



Mission Statement
The Iowa Learning Farm promotes efficient agriculture production systems that result in agronomic, economic, and environmental improvements through increased awareness and adoption of conservation systems and ethics.

ILF 01 Volume 5 Issue 1 Winter 2009

New Iowa watershed project launched

A new component with the Iowa Learning Farm is designed to improve water quality through development of watershed groups in the state. The project is titled "Leadership and Performance Driven Watershed Management" and is funded through the U.S. Department of Agriculture-Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service (USDA-CSREES) Integrated Water Quality Program. The project will build on neighbor-to-neighbor relationships and seek solutions to difficult nonpoint source pollution concerns. It will focus on establishing agricultural watershed groups across the state, which will in turn, set agricultural performance goals at the watershed level that are environmentally sound and economically practical.

The project 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 are currently being invited to participate in the watershed groups.

Iowa State University professors Lois Wright Morton and Matt Helmers lead the project. Wright Morton sees that environmental improvements can be made through the success of this project based on previous successful CSREES 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," said Wright Morton, associate 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."

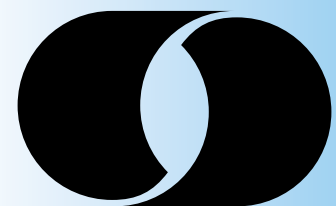
Project Goals

One of the goals of the project 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.

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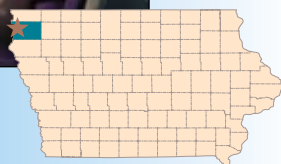


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Nate Ronsiek



Producer Profile

By Dick Tremain

“Nate may only be 26-years-old, but he farms like a conservation veteran,” says Sioux County District Conservationist Greg Marek. Nate Ronsiek, a Hawarden farmer, works with Marek, a USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) employee, to address resource concerns on his land.

“Nate has been farming a short time, but he’s doing a lot of things right on his farm that are saving him money and improving the environment. I wish more people would do what Nate does,” says Marek, who has worked with Ronsiek since 2005.

Ronsiek says he learned many conservation practices from his late father, Vince, while growing up on his family’s century farm and while earning an agriculture degree at Kansas State University.

Ronsiek raises 65 stock cows with his wife, Rachel, on 600 acres of land, including the family homestead where they now live.

Ronsiek says he’s heard no-tilling into residue can be a problem for some farmers, but he hasn’t seen it. He says his planter can handle heavy residue.

Because he farms no-till, Ronsiek says his fields can handle heavy rain much better than conventionally tilled fields.

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The project also seeks to strengthen partnerships among agency technical providers, educators and farmers in each local watershed.

Project coordinator Jamie Benning will coordinate recruitment of watershed leaders and oversee the development of the watershed groups across the state.

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. These will be used to document improvements in water quality by estimating reductions of phosphorous and nitrogen delivery to surface waters, improvement in soil condition, and reduced erosion. This information offers valuable feedback data for farmers to practice adaptive management.

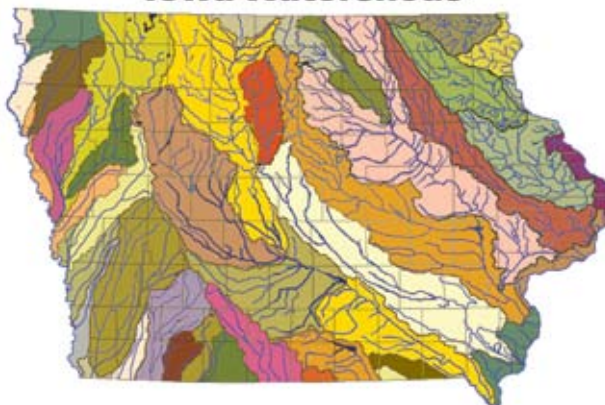
Expected Results

The results at the end of this three year project will show that farmer-to-farmer communication and leadership within impaired watersheds can lead to the local adoption of environmental management in conjunction with production management strategies.

Farmers who participate in this project will learn how to become citizen-scientists, gathering their own data and working with other farmers and technical experts to better understand their watershed and make management decisions that support improved water outcomes.

ILF Cooperators and Conservationists who are involved include Doug Nolte (Muscatine Co.), Randy Caviness (Adair Co.), Paul Hunter (Winneshiek Co.), Rick Juchems (Butler Co.), Laura Krouse (Linn Co.), Norm Lust (Warren Co.), and Rob Stout (Washington Co.). More participants will be added later. For more information about this project and how your watershed could become involved, contact Jamie Benning, 515/294-6038, email: benning@iastate.edu.

