



# North Raccoon Farm to River Partnership Project



*The North Raccoon Farm to River Partnership: an Iowa Water Quality Initiative to implement in-field and edge-of-field practices that keep nitrogen and phosphorus out of Iowa waters.*

## Past – Present – Future

The Farm to River Partnership — a nearly \$3 million Water Quality Initiative (WQI) — began in 2018 to increase conservation practices on the land for improved water quality in the North Raccoon River watershed. The project includes goals of adding cover crops to 11,500 acres, installation of 15 bioreactors and 15 saturated buffers, and construction of two targeted wetlands.

The third year of the project will wrap up in March 2021, but that doesn't mean the work stops. In this issue, we'll take a look at the project's current activity, past accomplishments and offer a glimpse into the future.

## Currently...

Conservation Agronomist Joseph Wuebker joined the project in August and immediately began on-farm visits as well as meetings with agronomists in area offices of NEW Cooperative, Nutrien Ag Solutions and Landus Cooperative. It has been a challenge trying to conduct visits and meetings during the pandemic, but Wuebker is making it work.

"In my outreach to farmers, landowners and ag retail staff, I'm adjusting to their level of comfort," Wuebker says. "I'm willing to use formats where people are most comfortable — whether it's in-person with masks and being socially distanced, or over the phone, through a Zoom call, by email or even text messages."

Wuebker wants to see the goals of the project reached and is continually looking for new edge-of-field options and appropriate locations. Current progress for 2020 includes more than 6,300 new acres of cover crops enrolled; three bioreactors were installed and two more are in the installation process. One saturated buffer is also ready for installation. The edge-of-field practices are 100 percent paid through the Farm to River Partnership with support from the Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance (IAWA), which is aligned with the ACWA mission. The IAWA was created by the associations of Iowa Pork Producers, Iowa Corn Growers and Iowa Soybean.

One of ACWA's long-standing accomplishments is water monitoring of streams and edge-of-field locations, which continued this summer at 20 sites in the project area. However, late in the summer many sites were unable to be sampled due to the dry weather conditions. As aggregate samples were reviewed from the area over last decade, a positive

### Winter 2020-21

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- *We need YOU!*

### GOALS:

**15**  
**BIOREACTORS**

**15**  
**SATURATED**  
**BUFFERS**

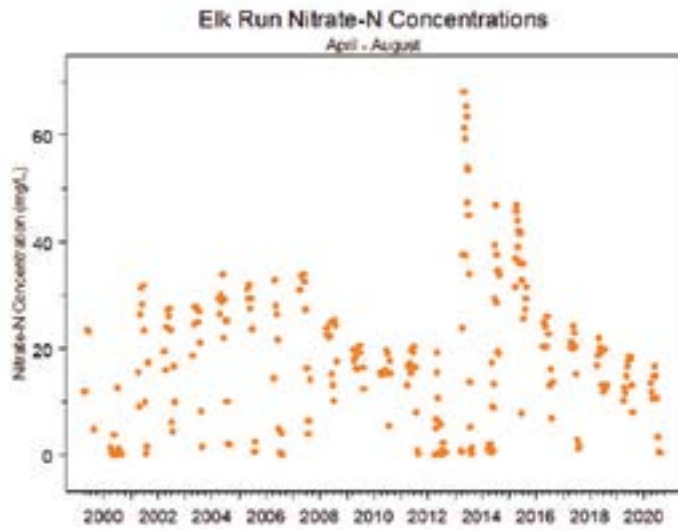
**2**  
**WETLANDS**  
**DESIGN AND**  
**CONSTRUCTION**

**11,500**  
**COVER CROP**  
**ACRES**  
**MET!**

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indication is showing nitrogen concentration levels are reducing to lower than the early declines in 2008-2010, which were wet years. In 2013, there was a large increase in nitrogen concentrations following the 2012 drought, which was similar across the entire North Raccoon watershed. Since the Farm to River Partnership launched in 2018, there has been a steady decline in concentrations. The graph illustrates concentrations from 2000–2020 for the Elk Run watershed, a sub-watershed located in the center of the project area.



*A bioreactor was installed near Lake City in the fall. A trench was dug, lined with a moisture barrier and filled with woodchips. The woodchips are covered with another moisture barrier and topped with soil. A tile line is routed from the field through the bioreactor to reduce nitrate-nitrogen from drainage water by 30 to 60 percent.*



## Past accomplishments...

The Farm to River Partnership kicked off in June 2018 with an event on the Mark Schleisman farm near Lake City. Iowa Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Julie Kenney made the announcement of the \$2.6 million project. The project uses a



different approach to implementing conservation practices by collaborating with three ag retailers and their agronomists located within the project's subwatersheds. The ag retail

companies are trusted resources for growers and they know their clients' fields and operations best.

