

Rainmaker has a story to tell

By CAROL BROWN

THE Iowa Learning Farm has the power to make it rain. The rainfall simulator — an educational tool used to illustrate the potential impacts of conservation and land management practices — crisscrossed the state last summer. It was demonstrated at county fairs, field days, conferences and farmers markets.

The rainfall simulator simultaneously distributes rain on five different surfaces via an oscillating nozzle. The runoff from these different scenarios is collected in glass jars so you can see the results.

The rainfall simulator can highlight how keeping various amounts of crop residue on the land surface can reduce sediment loss, or how grass buffers can be effective, or how much and how quickly rain runs off an urban parking lot.

The simulator is one way to illustrate the impact of people's actions on the land. A goal of the Iowa Learning Farm is to build a "culture of conservation," encouraging the adoption

Key Points

- ISU machine simulates the impact of raindrops on land.
- It travels to field days to show benefits of conservation.
- Nozzle can distribute rainfall on five different land surfaces.

of residue management and conservation practices to improve water quality and reduce nonpoint pollution. Farmers, researchers and Extension are working together in this program to identify and carry out the best in-field management practices that reduce sediment and nutrient loadings.

"The rainfall simulator delivers a simple but potent message," says Matt Helmers, ISU Extension water quality engineer. "That is, if we don't slow the flow, Iowa's rich topsoils can be lost to downstream water bodies." Helmers is in

RAIN MAN: ISU student Brad Bond demonstrates the Iowa Learning Farm's rainfall simulator during a stop on RAGBRAI last summer.

charge of the simulator and oversees students who help present the message to audiences during summer.

Last summer was hectic for Brad Bond, an ISU senior in ag engineering. The Centerville native hauled the rainfall simulator and presented its message all over the state. He and other ILF team members presented at 42 events in 33 counties between May and October.

Bond enjoyed interacting with different groups, from students, to RAGBRAI bicyclists,

to farmers who challenged him with questions. "I was nervous the first time I presented," says Bond. "But by the end of summer, I was able to look at an audience and determine what type of questions they would ask. I could then approach the presentation in a way that would spark interest."

Simulator is good teacher

"Many people are visual learners, and using the simulator to show how rainfall effects soil surfaces makes it easier to

understand," Bond says.

This summer will be as busy as last as the rainfall simulator is requested regularly. Bond will relinquish the simulator duties to Scott Jacobsen and Liz Juchems. The two ISU students will spend the summer traveling Iowa spreading the conservation message.

The knowledge of the importance of conservation is intergenerational as Juchems is the daughter of ILF cooperator Rick Juchems. Rick is currently president of the Conservation Districts of Iowa and has been working with the ILF team on his farm, comparing the impacts of cover crops.

Keep an eye out for the rainfall simulator in your area this summer. It could be at your county fair or an area field day. The simulator can be reserved for nonprofit events designed for the groups the ILF project is trying to reach. If you want to have the simulator at your event, complete the request form at www.extension.iastate.edu/ilf or call 515-294-5429.

Brown is a communications specialist for the ILF.



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