

SEPTEMBER 2025



AGRICULTURE'S
CLEAN WATER ALLIANCE

NEWSLETTER



What you'll find in this issue

- The story of the founding of ACWA from the perspective of its founding members and LD McMullen from Des Moines Waterworks
- A look at a lifetime of achievement from Harry Ahrenholtz, who received an Iowa Watershed Award earlier this month.
- Updates from the field from Kayla Bergman, who was on iHeartRadio's Clean Water Wednesday with Bob Quinn this month.



Fall is a season of transition, and as the leaves begin to change and temperatures drop, I'm reflecting on all the successful transitions ACWA has successfully led.

The organization has transitioned from supporting one watershed to the entire state, from offering one membership level to two, and from water monitoring as its sole responsibility to leading on-the-ground change with conservation agronomists.

In this fall edition of the newsletter, we are continuing our theme of celebrating ACWA's 25 year anniversary by transitioning you from the history of ACWA to its present. We are proud to share an interview with L.D. McMullen, former GM of DMWW as well as an interview with Kayla Bergman who plays a key role in the present and future of ACWA as she works with farmers to expand conservation.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeff Lucas".

Executive Director, ACWA

Updates from the Executive Director

There is much to recognize and share after a very productive quarter for ACWA!

Thank you to everyone who joined us in celebrating ACWA's 25th Anniversary! Your participation made the event truly special and is a strong reminder of the impact our organization has had over the years.

All ACWA members have reaffirmed their commitment to our Code of Practice and are prepared to report acres as soon as temperatures allow for application. When you're ready to report, you can find instructions at acwaiowa.com under the "Member Links" tab.

As a reminder, the NRCS Conservation Program application cutoff is October 10th for the current fiscal year. Let's make a strong final push to connect farmers with these valuable cost-share opportunities.

Our Conservation Agronomist Educational Session is also taking shape for this fall. This event will focus on Edge of Field practices and bring together partners from ADMC, IDALS, NRCS, and others. The goal is to expand both knowledge & confidence in promoting Edge of Field opportunities that can make a real difference in the watershed.

We're also excited to welcome Miss Alex Logan, the Iowa Soybean Association's new Conservation Agronomist. Alex will be focusing much of her work on the Farm to River Project, and we look forward to the energy and expertise she will bring to our shared efforts.

Finally, as a partner of IAWA, I encourage you to visit IAWA's new website at www.iaagwater.org where among the many helpful resources, you'll find the Conservation Agronomist Directory—designed to connect farmers and partners with trusted conservation advisors across the state.

Thank you for your continued partnership as we advance conservation and water quality in Iowa.



Harry Ahrenholtz Wins Lifetime Achievement Award



You can watch a short video featuring his achievements, by clicking on [this link](#).

Harry Ahrenholtz, Chairman of the Board for Agriculture's Clean Water Alliance, is the winner of the 2025 Iowa Watershed Lifetime Achievement Award. He was honored at the Iowa Water Conference in Ankeny on September 9.

The Lifetime Achievement Award recognizes professionals who have dedicated their career to improving Iowa's water quality and have gone above and beyond to make an impact. Ahrenholtz is a great example of this, having spent nearly 25 years with ACWA, advocating for water quality practices including the adoption of nitrogen stabilizers, addition of conservation agronomists, and the state's first bioreactor.

"I decided that I wanted to stay connected to that, in fact I've been a part of it now for the past 14 years since I actually retired from my professional career," Ahrenholtz said about his time spent with the organization.

ACWA Communications Working Group Lead, Eric Scherder, nominated Ahrenholtz.

"Harry has always taken a proactive agronomic approach to conservation and has and continues to keep the Iowa farmer top of mind," Scherder said, while noting Harry's critical role in gaining funding, building relationships, and engaging with partners.

Ahrenholtz gives that credit and gratitude back to the organization.

"I think of all the good people that I've been able to interact with through all the years at ACWA, and all of the good work that they have done," he reminisced, citing the "unsung heroes" he has worked with over the years.



Founder Insights

ACWA Founders and Former Des Moines Waterworks General Manager, LD McMullen, Reminisce on Organization's Establishment.

BY CAROL BROWN

Agriculture's Clean Water Alliance founders are proud of the organization's longevity — and not surprised that it's been working hard for 25 years. As ACWA celebrates this milestone, it prompts a look back on the journey.

"One morning in 1999, I met with a farmer near Jefferson for breakfast," recalled Roger Koppen, then manager of Farmers Cooperative in Farnhamville, now part of Landus. "He told me of nitrate issues at the Des Moines Water Works and wondered if there was a way to solve some things."

Des Moines Water Works director, LD McMullen, was dealing with high nitrate levels in the Raccoon River, a source for the metro's water supply.

"We were monitoring water annually for contaminants, but we noticed nitrate levels were increasing, so we started monitoring monthly," McMullen said. "We then monitored streams north of Des Moines, other than the Raccoon, and saw that the ground water from field tiles was really high in nitrates compared to the rivers."

McMullen first thought about working with the farmers in the watershed, but realized that would be a mammoth task. Instead, he looked to the retailers who supplied nitrogen. McMullen invited Koppen, Larry Petersen with Heartland Cooperative, and Jeff Stroberg from West Central Cooperative to the facility for a tour and conversation. At that initial meeting, he explained to the group what he was dealing with.

"One of the co-op leaders then said to me, 'can you leave us in the room so we can talk?', so I left the room," McMullen said. "After a bit, they called me back, and I'll never forget it, they said, 'We're your problem. We need to work with you to see what we can accomplish.'"



This newly formed relationship was innovative, as the cooperatives involved were only about 50 miles from one another — and highly competitive. Could they come together and agree to mutual goals?



