



Agriculture's Clean Water Alliance's NEWSLETTER

Summer 2022

In this second issue of the ACWA newsletter, we highlight the Conservation Agronomist and the contribution these positions can provide to improve soil health and water quality. It's a model that can adapt and evolve as ag retailers expand their offerings to their farmer customers.

Delivering on the ACWA Mission

ACWA members have a unique and trust-based relationship with farmers across Iowa. The ACWA's mission is to identify and advance solutions that reduce nutrient loss, build healthier soils, and improve Iowa's water. The keys to delivering on this mission are specific projects and program offerings.

"ACWA collaborates with several partners, providing additional support for projects and giving life to actions that support farmers as they consider implementing new practices and technologies," says Roger Wolf, ACWA Executive Director and Co-Director for Iowa Soybean Association Research Center for Farming Innovation.

Visit the ACWA website to learn more about the various programs, projects, and practices that help improve soil health and water quality: www.acwaiowa.com.

The Conservation Agronomist Model

ACWA is no stranger to innovative concepts. The organization of ag retailers has kept water quality a priority for more than 20 years, and in 2018, ACWA introduced the conservation agronomist concept as part of the Farm to River Partnership water quality initiative.

The conservation agronomist pivots from the traditional field agronomist found at most ag retailers. This person focuses on environmental issues in agriculture such as nutrient runoff and erosion control as well as soil health building practices, interweaving conservation practices with farm management plans for the best combination of productivity and sustainability for the producer.

Through ACWA, Iowa Soybean Association's (ISA) Research Center for Farming Innovation (RCFI), and organizations with similar conservation goals, the conservation agronomist network are thriving. Heath Ellison, ISA RCFI senior field services program manager, leads the conservation agronomists employed through ISA and coordinates the broader network.

"The conservation agronomists serve as knowledgeable, local resources for the agronomists and sales teams of specific ag retailers," says Ellison. "They work through the existing relationships that the retailers have with farmers, adding value for everyone where agronomics and conservation come together."



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Currently, there are eight conservation agronomists in the ISA network, and each is established through different capacities such as a funded grant or a company staff member. For example, Joe Wuebker heads the Farm to River Partnership initiative led by ACWA. He works directly with NEW Cooperative, Nutrien Ag Solutions and Landus Cooperative. Ryan Johnson, also an ISA-employed conservation agronomist, works directly with AgState. Conservation agronomists Ruth McCabe, Emery Davis and Will Hoffmann are employed at Heartland Cooperative.

“It was important to Heartland Cooperative that the conservation agronomists be our employees and work in the same department as our sales agronomists. This quickly builds a trusting relationship with our sales agronomists and our customers,” says Tom Fawcett, Heartland Co-op Environmental Resources and Precision Ag Director. “We want our customers and our employees to know that Heartland is taking a long-term approach to conservation being a part of our future. We want to offer an integrated solution through our sales agronomists and our conservation agronomists.”

The conservation agronomist helps farmers and landowners implement conservation practices by serving as a liaison with contractors for design and installation, helping with cost-share paperwork, and offering guidance for management and maintenance. This allows the field agronomists to focus on their responsibilities of helping customers with nutrient management, planting, and harvesting.

Although the conservation agronomist network program model is still early in its maturity, it seems to be taking off. Heartland Cooperative recently expanded its conservation agronomist staff positions because of farmer demand.

“Our farmers want help in navigating the conservation space for both agronomics and economics. Farmers are looking for someone to help them with selecting the right conservation practice and cost-share program,” says Fawcett. “There are a lot of farmers who haven’t adopted conservation practices because of the challenges in the field and market. We want to support them in adopting the right practices as well as making those practices work on their acres.”

ACWA, its members and numerous sponsors are working together to develop the conservation agronomist position, helping it become an industry standard. Through this new network of those serving in this position, the group is creating and refining protocols for the role of conservation agronomist to make an impact in Iowa.



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"We are proving that programs and dollars should be invested into a network of conservation agronomists," remarks Fawcett. "These experts are experiencing success in helping farmers adopt conservation practices on their farms."

For more information about finding a conservation agronomist in your area, contact Heath Ellison at Hellison@iasoybeans.com. If there isn't a conservation agronomist near you, it is important to know as well. Demand for this position could direct placement efforts as we grow the conservation agronomist network. The goals set by ACWA and carried out by farmers, conservation agronomists and industry partners can be achieved by working together.

4R Stewardship Event

You are invited to attend a 4R Stewardship event in Cedar Rapids sponsored in part by ACWA. It will be held Monday, August 29, from 10:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. (registration beginning at 9:30 a.m.) at Kirkwood Community College, Iowa Hall Student Center, 6301 Kirkwood Blvd, Cedar Rapids. Parking is available in Lot P18.

The event focuses on the 4Rs of nutrient management. Speakers and topics include:

- Fertilizer Branding: Jake Vossenkemper, Liqui-Grow; Sean Arthur, ETS
- Regenerative Nutrient Sources: Mike Bretz, eastern Iowa farmer; Evan Brehm, conservation agronomist, Iowa Soybean Association in coordination with Linn Coop
- Managing Manure Nutrients: Brent Pacha, Sinclair Tractor
- N Management–New MRTN: Mike Castellano, Iowa State University

The event is free to attend, but registration is requested. To register, go to:

<https://www.iasoybeans.com/events/4r-stewardship-field-day>

Contact Kristen Dearden with event questions: 515-334-1482, kdearden@iasoybeans.com.

Agriculture's Clean Water Alliance (ACWA) is a non-profit association whose mission is identifying and advancing solutions that reduce nutrient loss, build healthier soils, and improve Iowa's waters. ACWA is recognized for its ability to build upon its members' extensive relationship with farmers across Iowa.

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