

Farming and the Environment

Our commitment to "Advancing Agricultural Performance"

Roger Wolf, Director Environmental Programs, Iowa Soybean Association



The Iowa Soybean Association's environmental and agronomic programs are unique. They don't set out to impose an array of simple, prescriptive rules on farmers, nor do they make limitations on management practices, regulating every decision a farmer makes.

Instead, our work is governed by the notion that every farm, farmer, farming operation, and watershed differs. We believe the solutions to Iowa's water quality puzzle could also differ as we move across the state.

But that's not the end of the difference. We stretch our philosophy a step further by saying that it is essential to find ways of dealing with the issue of water quality that allow farmers to continue to perform agronomically and economically.

That's why, when we talk about our commitment to farming and the environment, we use big picture words like, 'Advancing Agricultural Performance.'

For too long, it's been easy for people to forget that farmers are running a business, and often on a very competitive margin. As we move forward, farmers must be able to compete and continue pursuing their livelihoods while employing sound environmental management of their resources. We've wrapped our agronomic and environmental programs around those principles.

The first of our programs addresses farmers' needs to investigate issues at the field level. It's called the On-Farm Network™. When growers get involved, they're given the guidance and techniques they need to conduct serious research on any topic they choose, right on their own farms, using their own GPS and combine yield monitors to mark trials and collect data. We may even provide aerial imagery to study trials using remote sensing and guided stalk sampling to determine whether corn crops had sufficient nitrogen available.

A second program called CEMSA, short for Certified Environmental Management Systems for Agriculture, broadens the perspective to an overview of total farm management and how decisions farmers make may impact resources and the environment.

Finally, the Watershed Program helps groups of farmers collect and analyze data from a number of farming operations in the watershed. In so doing, they can put the issue of water quality into its most compelling perspective – what's going on in the watershed.

We've chosen to pursue our work this way for a couple reasons. First, it's simply the right thing to do. The ISA Board of Directors realized this a decade ago and set the organization on its current path at that time. From our discussions with farmers, we know that water quality is an issue that's on everyone's mind. When farmers understand what we are doing, they are almost always supportive of our efforts.

Second, we think it's the most effective way to go about it. When it comes to solving complex problems like farming in an environmentally sound way, all the good intentions in the world will not work without an effective, well considered approach. Our approach lets growers use technology most already have to discover and implement their own solutions, field by field, farm by farm, watershed by watershed. We can often provide technical assistance and even financial incentives through funding from the Iowa Soybean Promotion Board, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship's Integrated Farm and Livestock Management program, the NRCS, and a host of other partners who contribute both financially and through in-kind products and services.

We hope you'll agree that our approach is effective. We welcome your comments. And if the opportunity presents itself, we hope to meet you and work with you in the future! ■



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On-Farm Network™
4554 114th Street
Urbandale, IA 50322-5410
515-251-8640 • 800-383-1423
email: info@iasafarmnet.com

Editors

Mick Lane
mlane@iasoybeans.com

Mike Tidman
mtidman@iasoybeans.com

On-Farm Network Staff

Roger Wolf
Director of Environmental Programs

Tracy Blackmer
Director of Research

Christine Borton
Contract & Administrative Manager

Victoria Carver
Senior Program & Resource Advisor

Todd Sutphin
Manager, Watershed Programs

Heath Ellison
Manager CEMSA

Matt Nelson
Field Research Operations Manager

Nick Seidl
GIS Research & Development Manager

Gary Hammitt
Ag & Environmental Specialist