

Learning Farm serves to teach

By CAROL BROWN

THE Iowa Learning Farm, entering its fifth year, has accomplished a lot. The five-year ILF project was launched in 2005 with the goal of generating public awareness about the importance of improved water and soil quality through conservation practices.

The project began with 17 cooperators across the state conducting field demos on various practices, including reduced tillage, fertilizer application rates and cover crops, to name a few. Since then, 12 more cooperators and 13 conservationists have officially joined the project.



ILF team members work with these farmers, studying the agronomics, economics and the sociological aspects. In addition to the on-farm demonstrations, five different water-quality modeling studies are being conducted.

The project is unique because of its structure. Working with the farmers and team members are the ILF partner organizations: Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Conservation Districts of Iowa, Iowa State University Extension, Iowa Farm Bureau and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture.

Representatives from each of these agencies and offices work together, overseeing the progress of the project. Involvement at all levels, literally from the ground up, is a key to success.

ILF has sponsored and hosted field days, and has been represented at conferences and larger events including the Farm Progress Show. ILF cooperators, team members and partner representatives have been at these events, all speaking the same message that Iowa's soil and water quality must be improved through better land management.

The farm's outlook and plans for 2009 are exciting. In addition to the current on-farm research, demonstrations, data collection and evaluation, several new avenues have begun.

Looking good in 2009

This past fall, ILF developed a series of short videos to aid in the education about water and soil quality. These are currently being distributed all over Iowa and will be in high school and community college classrooms with accompanying curriculum by next fall.

This year's priorities include expanded water-quality education through watershed communities. Several ILF cooperators will be working with ISU sociology professor Lois Wright Morton and the Heartland Regional Water Coordination Initiative. The initiative is a partnership of land-grant universities in Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska and Kansas, with the USDA to improve water quality at the watershed level.

Another project through a USDA-NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant focuses on crop residue management and removal. This three-year project, concentrated in northwest Iowa, will increase awareness and educate area farmers about soil loss, the nutrient value of crop residue and the economics associated with residue removal.

Also in 2009, ILF hopes to bring on-board 10 more conservationists. These people, farmers and non-farmers, are leaders in their communities and among their peers, are good conservationists, and are passionate about these issues.

Finally, there are unofficial project partners that cannot be overlooked. Media, like *Wallaces Farmer*, help spread the word of the project and its goals.

Brown is communications specialist for the Iowa Learning Farm.



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