To achieve the goals of the Farm to River Partnership, field days and winter workshops for farmers and landowners were held to offer in-depth information on the conservation practices available through the project. Meetings were also conducted with the ag retailer field agronomists to inform them of the project goals and the conservation practices covered.

The goal of 11,500 new cover crop acres was met in 2019, with more than 7,000 new acres enrolled. Edge-of-field practice goals have been slower to achieve, but the process for installing a bioreactor or saturated buffer are also more involved. The good news for farmers interested in these kinds of practices is this project helps coordinate all the pieces for getting the work done, including siting and design expertise and coordinating financial assistance paperwork. A total of eight edge-of-field practices have been installed through the Farm to River Partnership with three more to be completed.

# Outlook for the Future...

The three-year Water Quality Initiative (WQI) for the Farm to River Partnership with Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) ends in March, but the commitment of those involved



*In August, WHO radio aired the Big Show on-location at Mark Schleisman's farm. Host Bob Quinn (right) chats with Schleisman (left) and Iowa Ag Secretary Mike Naig (center). The broadcast highlighted the advancements of the Farm to River Partnership.*

remains strong. The three ag retailers, ACWA, and other partners including Iowa Soybean Association and Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance (IAWA), know the positive outcomes already achieved and want to keep up the momentum.

Leaders of these organizations are beginning to formulate what the future may look like for this key area. The sub-watersheds are located in the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), a national NRCS initiative that will begin early next year. This will be taken into consideration as future goals take shape.

"We want to ensure those who have participated in the Farm to River Partnership maintain and grow their conservation efforts," says Roger Wolf, ACWA executive director. "For example, if they tried cover crops because of this partnership, I hope they expand their usage and even become advocates for conservation agriculture."

In the meantime, Wuebker and the ag retailers will continue to search for possible edge-of-field sites and encourage grower participation.

## Introducing Joe Wuebker

Conservation Agronomist Joe Wuebker came on board with the Farm to River Partnership in August. He is working with farmers and landowners in Sac, Calhoun, Carroll and Greene Counties in the Raccoon River watershed to implement cover crops and edge-of-field practices for improved water quality.

He holds a unique position, serving as a bridge that connects farmers and landowners with ACWA ag retail members Landus Cooperative, NEW Cooperative and Nutrien Ag Solutions. He engages with growers and field agronomists to achieve agronomic and environmental goals.

"I have been enjoying getting out in the field with people whom I've known for years and also people I'm just getting to know," Wuebker says. "I look forward to seeing how this project will grow in the future. There is a lot of potential for projects to help soil and water quality in the watershed."

Wuebker began his work immediately, getting to know Natural Resources Conservation Ser-

vice (NRCS) field staff, the ag retail agronomists, and meeting area farmers and landowners. He is striving to be an asset to those looking for help with conservation efforts and is working to increase exposure to less familiar conservation practices like bioreactors and saturated buffers.



Wuebker resides in Mount Carmel, just north of Carroll, with his wife Malynn and their two young children Noah and Macy. Prior to joining the partnership, Wuebker was an agronomist with Landus Cooperative for six years.



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# We Need YOU!

Do you have a field that has a buffer along a stream?

Are you planning to install tiling soon?

Do you have a tile line with an outlet into a buffer, pasture or grassed area?

These locations may be appropriate for an edge-of-field practice, which is 100 percent paid for through the Farm to River Partnership. These practices, and others such as cover crops, contribute toward water and soil quality improvement on your farm and downstream. Contact Joe Wuebker to

discuss possible sites and how the Farm to River Partnership can help.

Other opportunities available at no cost to you:

- Tile water monitoring
- Whole farm conservation assessments to identify ideal choices for conservation practices
- Replicated strip trials to test practices and products on your farm with your management systems.

Contact Joe Wuebker —

cell: **712-790-1415**

email: [jwuebker@iasoybeans.com](mailto:jwuebker@iasoybeans.com)



ACWA is a non-profit organization of 11 ag retailers in the Des Moines and Raccoon River watersheds, that agree water quality is vital to the future of farming. By helping their farmer clients with management options, adopt conservation practices, ACWA members are making strides toward the alliance's goals of farmer profitability combined with improving water quality.

[www.acwa-rrws.org](http://www.acwa-rrws.org)

