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LAYERS OF LEADING-EDGE CONSERVATION ON IOWA FARMS

HOW FARMERS ARE PARTNERING WITH THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTOR TO ACHIEVE SOIL AND WATER QUALITY STANDARDS.

By

[Megan Vollstedt](#)

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Partnerships and new conservation practices were the buzz during the 12th annual Conservation in Action Tour hosted in central Iowa.

The Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) coordinated the one-day event to showcase Iowa farmers' use of technology and the collaborative efforts between public and private sector stakeholders to improve soil and water quality.

Couser Family Farm and Cattle Company

Bill Couser and his son, Tim, have created what they call an "AGvocacy Farm." Located

near Nevada, Iowa, the Couser farm, a 7,000-acre operation, is split into tidy quadrants that represent the major soil types of Iowa. On these quadrants, the Cousers plant cover crops, do no-till farming, manage a saturated buffer, bioreactor, native prairie, and land for grazing.

Bill Couser says, “I don’t consider our operation normal. There is probably always something different we do – from driving a tractor to chasing a cow.”

Bill and Tim credit the number of soil and water quality initiatives present on their farm to the partnerships they’ve formed with major ag companies, from working with John Deere to develop a single-pass round baler that follows their combine and bales plant material that is left behind for future use as cattle feed, to Monsanto for helping collect research and data on the quality of water leaving their tile lines.

These relationships have allowed the Couser Farm to make the most of their resources and accurately represent their conservation efforts to any audience.



Couser Family Farm and Cattle Company

Tesdell Century Farm

Lee Tesdell’s farm near Slater, Iowa, also boasts of many conservation practices. Tesdell says, “We want to demonstrate to other farmers how to reduce the excess nutrient load in our leaky system.”

If you visit the 80-acre farm, you’ll find cover crops, terraces, buffer strips, a woodchip bioreactor, [saturated buffer](#), prairie strips, and a no-till corn and soybean rotation.

One of the newest conservation initiatives is the 18-month-old prairie strip covering a terrace between the fields. A prairie strip is a narrow section of land planted with native prairie plants, strategically placed to slow down water and nutrient runoff.

Tim Youngquist, Farmer Liaison for the Science-Based Trials of Rowcrops Integrated with Prairie Strips (STRIPS) project, is a member of the team that implemented the prairie strip on Tesdell’s farm. Youngquist comments, “It’s going to take a bunch of practices to improve soil health and water quality, like cover crops and no-till. Prairie strips is another

tool that provides benefits.”

Tesdell is quick to emphasize the true partnership that exists on his farm. That is, between himself and Charles and Mike Helland, brothers and operators of the Tesdell farm. They share trust and a vision to care for the land close to home and down the stream.



One and a half year-old prairie strip on the Tesdell Century Farm.

Financial Support

An ecosystem of support exists for conservation-minded farmers like Lee Tesdell and the Crouser family.

Cost share is available from the state and USDA, but Sean McMahon, executive director of the Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance (IAWA), speaks to the pressure on farmers. “Edge-of-field practices don’t increase yield, so it isn’t fair to make farmers pay for them when the benefit is downstream.”

The IAWA and Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) colead the Conservation Infrastructure Initiative, which brings together private and public sector stakeholders to increase investment and engagement for the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy (NRS). That strategy is established to reduce nutrients in Iowa waters and the Gulf of Mexico.

McMahon comments that without partnerships, it wouldn’t be possible to scale up the conservation practices that already exist.

According to the Conservation Learning Group out of Iowa State University, the state needs to reach:

- 10.5 million acres of no-till
- 12.5 million acres with cover crops
- 7,600 wetlands
- 120,000 bioreactors and saturated buffers

- **3,712 acres treated with prairie strips**

Currently, Iowa has approximately:

- **6.95 million acres of no-till**
- **760,000 acres of cover crops**
- **87 wetlands**
- **50 bioreactors and saturated buffers**

Still, the resounding message after a day spent exploring the Iowan landscape with farmers successfully working to improve soil and water quality, and to be an example for others, is that the goals can be reached.

“In the last year, Iowa surpassed 1 million acres in cover crops,” says Kurt Simon, Iowa NRCS State Conservationist says. “This is movement forward we didn’t have three or four years ago.”

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