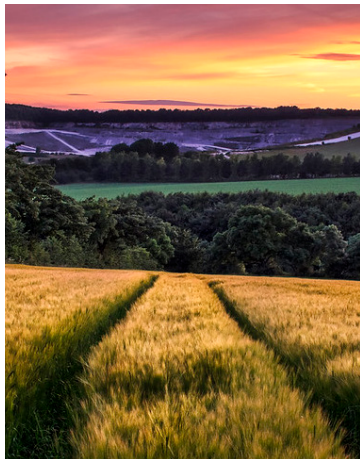
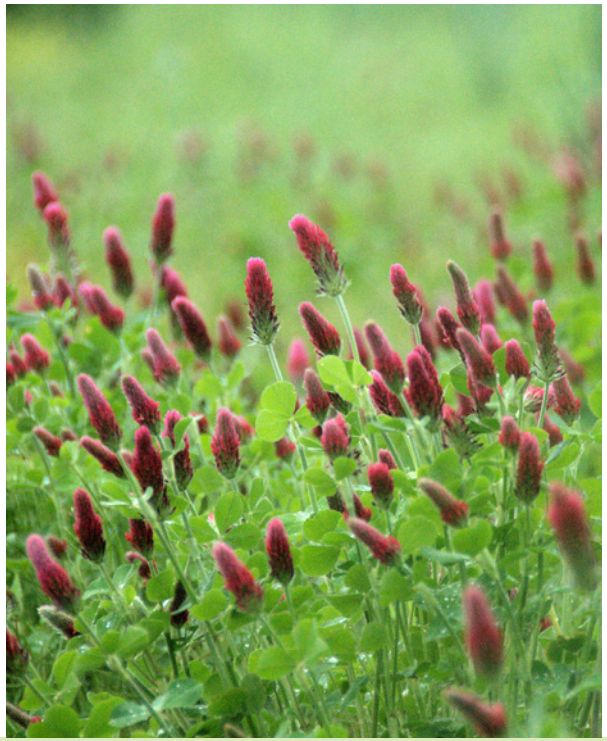
Developing Partnerships with Agricultural Stakeholders



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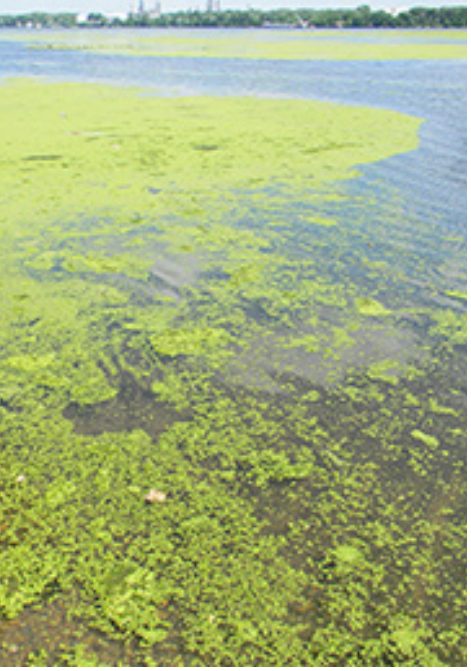

Credit: University of Wisconsin

Key output: Identification of causes and sources that need to be addressed and the load reductions this project hopes to achieve.

Part 1: Identify Pollutant and Project Area

Before beginning a watershed-farmer project it is critical to identify the issues of concern. Characterizing the problems, specifically the pollutants you hope to address, helps focus the scope of the project. Once you have defined the pollutant of interest, the next step is to identify the pollutant sources. This will help determine which areas in your community are best to focus your efforts and define the project area.

In your area the pollutant of concern may vary, however, in Iowa the main pollutants of concerns are nitrogen and phosphorus. Nitrogen and phosphorus are components of farm fertilizers, which when not fully utilized by plants can be lost from fields and negatively impact downstream water quality. To identify the pollutants and areas of concern, start by gathering the following reports and data:

- Physical and natural features of the community and watershed
- Land use and existing management
- Nearby waterbody conditions and monitoring data
- Pollutant sources

This information can be found in local government offices (city and county planning offices, environmental departments, soil and water conservation districts), the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship and various federal agencies (Environmental Protection Agency, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Department of Agriculture, etc). Reviewing this information will help define the goals of the project and develop more detailed objectives, measurable targets and performance indicators.

