JUNE 11, 2025

ACWA
Agriculture's Clean Water Alliance

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NEWSLETTER

What you can expect in this newsletter

June's edition focuses on how ACWA's rich history has impacted the present.

- A look back at ACWA's role in four core conservation tactics
- A spotlight on one of ACWA's original water monitoring volunteers
- A look at the changes and growth in water monitoring
- Detangling cost share programs - the latest tools

As we look to the future, we honor the past that shaped us. One of the things I am most grateful for as ACWA's incoming Executive Director is the brave and determined board, staff, and leadership who came before me and built ACWA into the successful organization it is today

The original founders' bold steps and investments laid the foundation for us. Those original ag retailers and co-ops dared to believe in a better Iowa with cleaner water and healthier soils.

They dared to reach out to each other, even amidst fierce competiton, because they knew unity was the only solution.

To all of you - both individuals and organizations - who led us to 25 years, *thank you*. We will not waste the momentum you have built for us.

Jeff Lucas

Executive Director, ACWA

ACWA's impact on critical tactics

Bioreactors

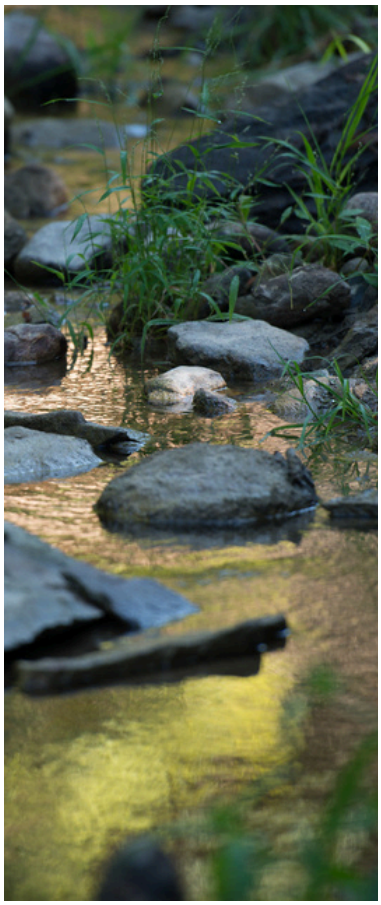
The story of bioreactors and ACWA is legendary. In 2008, ACWA installed the first large, on-farm bioreactor in partnership with the The Sand County Founation. Its installation and monitoring led to NRCS's first interim standard.

Why it matters: Practice standards made them eligible for cost share. Now, Iowa installs 100's of cost share funded bioreactors annually

Monitoring

ACWA's first purpose was water quality monitoring. It began with volunteer monitoring in partnership with DSM Waterworks and grew into a full time program led by Anthony Seeman in the Iowa Soybean water lab.

Why it matters: Monitoring allows for better watershed planning. It's guided ACWA focus areas for 25 years.



Watershed planning

If you ask Roger Wolf, ACWA's outgoing Executive Director, what he is proudest of, listening to farmers & communities is somewhere at the top of the list.

Why it matters: ACWA watershed plans have been guided by community needs. The data - both qualitative & quantitative - has helped partners secure millions for informed watershed programs.

Nutrient management

Members have agreed to the Code of Practice for Nitrogen since 2001. Members agree to delay fall anhydrous without an N-inhibitor until soil is 50F and trending lower.

Why it matters: ACWA's footprint touches 87 of Iowa's 99 counties. The pact pact means farmers statewide are getting strong guidance on good nutrient practices.

Today's progress

According to NREC data

- Average commercial N rate on corn in rotation went from 170 in 2017 to 173.4 in 2024
- Current N Inhibitor use is at 64%
- 15.2% of acres are variable rate applied for nitrogen. Phosphorus is 61.3%
- 17% of acres have cover crops
- Conservation-tillage and no-till make up 62.8% of acres.

See the full report here.

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An interview with one of ACWA's first volunteer water samplers

Rebekah Jones: At the time, I imagine water monitoring wasn't something a lot of people did. ACWA was ahead of the curve. Why did you decide to help?

Craig Fleishman: I just wanted to see what kind of effects farming has on water supply and streams, especially nitrogen. I signed up because Iowa Soybean used to have these nitrogen conferences and Dr. Fred Blackmer would speak about how nitrogen gets into ground water and streams, and I wanted to investigate that further. He was very convincing on why we should really watch our rates.

Rebekah: You are a farmer yourself. I always think it's amazing to see farmers who go above and beyond for their farm and for their community. How did the experience help you?

Craig Fleishman is a farmer from Minburn, who volunteered for ACWA's certified sampler program for several years around 2003.

He collected samples from streams and tile outlets every two weeks from several locations near his farm.

Craig: It gave me a better view of what's going on. You could see the hard data and the numbers in the samples. A lot of times they weren't in any severe ranges to cause harm. And it was good to know that some of the practices we were doing were having impact.

Rebekah: What practices were you using?

Craig: I did no-till and ridge-till. We also had filter strips. I did split application with an in season side dress. And I never applied anhydrous in the fall. I started cover crops later. And now I am a soil commissioner in my county.

Rebekah: Cover crops weren't popular back then. I don't think my dad started them until the 2010's and even now, there are many acres across the state that are bare. Why did you make the change?