Iowa Watersheds



**Iowa Learning Farm
Planter Clinic**

Iowa Lakes Community College, Emmetsburg
Wednesday, March 4th, 10:00 AM-12:00 PM
Lunch to follow

For more information or to register,
 contact Erin Harpenau 515/509-4768
 email: erinharp@iastate.edu

A look back at 2008

There are many successes to highlight as the Iowa Learning Farm reviews its fourth year. ILF hosted or sponsored nine field days in 2008. Hundreds of producers discussed a variety of topics from strip-tillage to conservation measures that slow water runoff from fields. ILF was represented this summer at the Farm Progress Show held in Boone County with the Operation Strip-Till exhibit where show attendees could discuss strip-tillage with ILF cooperators who use this practice.

The Rainfall Simulator remained popular in spite of the high amounts of precipitation. It was part of the Conservation exhibit at the Farm Progress Show and was demonstrated at 47 different events last summer.

A series of five videos was completed at the end of 2008 and is fast becoming a valuable educational tool for all ages. The implications of these films is beginning to unfold. For example, some of them will be shown at the Quad Cities Environmental Film Festival on March 28.

The ILF project was launched in 2005 with the goal of generating public awareness about the importance of improved water and soil quality through conservation farming practices. It began with 17 cooperators across the state. Since then, 12 more cooperators and 13 conservationists have officially joined the project. In 2009, ILF hopes to expand by bringing on-board 10 more conservationists to help build “A Culture of Conservation” in Iowa.



Juchems speaker at Flood Conference

The Leopold Center and the Center for Energy and Environmental Education at the University of Northern Iowa hosted a workshop on December 8, “Learning from the Floods of 2008: Practical Strategies for Resilience.” The Ames event brought together more than 120 farmers, urban planners, policymakers, educators, scientists and representatives from numerous state agencies and nongovernmental organizations.

ILF Cooperator Rick Juchems was a member of the Farm Systems panel with Francis Thicke, who operates a grass-based, organic dairy near Fairfield and Rick Cruse, agronomy professor and director of the Iowa Water Center.

Juchems farms along the Cedar River that was heavily flooded last summer. He said three newly installed terraces all held. “It’s kind of a no-brainer to put a grassed waterway on your farm where it’s needed, but you have to maintain it.”

He also recommended filter strips and grassed headlands to keep water from running up and down hills, and proper tiling underneath terraces. He has multi-year leases for the land he farms, a necessity for sustaining critical conservation practices. He advocated no-till because it keeps nutrients in the soil and holds soil particles in place. “The ground that I saw that was no-till had the least amount of impact from the rain that fell this year,” he said.



Juchems

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Ronsiek said, “We had a one-inch rain in 20 minutes last spring. I saw water sitting on top of the conventionally tilled field long after the rain stopped. In my no-till fields the water went straight down. The increased residue reduced soil erosion and made more soil moisture available for growing my crops in the weeks that followed.”

Ronsiek conducted side-by-side comparisons of no-till and conventional till tests plots as an Iowa State Extension’s On-Farm Research Program and an Iowa Learning Farm cooperator. Ronsiek says he didn’t see a difference. The no-till corn field came in this year at 200.7 bushels per acre while the conventional-tilled plot was 200.6 bushels per acre.

“This test took place over three growing seasons on a five-acre piece of my better ground in the bottoms. I’m excited because now I’m past the first three years of no-till. In future growing seasons yields are expected to increase—profit potential, too. What I don’t spend on fuel and time for conventional tillage field trips I can invest elsewhere on the farm,” said Ronsiek.

Saving money using a conservation practice that benefits others? Marek says that’s an excellent definition of a conservation veteran—which can be applied to Nate Ronsiek today.

Tremain is a public affairs specialist for USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

New staff

The Iowa Learning Farm welcomes Kevin Dietzel as research associate for the ISU Department of Agronomy. A Minnesota native, Dietzel and his wife, Renee, recently relocated from Cornell University, New York.

He will be working with Mahdi Al-Kaisi on the agronomic component of the ILF project, coordinating with ILF cooperators and ISU Extension Field Agronomists.

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Winter Events



The Iowa Learning Farm team has been busy this winter attending and exhibiting at conferences and meetings all over Iowa. These photos represent a sampling of events.

Above Left: ILF Cooperators, Conservationists, ISU Extension Field Agronomists, Steering committee and team members gathered in Ames on Feb. 4 for the annual winter meeting.

Above: Student representatives from the ISU Soil and Water Conservation Club talk with a legislator at the annual Conservation Partnership Day held at the Capitol January 28.

Left: Iowa DNR Director Richard Leopold receives a copy of the new ILF video series from Jackie Comito at the Iowa Conservation Educators Conference at Honey Creek Resort, Lake Rathbun, Jan. 23.