

Pilot farm project tackles conservation

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(Photo: Bill Neibergall/The Register)

Farmers in Iowa and the Midwest will soon be able to get advice about conservation at local elevators, along with their seed, fertilizers and herbicides.

The effort is expected to more quickly bring conservation efforts to Iowa farmers and their fields, and help the state accelerate work to meet a broad plan to reduce nutrients that go into state waterways and eventually flow to the Gulf of Mexico and contribute to the "dead zone."

"If we're really going to move conservation forward, we have to engage the private sector," said Stan Buman, who with his brother, Tom, began Agren in 1996. The Carroll-based company helps farmers build soil conservation practices into their operations that help the bottom line and the environment.

Agren is teaming up with Ames-based United Suppliers, a member-owned wholesaler that provides agricultural products to about 700 elevator groups and other retailers, with thousands of locations, in 20 states and two Canadian provinces.

Matt Carstens, a United Suppliers vice president, said the 51-year-old company is already providing products and services to help farmers better manage nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphate. Adding soil conservation services through Agren — and bringing the products and services together under a marketing effort called Sustain — made sense, he said.

The project, being piloted in Iowa before it is rolled out broadly, will likely cost more than United Suppliers can recoup — at least initially. Carstens said the initiative is essential to helping preserve farming's long-term viability.

"We believe we've got to be on the forefront of this sustainability issue," Carstens said. "We need to do it to keep crop nutrients in the fields where they're applied — and the herbicides and insecticides — and this is a tool that we can provide."

Farmers are under pressure to move toward more sustainable practices, prodded by environmentalists, the federal government and food companies that use their corn, soybeans, oats and wheat.

Carstens said farmers have already adopted many conservation practices — such as reduced, no-till and strip tilling that build soil health and help prevent erosion; splitting fertilizer applications so there's reduced opportunities for it to move into the water; and using products that help hold nutrients such as nitrogen in place.

"It's amazing how much work farmers are doing in conservation ... but there's also more work to be done," Carstens said.

Iowa needs to amp up its conservation efforts to meet the goals in the nutrient reduction strategy, say the Bumans, former employees of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Government assistance will never be enough to get the work accomplished, they said.

For example, Iowa would need at least 50 years to put in all the grassed waterways needed across the state using only government cost-share programs, the brothers estimate. Grassed waterways help prevent erosion and water leaving farms and entering streams and lakes.

"The state and the nation don't have the stomach or the budget to meet the conservation needs out there," said Stan Buman, who has joined United Suppliers to lead the soil conservation initiative.

United Suppliers will use Agren's software to provide rapid farm-based assessment of conservation needs, its cost and potential benefits to the operation.

"There are really two issues hanging over farmers — possible regulations and food-supply changes," Stan Buman said. "From the state's nutrient reduction strategy side, everybody is pretty much saying this is the last chance to get it right before regulations."

Carstens said farmers need help sorting through the conservation practices that are right for them. And new approaches are being developed. "That grower has a lot of stuff coming at him. ... This program gives the ag retailers across Iowa and the Midwest the tools they need to help the grower move in a direction that's long-term and sustainable," he said.

United Suppliers' Sustain program also can help provide food companies and their suppliers with the information they need about farms' sustainability efforts, Carstens said. Figuring out what farmers need to do to meet food companies' new standards is part of the challenge.

"There's got to be a sustainability blueprint that farmers can follow," he said. "That's what we're working on here, something that people can rally around."

Tom Buman said farmers aren't waiting for government incentives to tackle conservation, either.

Half of recent conservation activities had no government involvement, according to a survey of the Iowa Land Improvement Contractors Association, whose members build waterway, wetlands and other conservation structures.

"That was when corn was \$6 a bushel, but there's still a lot of work being done by farmers without government assistance," Tom Buman said.

The Bumans' technology helps give farmers a quick, accurate snapshot of how different conservation practices such as no-till planting or terraces can reduce soil erosion.

"Farmers intuitively know that if they lose topsoil, they're losing productivity" and yields, Tom Buman said.

Richard Cruse, an agronomy professor at Iowa State University, estimated earlier this year that gully-washing rains and the erosion that comes with them could cut \$1 billion from yields annually in the state. He and others are trying to better determine the economic impact of erosion in the state.

Tom Buman said soil erosion assessments like Agren's can give farmers electronic data that can be overlaid on yield maps and begin to paint a stronger picture of how yields can improve with erosion control practices.

"Over the next three to five years, in the hands of ag retailers, we're going to understand a lot more" about the economic impact of soil erosion, he said.

Forces changing farming

Farmers face pressures from corporations and government to adopt conservation practices. Some examples:

General Mills said last week it will expand its carbon emission reduction targets to include raw farm ingredients that it uses in cereals and other products. The Minneapolis-based company wants to sustainably source 100 percent of its top 10 priority products, including wheat, oats and milled corn by 2020. They represent 50 percent of the company's purchases.

The state of Iowa has adopted a nutrient reduction strategy to help improve water quality here and in the Gulf of Mexico. Efforts range from encouraging farmers to adopt cover crops that hold soil and nutrients in place to adding bioreactors, buffer strips and other conservation efforts within large watersheds.

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