Hypothetical

Claire has just been hired as a watershed project coordinator for Cornville, IA to help the city develop a source water protection plan and explore the possibility of nutrient trading. Her first step as part of this work is to research what the biggest pollutants are and to find maps that highlight different land uses including farming. She contacts her local Iowa DNR representative and talks to him about what information he has as well as the local IA DALS office.

Part 2: Develop your Plan

Now that you have identified the pollutants that need to be addressed and outlined the geographic scope of the project, you can determine the extent to which the pollutants need to be reduced to meet watershed goals and what management practices can help you get there. For many communities target load reduction is based on the local water utility permit (either drinking water standards or wastewater effluent load). Talk to your wastewater engineer. Have them explain the permit and what is required to be reduced through infrastructure and what can be reduced through watershed work. Most likely you will be facing significant nitrogen reductions. Using the numbers in the permit can give you a place to start when thinking about how much of a reduction you hope to achieve from agricultural sources.

Once a consensus has been reached on a target load reduction, you should select several management practices to achieve those goals. In general, management practices are implemented next to the waterbody or upstream to address pollution sources. As you review different practices you will want to think about which can be implemented in the critical areas you identified in part 1. A key part of identifying management practices is estimating the expected load reduction from each practice. A variety of models are available to determine which practices are more appropriate for reducing pollutant loads and can help select the location that will have the greatest reduction. (See Appendix A for a more detailed review of different models). One thing to remember is the timing involved with each practice. Some practices such as cover crops have a very narrow window during which they can be planted depending on the weather. Other practices such as buffer strips have more flexibility with implementation timing.

Another important piece of plan development is determining the cost of the project. This requires information from several sources including the local soil and water conservation district [1] and the local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office.[2] The overall project cost should include:

- Cost of each management practice (including life expectancy and maintenance)
- Staff time associated with practice design, technical assistance, installation (if applicable) and verification
- Water quality monitoring (both staff time and associated analyses)

At some point it may become necessary to have your plan reviewed by the IA DNR. The IA DNR has a watershed management plan development guide that is a good place to start and provides a step by step outline of the process. You can find the guide here.

Credit: Soil and Water Conservation Society Conservation Media Library

Key output: Identification of target load reductions, appropriate management practices and project costs.

[1] Iowa Soil and Water Conservation Districts: http://cdiowa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Pictorial-Directory1.pdf
[2] Iowa Natural Resources Conservation Services Offices: https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/ia/contact/local/

Part 3: Develop and Engage Partnerships

Credit: Soil and Water Conservation Society Conservation Media Library

...these groups may have insight into which individuals are easiest to work with and have recommendations for navigating certain personalities.

Now that you have a plan you need partners to help you implement your plan successfully. Partnerships will vary between watersheds and true engagement depends on the project leader's ability to understand the interest of each group and effectively explain how those can be met through the project. Potential partners can be divided into several groups including:

- Local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD)
- Local NRCS offices
- Farmer-led watershed groups and
- Other agricultural stakeholders (agronomists, nutrient management planners, etc)

These groups can help you connect with farmers in your watershed. It is possible to connect individually and work one – on – one with any farmer in your area but we strongly suggest working with one of the entities listed above. Because these groups are already working with farmers they have established relationships that will make it easier for you to connect more effectively. Additionally, these groups may have insight into which individuals are easiest to work with and have recommendations for navigating certain personalities. While this may sound trivial, tricky personalities and fragile relationships are among the main reasons projects fail. Ultimately you will want to find farmers that are leaders in the area and can be spokesman for both the project and conservation generally.

An example of a successful urban-agricultural partnership is the Yahara Watershed Improvement Network (Yahara WINs). Yahara WINs, led by the Madison Wisconsin Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD) began in 2012 in response to more restrictive water quality standards. Yahara WINs approached the Yahara Pride Farms (YPF) farmer group about being a partner and helping provide nutrient load reductions. Both MMSD and YPF were cautious about the relationship but through clear goal setting, outlining the benefits to both parties and slow trust building the partnership has blossomed.

Credit: Soil and Water Conservation Society Conservation Media Library

YPF receives annual funding to hire a dedicated soil conservationist to research and explore new techniques. Also an annual meeting of the stakeholders and partners. This ongoing gathering goes a long way towards maintaining a strong connection and a successful program.

YPF agreed to the partnership for several reasons:

- the urban-agriculture framework provides access to long term and flexible funding,
- access to complimentary watershed planning and monitoring services, and
- an opportunity for farmers to play a leadership role in the watershed around water quality.

