

Watershed groups begin

Inside Look

By CAROL BROWN

A NEW component with the Iowa Learning Farm is designed to improve water quality through development of watershed groups in the state. It's called the Leadership and Performance Driven Watershed Management project.

The project is funded through the USDA Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service Integrated Water Quality Program. It will build on neighbor-to-neighbor relationships and seek solutions to difficult nonpoint-source pollution concerns.

The project will focus on establishing agricultural watershed groups across the state, which will in turn set ag performance goals at the watershed level that are environmentally sound and economically practical. The effort will be implemented through a partnership of university and state agencies working with local farmers. Impaired sub-watersheds throughout Iowa will be selected and local farmers will be invited to participate in the watershed groups.

Iowa State University professors Lois Wright Morton and Matt Helmers lead the project. This project is based on previous successful watershed projects in northeast Iowa.

"The goal of this project is to transfer statewide what we've learned from our successful pilot performance-driven farmer watershed groups in northeast Iowa," says Wright Morton, a professor of sociology. "Iowa has highly skilled and dedicated farmers with a great deal of interest in solving loss of sediment, phosphorus and nitrogen into our water bodies. This project will give them additional tools and build support networks to better protect our natural resource base."

Establish watershed groups

One of the goals is to build local capacity for watershed management. Local farmers will participate in training to build leadership and technical skills.

The farmer-leaders will work with technical specialists to establish watershed groups in their local area. The groups will set water quality priorities and use performance-based strategies that allow farmers to address their own environmental goals more effectively.

The project also seeks to strengthen partnerships among agency technical providers, educators and farmers in each local watershed. Project coordinator Jamie Benning will lead recruitment of leaders and oversee development of watershed groups.

In addition to in-place best management practices, project achievement will be monitored by farmer-useable, science-based performance measurements such as the late-season cornstalk nitrate test, the Soil Conditioning Index and the Iowa Phosphorus Index.

Brown is communications specialist for the Iowa Learning Farm.

Key Points

- New project emphasizes improving water quality at watershed level.
- Farmers within selected watersheds will work with university, agency personnel.
- Goal is farmers working together to adopt environmental management strategies.

CLEAN WATER: The goal of Iowa's new statewide watershed project is to get farmers to work together to adopt environmental management strategies within their watershed.

■ For more about how your watershed could become involved, call Jamie Benning at 515-294-6038.



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