

# CEMSA is a natural next step for watershed participants

Many watershed program participants find themselves pushing harder and harder for improvements in environmental management on the farm. In 2001, the Iowa Soybean Association undertook the design of an environmental management system for farm operations. The result was a farmer-driven initiative called CEMSA (Certified Environmental Management Systems for Agriculture). CEMSA was designed by farmers, for farmers, and integrates new tools, information and support from technical experts.

The impact is clear – farmers can now access an expanded range of management capabilities alongside documented proof of a management system on their farm that is specifically designed to improve the envi-



Ray Gaesser,  
CEMSA participant

ronment. CEMSA participants have expressed having greater awareness of the relationship between aspects of production and envi-

ronmental impacts, greater overall management effectiveness, increased efficiency, and an improved bottom line.

And that's the key component of CEMSA – it applies a management system framework to farming that can be evaluated and adjusted based upon real performance. It's not 'prescriptive,' so much as it is 'proactive.'

## Monitor, Measure, Validate

CEMSA participants cite the process of monitoring, measuring and validating performance as the key component – the place where opportunities are captured. It means that farmers have the capability of continuously optimizing their management.

This is a new paradigm for agriculture and natural resource management. It goes beyond simply implementing 'Best Management Practices,' to identifying and benchmarking outcomes, and setting objectives that progressive-

ly perform. Many farmers in the watershed programs are investigating the implementation of an EMS or participation in CEMSA.

Ray Gaesser farms near Corning, Iowa. He was one of the first farmers to complete the CEMSA process. Gaesser says that farmers should look into CEMSA. "As farmers, we have a duty and responsibility to be good stewards of the soil and of the environment. But CEMSA helped us to do more than just look at the environmental aspects of a farming operation – it gave us a way to step back and make sure we were doing something about it.

"CEMSA helped us examine how everything interacts on our farm – from tillage practices to fertilizer management, and how we work with seed, chemicals and grain storage. It showed us ways to think through our operation more than we would have. Farmers still have a window of opportunity to become our own industry watchdogs, but we need to be responsive and feel comfortable with improving the farm, and CEMSA is one way to do that."

## Linking environmental and agronomic performance

As a grower-led group, it's important to the Iowa Soybean Association to offer farmers ways to consistently improve agronomic and economic performance. And they've delivered by giving farmers a compelling process for management examination. It has tremendous value. The research shows that improved agronomic and economic performance can be environmentally sound.

Helping farmers see the linkage between those two objectives has been a key element of the success in the programs – it's what has made this approach to watershed projects particularly unique and effective. It recognizes the truth of the matter: growers cannot afford to voluntarily adopt practices that limit agronomic and economic performance.

From the On-Farm Network™ to CEMSA and Watershed Programming, the programs offered by the Iowa Soybean Association are on the ground and running – right now – and they are establishing a track record of farmers taking action for the environment.

These programs are going to influence policy. For farmers who want to stay competitive and contribute to agriculture's growing environmental movement, the Iowa Soybean Association programs might be the way to go. And farmers can step into any of the programs to begin their own journey of experimentation, discovery and improvement, whether it's through a watershed program, CEMSA or the On-Farm Network.