

Mission: Possible!

When farmers lead, everyone benefits. The farmer-led initiatives covered in the first four issues of *Field, Farm, and Watershed* contribute practical, timely solutions to the complex issues of economic and environmental performance. They benefit individual producers, the industry, and the public, which wants and needs farmers to succeed economically while conserving natural resources on their behalf.

Deficit budgets, global economies, and environmental interests have raised the stakes. As budgets tighten, performance becomes more valuable and the cost of waste more burdensome. You, the producer, have the most to lose from wasted or spoiled natural resources and production inputs – and the most to gain from managing them well. That's exactly why you and your organizations need to lead the search for solutions that maximize performance at all levels of agriculture. You have the motivation and insight – you are in the position to implement and evaluate practical solutions.

What else does it take to lead such a search? Information and infrastructure.

You need credible data showing what works, what doesn't, and what could work better in your own fields. You won't get this from general management recommendations from universities, agencies, or corporations. Even though these may be based on research, they are generalized to account for average circumstances over wide areas, not tailored to optimize performance on your farm.

When you use products and practices in your own operation, you face real, unique, and variable conditions, economic realities, and competing resource concerns. You waste less and produce, conserve and earn more by evaluating the performance of products and practices in your fields, asking your own questions, collecting your data, and incorporating the results into your management decisions. This becomes an information-commod-

ity that you and other producers can pool to exercise leadership in improving programs, practices, and products.

No producer can do this alone. Academic, agency, and corporate searches for solutions are enabled by their respective infrastructures. You, as producers, need a coordinating infrastructure under your direction, dedicated to answering your questions, protecting your data, and helping improve your performance. Affordable technologies make such an infrastructure possible.

Iowa Soybean Association (and, until this year's merger, Iowa Soybean Promotion Board) farmer directors recognized this need in 1990. They've invested well over \$1,000,000 of your soybean checkoff and Association resources to develop this infrastructure. State and federal policy-makers, NRCS agency leaders, environmental organizations, and private partners have recognized the value of this industry-led initiative in providing credible data and practical approaches to complex problems. In a climate of Cooperative Conservation, they have multiplied resources for this initiative, making possible the program expansion described in this issue.

The time has come for agriculture to mature its role in Cooperative Conservation by establishing criteria for industry leadership and engaging its partners in defining how success will be measured and creating transparent standards with linkages to credible data. Farmer leadership is essential to develop programs and practices, and to help inform policies, that will sustain both agriculture and the environment. If the policies and programs that define the next five years don't allow you to measure and improve environmental, agronomic, and economic performance on your own farm, they will fail society, as well. ♦



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