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STRIPS program provides extra help for run-off control

By Tim King Mar 21, 2019



NORTHFIELD, Minn. — Kurt Kimber and his family are second generation farmers who farm 240 acres just north of Northfield, Minn. They raised certified organic sweet corn for Seneca Foods, food grade soybeans, and wheat for Nature's Organic Grist in 2018.

"Our mission is to grow food for local consumption," Kimber said.

The Kimber family also has another mission. They want to keep the rich soils that they have on the farm and make them even more productive. They also want to hold the rain water that falls on their farm for as long as possible. They have adapted, or are adapting, a number of management tools to accomplish those soil and water retention goals. Cover crops are included in that tool bag.

“We underseed our small grains with red clover,” Kimber said. “We also plant winter rye for a spring plow down.”

Combined with the cover crops is shallow tillage, with a disc, and even shallower cultivation. As much trash as possible is left on the field following tillage.

These are productive but fairly conventional soil and water conservation practices. So are the contour strips that crops are planted in. The Kimbers are pushing the conservation envelope a little with the terraces that they are working with the USDA’s Natural Resource’s Conservation Service to install on their farm.

“We have some two to four percent slopes as part of our farm,” Kimber said. “That may be a gentle slope, but some of them are 1,000 feet long.”

Contour strips and cover crops may prevent most soil loss and run off on those long gentle slopes during the growing season. But the growing season isn’t necessarily what concerns Kimber.

“The big thing is that we’re getting more intense rainfall events, so these terraces are our attempt at mitigating these changing weather patterns,” he said. “It’s in the spring time that we’ve been getting a lot of these big rain events. That’s when the soil is most exposed. We do try to leave as much residue on the field as we can, but these terraces will help a lot.”

Although the terraces are going to be fairly expensive, Kimber expects that NRCS will cost share about 75 percent. He figures that the remaining cost of the terraces is just part of the cost of doing business as a farmer.

“It’s part of the cost of stewardship that farmers have,” Kimber said. “The bible says we’re supposed to be stewards of the Creation. I’m trying to do what I can from where I’m at.”

The terraces on the Kimbers’ farm will likely be cost shared but, but in the spirit of land and water stewardship, Kimber wants to go beyond terraces and install some prairie strips. He’s not sure yet whether NRCS will cost share the seed for that.

The prairie strips, or STRIPS as their developers at Iowa State University call them, will allow Kimber to prevent run-off and soil loss on what he calls compound slopes. Terraces run perpendicular to the main slope of the fields but there are shorter slopes that run more or less diagonally to the main slope.

“There are certain places where our slopes get complicated and it’s in those places we want to use the STRIPS — kind of like a dam,” Kimber said.

STRIPS, which stands for Science-based Trials of Rowcrops Integrated with Prairie Strips, is a project that has been developed by a team researchers, along with farmers and extension agents, at Iowa State for over a decade.

“Our research shows that prairie strips are an affordable option for farmers and farm landowners seeking to garner multiple benefits,” writes the team at their website. “By converting 10 percent of a crop field to diverse, native perennials farmers and farmland owners can reduce the amount of soil leaving their fields by 90 percent and the amount of nitrogen leaving their fields through surface runoff by up to 85 percent. Prairie strips also provide potential habitat for wildlife — including pollinators and other beneficial insects.”

The STRIPS project has moved well beyond research, however.

“In addition to Kurt’s project, there is one other location in Minnesota that is installed and several others in Wisconsin, Illinois, Missouri and Michigan. But the majority of prairie strips are in Iowa,” Omar de Kok-Mercado, the STRIPS project coordinator at Iowa State said. “Currently there are 65 locations with a total of 568 acres of prairie strips installed. There are an additional 10 to 12 projected sites to be seeded this year.”

De Kok-Mercado says that the big news is that the 2018 farm bill includes STRIPS as a contractable practice for a Conservation Reserve Project.

“It is assumed that the cost-share will be dependent on standing CRP guidelines, but discussion with the USDA is currently ongoing,” he said.

For those farmers not interested in a contract with the federal government, the STRIPS website lists numerous other sources for potential funding including private organizations such as Pheasants Forever. You can learn more by looking at the website www.nrem.iastate.edu/research/STRIPS/.

Hayed buffer strips were a team effort

By TIM KING

The Land Correspondent

SAUK CENTRE, Minn. — Farmers, with the support of a broader community of people interested in a healthy environment, can come up with solutions that benefit both groups. That, at least, has been the experience of the hayed buffer strip program in the Sauk River Watershed District in central Minnesota. The roughly 1,000 square mile watershed is located in some of Minnesota’s prime

farmland in Stearns, Todd, and neighboring counties. Farmers and land managers have long sought to keep the valuable soils out of the lakes, streams and ditches of the watershed.

Implemented in 2015, the hayed buffer strip program had 25 voluntary buffer strips at the end of 2018. Most are located on non-public land in areas that the District's managers and elected board of supervisors consider priority riparian areas.

Mike Orbeck, a Stearns County dairy operator near Spring Hill, put a hayed buffer on his farm three years ago and says he's very satisfied with it so far. The 10-acre buffer is on a combination of public and private waterways. He says he appreciates how the Watershed District staff worked with him to design the buffer.

"They designed it so my fields were squared up," he said. "They are good to work with."

But before any buffer strips were put in place, farmers, Pheasants Forever, Watershed District personnel and other interested parties met often to discuss something that would work for everybody.

"The District would convene meetings with the farmer-led council and discuss the main issues with buffers and then talk about ways to make the District's program work," the District's administrator Scott Henderson said. "All of the parameters, such as when to cut them, how much stubble to leave, and how many cuttings to make were a collective effort among the participants."

"A lot of the discussion centered around alfalfa and what type of grasses to seed and whether farmers would be able to till the land midway through the 10-year agreement to re-establish alfalfa," Henderson said.

After much discussion, the planning team came up with a program for buffer strips which would provide farmers with a 75 percent cost share for installation of a 50-foot wide buffer; and a \$150 per acre annual payment for a 10-year contract.

Mowing for hay would be allowed twice a year between June 15 and Sept. 1. (Orbeck feeds the hay to young stock and dry cows.) The mowing schedule allows for spring pheasant nesting to be completed and for some fall regrowth of the hay.

One of the requirements of the program is that it actually show results. As of the end of the 2018 growing season, the hayed buffer strips have helped reduce phosphorus and other nutrients by more than 2,000 pounds, according to the watershed district.

"The program started out as a grant-funded program from the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil

Resources,” Henderson said. “The grant helped get the program off the ground. But all funding for the buffers as of 2019 will be funded strictly by the District.”

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