

DATES TO REMEMBER

Oct. 1: Section 319 data report due for project coordinators

Oct. 2: IDALS-DSC watershed development and planning assistance grant applications due

Oct. 15: Quarterly reports due for project coordinators

Residue Matters campaign kicks off

Continued from page 1

meeting farmers’ needs and that they can go to private and public sources for technical information.”

Producers can get more information from their local USDA-NRCS center, SWCD office or their local Iowa State University Extension office. They can also talk with their Ag Partners’ agronomist.

Or, they can go directly to

www.residuematters.org for more detailed information and research publications.

Watershed coordinators and groups can also use the resources on the website – fact sheets, decision making tools, online tools, research data and more – when they’re talking to landowners about conservation tillage.

New study shows better water quality follows lawn fertilizer ban

Communities around the country have been restricting the use of lawn fertilizers with phosphorus in recent years, claiming fish kills, algae blooms and other problems result when the phosphorus washes into streams, lakes and rivers.

But until now, there was no real evidence to show those bans were making an impact.

A University of Michigan study published this August shows that phosphorus levels in the Huron River dropped an average of 28 percent after Ann Arbor adopted a 2006 ordinance that reduced phosphorus use on lawns.

Michigan soil is naturally high in



phosphorus, so fertilizing established lawns with the nutrient is usually unnecessary, according to the university.

Using statistical models, Michigan professor John Lehman determined how much sampling was needed to detect a 25 percent decrease in phos-

phorus concentrations.

"We came up with the result that for most of the river that runs through Ann Arbor, we should be able to detect a change of that magnitude by sampling once a week for one summer or two summers, depending on the sampling station."

After the first year of data collection, it was clear that phosphorus concentrations were lower than before the ordinance went into effect. However, public outreach efforts and increased environmental awareness among Ann Arbor residents also may have factored in.

For more information on the study, visit www.umich.edu/~hrstudy/

NRCS hires Hurley as new state nutrient management specialist

USDA-NRCS recently hired Eric G. Hurley as the state Nutrient Management Specialist. His main duties are to develop nutrient management technical standards and procedures, coordinate and train NRCS personnel, and provide statewide leadership for nutrient management planning.

He comes to Iowa with several years of experience as a soil conservationist and a nutrient management educator working in Wisconsin.

Hurley is a native Iowan, born and raised in Boxholm in Boone County and later Waverly. He attended Luther College and did graduate work in agronomy at Iowa State.

Hurley spent four years with Peace Corps-Guatemala and CARE working with farmers to improve their crops, conserve soil and raise fruit trees.

"In my work with Wisconsin producers, I found that nutrient management planning can be a positive process. Farmers often learn about the full economic value of their manure and can make more informed decisions about their soil fertilization program," Hurley said.

"The producers I worked with wanted to protect groundwater from nitrate pollution and surface waters from excessive phosphorus, but needed the information and planning tools to properly manage their resources," he added.

Hurley notes that many program recommendations and rules coming from several different agencies can be confusing to producers.

"In order to have a successful nutrient management program, it will be

Eric Hurley

USDA-NRCS

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important that all agencies work as closely together as possible."

Hurley can provide assistance in coordinating DNR, IDALS and NRCS programs; provide training concerning NRCS standards, policies, and financial assistance opportunities; participate in field days, workshops, and conferences representing NRCS; and answer technical questions about NRCS standards.

Empathetic farmers more likely to no-till

A recent study adds more evidence that convincing a landowner to use conservation tillage is about more than just money: <http://www.agecon.unl.edu/Cornhuskereconomics/2009cornhusker/1-14-09.pdf>

Get your community in, on or around the water to build support

If your watershed effort focuses on a waterbody that's made for recreation – fishing, boating, swimming, or maybe there's a multi-use trail on the shore – get your community there.

"Having events that bring the community to the lake, river or stream can get them invested in the resource," said Jessie Brown with the DNR's Communications Bureau. "If you can help locals feel ownership of the water, you can build support and get them involved in your project."

Partner with other local agencies, businesses and groups to hold one-day events or longer competitions. They can help with organization, promotion and rounding up prizes for participants.

While these events may not directly lead you to a landowner who wants to install an ag-related conservation practice, they can help create community support.

That's important for sustaining a long-term effort, securing funding, keeping those who install practices accountable and putting positive pressure on others to get involved in your project.

Two recent examples of creative events:

Walk for water quality in Portland

The Johnson Creek Watershed Council in Portland, Ore. is raising money for its efforts by asking locals

to hop on a bike. Or walk, jog, skateboard – however they want to enjoy the Springwater Corridor Trail, which runs along Johnson Creek.

The Springwater Cycle Stroll is a benefit event where participants collect pledges from family and friends for each mile they log on the trail during September.

The council is awarding prizes for most miles biked, most miles run, most miles walked and most money raised. The donations raised through this event will support the council's restoration, education and outreach programs.

More info: www.jcwc.org/getinvolved/springwatercycle.htm

Iowa watershed efforts can use similar events, even if fundraising isn't needed. Partner with local businesses for prizes, or with local non-profit groups if they're in need of a new fundraising idea.

Please note that 319 grant funds cannot be used to host a fundraising event for the project. However, a project that receives 319 funds can host a fundraiser using alternate funding.

If you don't have a trail along the water, maybe try a similar idea, like miles paddled along the river. Or apply it to your next cleanup day, giving prizes or awards for the oldest, largest and most unique things pulled from the water.

Keep them connected in winter

Swimmers in Le Mars are making their way down the Floyd River, even when there's snow on the ground.

A number of swimmers at the local YMCA are "swimming the river" by keeping track of their laps. For every mile they swim in the pool, they mark off a mile of the river on a map.

More ideas for community events and competitions:

- Fishing tournament
- Kids fishing derby
- Paddle boating "races"
- Wind surfing or sailboating competitions
- Sand castle building contests
- Paddling demonstrations, races or challenge courses
- Geocaching competitions
- Entertainment at park facilities, like bands, dances, catered dinners, a fish fry
- Educational workshops for activities at the lake or stream – fishing, dutch oven cooking, birdwatching, cross-country skiing
- Kids' educational activities
- 5K Walk/run through park, around lake, along stream-side trail
- Dutch oven or campground cooking competition

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