

Cover Crops: The Answer to our Water (and farming) Woes

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Everyone agrees that our region's rich, black soil puts us in the epicenter of growing food to feed the world. Everyone agrees that clean, safe water is a priority for our taps as well as our recreational waterways. What we can't seem to agree on is the interconnectedness of these two precious resources, and the role nutrient pollution from modern agriculture plays in water quality.

A [recent analysis](#) by the Iowa Environmental Council showed that implementation rates of voluntary conservation practices set forth in the 2013 Nutrient Reduction Strategy are slowing. Under current time modeling, the IEC analysis shows it would take hundreds of years or more before we achieve the necessary goals.

It is time for all farmland owners to do more and do it quickly.

What has stopped farmland owners from taking immediate action? Money to start. And the rightful fear of risk.

The good news is that we are often able to back into conservation solutions on a farming operation. By solving the financial issues on a farm, there is almost always a positive environmental impact for the land and water. This opportunity comes into play as we shift our mindset on production, where in the past we focused on maximizing yield to generate significant income to newer precision agriculture that now allows us to zero in where inputs are not equating to a commodity.

Today's technology lets us model on an acre-scale to identify opportunities for more prescriptive management. This looks like taking an active role in measuring soil and nutrient loss on every acre of a farm. It is assessing crop rotation, tillage practices, as well as putting the right fertilizer on each acre at the right time and rate. It is also committing to a cover crop program to benefit the land all year long.

Cover crops provide living roots to hold soil in place and retain nutrients for the next cash crop. This practice builds on each year of implementation, with long-term advantages of reduced fertilizer costs, reduced chemical use due to improved weed suppression, improved soil biology to protect from insects and disease, and increased water holding capacity.

Cover crops are typically a hardy small grain crop, such as oats, wheat, barley, or tillage radishes, either seeded into a standing crop or seeded after harvest to provide vegetative cover over the winter months. Cover crops reduce erosion, increase soil tilth with their extensive root systems, and increase organic matter. Cover crops also hold excess nitrogen, keeping it in the soil and stopping it from entering nearby bodies of water where it can degrade drinking water or spur threatening algae blooms.

These efforts aren't just good for Iowa's waterways, they are also good for land values. When these improvements are tied together, there is opportunity for increased yields on the cash crop. When yield increases, farmland rent and sale price follow.

Peoples Company understands the value of investing in the long-term health of the land. Our Sustainability Cover Crop Initiative is designed to simultaneously maximize yields and improve overall return on investment, while benefiting the environment. The program is a partnership with Stine Seed, where three years of cover crops are paid for when new land management clients plant Stine soybean or corn seed.

Conservation practices must be accelerated on Iowa's farmland if the state is going to reach nutrient reduction goals we committed to. Adopting new practices can be difficult, but the research shows implementing conservation practices – specifically cover crops – benefit farmland AND our waterways. With swift action now we can change the conversation and show that agriculture and water quality can work together to benefit everyone.