



## Farmers, Iowa Communities Collaborate to Protect Water

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**Dirck Steimel**



A growing number of Iowa communities — of all sizes and from every corner of the state — are working with local farmers to improve the quality of their drinking water sources. That collaboration, according to municipal and state regulatory officials, is helping communities meet federal standards for nitrogen, phosphorus and other nutrients, hold down costs and build stronger and lasting relationships with farmers in their areas.

"Most of our communities have always had a very good relationship with their local farmers, and they want to build on that," said Dustin Miller, general counsel for the Iowa League of Cities. "These collaborations are helping communities offset the cost of building expensive water treatment plants and creating a win-win situation."

### Farmers stepping up

To reduce nutrient loss and help their communities, farmers are stepping up to rework their traditional cropping patterns to add cover crops. They are adding wetlands and other structures that have been shown to improve water quality. And they are adjusting tillage practices to reduce the potential for nutrients leaving their fields after rainstorms.

"I've really seen a very good response from farmers in my projects," said Rebecca Ohrtman, coordinator of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) source water protection program. "For the most part, we've seen farmers are very proactive in this, and they really want to do things to help their community," she said.

These cooperative efforts are under the umbrella of the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy. Launched in 2013, the strategy is designed as a long-term approach to improve surface water quality in Iowa and help reduce nitrogen and phosphorus delivered to the Gulf of Mexico. The Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy covers both point sources, such as industry and municipal water systems, as well as nonpoint sources

like farmers.

### **Cedar Rapids example**

One of the most visible collaborations of farmers and Iowa communities is in and around Cedar Rapids, Iowa's second largest city.

Officials there recently launched a \$4.3 million project that is focused on improving the quality of water in the Cedar River watershed, the source of the city's water supply. The Middle Cedar Partnership Project will focus on building cooperation with farmers and landowners to install best management practices such as cover crops, nutrient management, wetlands and saturated buffers to help improve water quality, water quantity and soil health in the Cedar River watershed.

The twin goals of the plan are reducing nitrate levels in the water and reducing flood potential, said Steve Hershner, utilities director for Cedar Rapids. "The City of Cedar Rapids has always been interested in partnerships to improve water quality, and this helps us focus on both of those issues." Partners in the project include the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation and other agricultural organizations, conservation districts, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, Iowa State University Extension and DNR.

### **Farming improvements**

Farmers in the area are ready to step up to work with Cedar Rapids to continue to improve water quality. "We always face a lot of challenges with the weather, but we're always working to do better," said Linn County Farm Bureau member Curt Zingula, who has planted stream buffer strips and cover crops, as well as installing a bioreactor to reduce nutrient loss.

"The way we farm today is better for the environment than what grandpa did. He did the best that he could, but the technology that we have today is getting better all of the time."

The Cedar Rapids water project was recently awarded \$2 million from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Regional Conservation Partnership Program. Partners in the project will contribute \$2.3 million, and the city will provide \$316,000.

Across Iowa, in the small town of Griswold in Cass County, farmers have stepped up to reduce nitrate levels in municipal water wells by planting cover crops and moving to spring fertilizer applications. "We're just ecstatic with the cooperation we are getting from farmers in our area," Drue Kirchoff, who chairs Griswold's water quality committee said recently.

### **Rathbun Lake**

The cooperation is also showing results around southern Iowa's Rathbun Lake area,

which provides drinking water to some 16,000 homes and businesses. There, farmers have installed terraces, buffer strips and other conservation practices, which has reduced sediment delivery to the lake by more than 43,000 tons from the past decades, significantly reducing phosphorus levels in the lake's water.

"The farmers we work with are very engaged in the process," said John Glenn, CEO of the Rathbun Regional Water Association. "They want to help find solutions to water quality issues and implement them."

The DNR's Ohrtman, who works primarily with smaller Iowa communities who have identified water quality issues, says cooperation of community leaders, municipal officials and farmers has been the key to success in water quality improvement projects. Some, like Griswold, can opt for cover crops, while others, such as Elliott in Montgomery County, decide that buying land and creating a wetland was the best solution.

"Each community is different, and they need to find local solutions that everyone buys into," Ohrtman said. "It's important to have everyone at the table and to work together."