

Conservation: My View

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As a fifth-generation Iowa farmer, I am aware of the impact farming has had on the land. I can literally stand every day in the footsteps of my father and his father, grandfather and great-grandfather.

I'm sure the land looks different today than it did generations ago. Because of the machinery we use today, we no longer need large acreages of pasture and forage crops to fuel horses and oxen, or woodlots for heat and cooking fuel. Those of us who are not involved in cattle or sheep production can devote all of our acreage to row crops.

Of the state's 31.7 million acres of farmland, nearly three-fourths is planted to either soybeans or corn every year. The same factors that contribute to the state's number one position in corn and soybean production – highly productive soils, much of which has been tilled or otherwise modified for good drainage – also contribute to erosion and deposition of sediment and nutrients in many of Iowa's lakes and streams.

The Iowa Soybean Association has been working with farmers in the Raccoon River Watershed for more than 15 years, searching for ways to help farmers voluntarily reduce nitrogen use. Within the past five years, that involvement has become more hands-on, with the creation of association sponsored watershed programming, the Certified Environmental Systems for Agriculture (CEMSA) program, and the On-Farm Network™.

Participation in the ISA On-Farm Network, which helps farmers conduct their own crop production research using GPS and combine yield monitors, is at an all-time high. Through this program many farmers have learned they can reduce the amount of nitrogen fertilizer they need for an optimum corn yield. Their findings are spurring farmers in testing other farming practices in their own operation. When a number of growers within a watershed conduct these tests and modify their management so less nitrogen is lost, not only do they benefit from more efficient and economic use of the fertilizer, but the surrounding community and those downstream also benefit. This is what is happening with ISA watershed programming in West Buttrick Creek near my home in Greene County, in the Boone River watershed, the South Fork of the Iowa River, and more. We're hoping to organize a similar program in the Hardin Creek Watershed, in which much of my own farm lies.



Jim Andrew
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This brings up the subject of this issue of Field, Farm & Watershed: the myriad of conservation and environmental programs designed by federal and state governments for farmers and the incentives they offer.

I believe that participation in the ISA programs should qualify farmers for an enhancement payment under the Conservation Security Program.

The key element of all ISA programs is the data they gather and analyze. Because it is based on sound science, farmers and watershed stakeholders can use this information to make decisions that will improve their management, their bottom line, and, we hope, the environment. I'm a believer in sound science. If we really want cleaner water, we must have hard evidence that cleaner water is the result of any investment.

Participating in the ISA programs is important for another reason. It shows that farmers are investing in conservation practices and systems that can benefit the environment.

My father and I have been aggressively installing and applying conservation practices on our farms for more than 30 years. These efforts allowed us to qualify for Tier III when our watershed was accepted into the CSP.

CSP is bringing conservation back to the forefront of agriculture. If your watershed has not already been included in CSP, it will be. As a member and a director of the Iowa Soybean Association, I know that the association is aggressively pursuing methods that help growers improve agronomic, economic and environmental performance. And my experience with the ISA programs helped prepare me for CSP.



COVER PHOTO: Contour stripcropping helps control soil erosion and keep sediment and farm chemicals out of the water in Red Rock Lake in central Iowa. *by Lynn Betts*