“I had concerns about the direction this could take and whether legislation would be enacted, which could be detrimental to the industry and farmers,” said Petersen. “We wanted to be at the table

to help decide what to do and we needed to be proactive. We began as a science-based, fact-finding mission of intense water sampling.”

At that time, Roger Wolf was a new hire at ISA and led the water sampling for the group. Wolf’s volunteers sampled each week from the Raccoon River and its tributaries. The samples were sent to Water Works for testing and data collection.

“We thought if we monitored enough, we could kind of tell when the nitrate levels were increasing and what had gone on just before the increase to make it happen,” Koppen said. “But we found many other things that influenced the water quality beyond fall-applied nitrogen, such as cattle yards leaking into tributaries and discharge from processing plants. The more knowledge we had, the more we realized we didn’t know much.”

As the ag retail leaders continued to meet, an organized entity emerged and ACWA was established with Wolf as executive director. It started with three members and it blossomed to six fairly quickly.

“The drivers of this effort were the co-op general managers in the Raccoon River watershed, but more importantly were the efforts of Roger Wolf and Iowa Soybean Association,” commented Brent Bunte, former general manager of NEW Coop. “Roger was passionate about water quality and the environment. He fit in well with ACWA and what we were trying to accomplish.”

The longevity of the organization far exceeds the founders’ expectations, especially since those early expectations were gray areas.

“At the point of founding, we really didn’t know what we were looking for,” said Petersen.

“But we were able to work together, to focus, and to be one source for communications. We were able to make headways and that was important for the long term.”

The founders created unique membership requirements. They developed (and still adhere to) the Code of Practice for Nitrogen Fertilization, an agreement to delay fall anhydrous applications without a nitrification inhibitor until soil temperatures are 50°F and trending lower. They also agreed to a membership dues structure.

“It’s not often a group agrees to tax themselves, but that’s what we did,” Koppen said. “We established a monetary rate per unit of nitrogen we applied and that’s how we paid from the beginning and for the 10 years I was involved.”

This membership dues process held through 2020, when a new strategic plan was adopted with a new membership dues structure.

Although McMullen has been retired from the Des Moines Water Works since 2007, he is still a Des Moines metro resident. He is hopeful that ACWA can continue to make a difference.



“I still feel that field tiles are a major nitrogen source and if the water coming from the tiles can be treated before it gets to the streams, we’ll make a giant step forward,” he commented.

“The use of bioreactors, saturated buffers and targeted wetlands are all good options for this.”

Founders say it’s important to recognize ACWA’s accomplishments and keep pushing forward.

“When ACWA started, I don’t think anyone who wasn’t involved in agriculture thought the agriculture industry cared,” Koppen said. “We showed that we do care... Everyone has a right to clean water and no one has the right to affect it negatively. Agriculture is part of the whole system and we need to do what we can to make the system work.”

conservation agronomy



Kayla Bergman is the Sustainability Lead at IAS and helps farmers in the NE region of Iowa with balancing conservation with sustainability. On a recent Clean Water Wednesday broadcast on AM 1040's The Big Show, she shared advice for farmers heading into harvest.



- First, limit or reduce tillage this fall to protect your soil structure.
- Make sure your residue spread from the combine is even.
- If you are using a cover crop, get it seeded as soon as you can so it has the best chance to germinate and start to get some good growth before winter.
- Make sure you are working with your sales agronomist on your fertilizer plan and always consider the 4Rs of nutrient management: Right source, right time, right rate, right place.
- If you haven't done soil sampling in a while, consider getting new testing done.
- Plan ahead as much as possible! Financial assistance programs that can help with conservation costs often require paperwork to be done before that practice is implemented or installed. A conservation agronomist can help you.
- Choose your cover crops based on what goals you have.
- Check with your local co-op or state conservation office to find someone who can help! (or of course, give Kayla a call!)

ACWA updates you should know about

- Conservation Agronomists, mark your calendar for an ACWA training on edge-of-field practices on Mon., Nov. 3.
- As the seasons change and you're reaching for warm coats and sweatshirts, don't forget that ACWA has a [branded clothing store through P&M Apparel](#). Conservation Agronomists can receive up to \$200 reimbursed for ACWA branded clothing!
- If you're looking for photos from the 25th Anniversary celebration, you can find and download them [here](#).
- We reorganized the ACWA website to help you navigate it more easily. It's also been updated with new materials and the new branding. Here are some highlights we recommend checking out:
 - [About ACWA](#) page has a "video business card" with Exec Committee interviews.
 - [History](#) features the 25-year timeline of ACWA.
 - The entire [Member Links](#) tab has helpful resources including downloadable materials, and an "onboarding" page.

In the news

Iowa Department of Ag Announces Streamside Buffer Pilot Program

Farmers and landowners in key watersheds upstream of Cedar Rapids and Des Moines are eligible for a new voluntary pilot program designed to add streamside buffers to improve water quality. [Read more.](#)

ISU Study Shows Dynamic Shifts in Iowa Farmers' Conservation Practice Use

It found that many farmers who adopted two key conservation practices -- cover crops and no-till -- did not continue to use the practices over time. [Read more.](#)

Updated Tool will Help Iowa Farmers Select Cover Crop Varieties

The Midwest Cover Crops Council cover crop decision tool that helps farmers evaluate cover crop species based on things like county, production goals and drainage situation has been updated to reflect new research in the field. [Read more.](#)

Iowa is at risk of losing most of its water quality sensors

In 2023, the Iowa legislature voted to cut \$500,000 from the network after July 2026. The University of Iowa is trying to find a new funding source after next summer. [Read more.](#)