Craig: I saw the potential to reduce erosion more. I went to enough meetings in those early days that I was convinced it was something we needed to do. Results were mostly good; Cover crops can be tricky if you don't do your homework. I do think water monitoring had an impact on the change, too.

Rebekah: ACWA had some passionate members back then - some of which are still members today. The fact that ag retailers are making this investment, promoting conservation, and hiring conservation agronomists. What does that say to you as a farmer?

Craig: It means they're serious about doing their part. I'm encouraged when I see our local coop has regional conservation agronomists and I think that's good. And I think the water monitoring program has had a positive impact on the industry. People are recognizing farmers care. It identifies critical areas that needed to be highest priority.

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water monitoring

Tony Seeman started in 2006. To date he's collected or run over 10,000 samples through Iowa Soybean and ACWA. He shares how the landscape of water monitoring has changed over the years.

"Gain an intimate understanding of the Raccoon River and its tributaries."

That was the charge from Roger when I started with ISA back in the spring of 2006. By that point, the volunteer monitoring program was stable and ready to branch out through new opportunities. My full time position was justified by contracting with Des Moines Water Works to collect samples for an E. coli study in the Raccoon, funded by IDNR. ACWA's automated water samplers did double duty looking at both nitrate and bacteria in those years, working to understand the dynamics of the watershed during wet conditions.

The volunteer network proved valuable for partnering on special studies and screening for emerging contaminants such as algae and cyanobacteria, pesticides, and antibiotic-resistant bacteria. But as ACWA began to mature, the need to expand nutrient monitoring took precedence. By the time the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy was completed in 2013, ACWA monitoring had expanded it's footprint into the Boone and Des Moines Rivers on its way to working statewide. Tile monitoring started in 2015 and ramped up in 2016.

This year will mark 10 years of data for about 20 of the original tile monitoring sites. As we move forward, the conservation agronomists will continue to become the face of water monitoring as they help growers and land-owners not only understand how farm management affects water, but also how changes on their own farms can have positive impacts downstream.

-Tony Seeman, Water Lab Service Manager

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Detangling cost share

Two tools to know about

Key differences

- Programs are listed for every state
- Covers all conservation practices
- Conservation practices are listed by practice code
- "Find Providers" tab finds technical assistance
- Voluntarily updated by program providers

The Connector

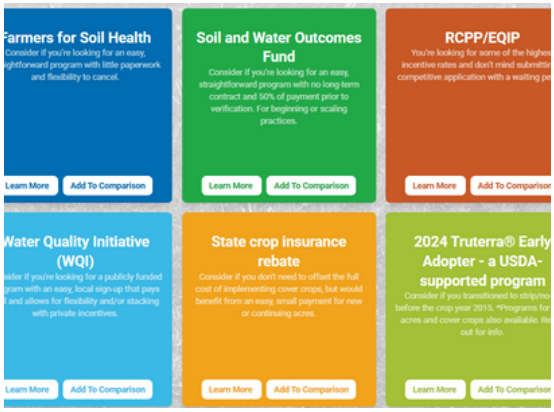
The Conservation Connector is a new tool launched by CTIC to help farmers around the country find conservation funding. It started as a Climate Smart Commodities project and has grown into a robust website with 197 programs listed. It is the first and only platform that provides programs for your location as well as technical assistance. If you have a program to advertise, create a free listing by creating a profile. You can also search for AMP specific programs (The renamed USDA fund formerly known as Climate Smart Commodities)

Explore Connector.Ag

costshare compare.com

Costsharecompare was launched in June 2024 by the Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance. It is the only cost share tool that offers a journalistic approach to programs. IAWA staff has interviewed farmer-facing staff about each program to get the real scoop on how it works - no jargon, no practice codes, no confusion. You can also select multiple programs to compare at once. IAWA offers a print version for all conservation professionals and ag businesses promoting water quality practice adoption.

Explore costsharecompare.com



Key differences

- Narrows programs to only those offered in Iowa
- Focuses on cover crops, no-till, reduced till
- Has synchronous filter function (like you're shopping)
- Refers users to conservation agronomists to get full details.
- Updated internally by IAWA communications team

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ACWA Updates

- **Save the date!** The 25th Anniversary celebration of ACWA will be Friday, August 8 in the Des Moines area. We are targeting a morning event. Look for more details!
- ACWA is launching **a new logo and brand kit**. You can find it here. Please update any material to show the new logo and pass this on to you communications teams.
- We spent hours looking for and organizing old ACWA photos from the past 25 years so that we'd have an accurate archive. If you'd like to look through old photos of ACWA, click this link.
- ACWA now has a LinkedIn page! Please follow us! Visit ACWA LinkedIn
- **Farm to River Partnership**: Conservation Agronomist, Joe Wuebker says they are busy with outreach on the Sac County Batch and Build as well as getting geared up for cover crop sign ups. Spread the word, they are looking for interest farmers!
- ACWA is adding an online clothing store! Wear the brand proudly! Conservation Agronomists can receive up to a $200 reimbursement for ACWA clothing. The online shop is still under construction, but will be located at this link next week.

Click here to download last meeting's photos