MMSD and other municipal partners benefit from the partnership by receiving nutrient and sediment load reductions generated by farmers.

Beyond a basic transactional relationship this is where the municipality needs to provide a structure or team that can help farmers feel a part of something bigger.

A smaller scale example can be found in the city of Griswold Iowa. Griswold developed a source water protection project and team to prevent contaminants and ensure sustainable drinking water. After identifying agriculture as the main source of pollution the team mapped out high priority capture zones. They decided to focus on planting cover crops and set a goal of increasing cover cropped acres in the capture zone by 25% each year. Griswold has seen a decline in nitrate levels and staff anticipates larger decreases in the future after consecutive years of cover cropping.

Key output: identify key partners and begin to develop relationships.

Part 4: Public Engagement

Telling the story of watershed work and explaining why it's important to spend dollars working with farmers is critical to getting the public engaged.

Now that you have developed a plan and built relationships with local farmers, it's important to communicate your work to your customers and the general public. Effectively communicating about your work and the impacts it has on water quality and watershed health will ensure buy in from the community and possibly open doors for other opportunities in the future.

There are several key things to keep in mind when thinking about outward communications:

1. Who is your audience?

The first rule of communications outreach is to know your audience. Targeting a specific audience will help you tailor your message and make your communication more effective. In general your audience will likely be the utility's customers and the people who live in the community. Telling the story of watershed work and explaining why it's important to spend dollars working with farmers is critical to getting the public engaged. You'll also want to thinking about different types of meetings and the audiences you'll encounter at each. A meeting with local businesses will require a slightly different presentation than a meeting with the larger community.

2. What is the message?

Once you have identified your audience you can define your core message. While the message may shift slightly depending on your audience, it is important to keep in mind there is a fundamental message that will not shift. The core message is a values-based message with the following elements: shared value of the water/surrounding watershed, threat to the water/watershed, a manageable solution and a sense of urgency.

VALUE
What is the value your project is bringing?

SOLUTION
What solutions are you offering in your work?

THREAT
What is threatened if you don't do your work?

URGENCY
What would happen if your work was delayed?

Another important piece is to consider when developing your message is the best messenger for your work. Strong messengers are essential to effective communication and different messengers can connect with audiences in different ways. Compelling messengers could include water utility staff, or businesses who are struggling with the effects of nutrient pollution.

3. What is the story?

In the communication world people say “the best story wins”. People respond to specific personal stories. Strong, compelling stories will make your message more effective and make abstract concepts more concrete, immediate and salient. It is worth the up-front time to find a powerful story that will capture the attention of your audience. Success stories also underscore that these problems and issues are solvable, and can help instill good morale and momentum in the work. An example of a story relating to agriculture can be found here. Notice how the main voice highlights the emotional value and greater importance of his conservation work.

4. How do I handle challenges or opposition?

Inevitably you will be faced with a tough or difficult question. When answering questions or criticisms your goal should always be to return to your own message through the ABC’s of message discipline:

Be sure never to get defensive, but rather make the other side defend why they are mentioning this issue. Link to one water concept. Hard to argue against clean water. You all value and need clean water (no water no life).

Credit: NWF

ACKNOWLEDGE
the question or issue

BRIDGE
with a common fact or talking point back to your core message

COMMUNICATE
your core message

Link to one water concept. Hard to argue against clean water. You all value and need clean water (no water no life).

5. How do you get your message out?

In addition to in person meetings and gatherings, it is important to always continue pushing your message out through various channels. There are many ways to circulate your message to the people who want to see it and hear it. Here are some ways to get your message out:

With the Public:
- Website
- Blog
- Twitter
- Facebook
- Reports
- Events
- Conferences
- Speeches

With the Press:
- Press releases
- Statements
- Op-eds
- Editorial board memos
- Letters to the Editor
- Reporters tour
- Press conference
- Phone briefing

With your Members:
- Newsletters
- Magazine articles
- Email updates
- Action alerts
- Annual reports
- Presentations
- Events

With Public Officials:
- Letters
- Phone calls
- Congressional office visits
- In-district visits
- Restoration site visits

Credit: NWF

Take an inventory of communication channels you currently use or may add to your portfolio to decide which ones are right for your project. Remember who your target audience is and the most effective way to reach them. If there are multiple options, prioritize which tactics are most important and act to implement it. Tell your story!

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Part 5: Getting Credit

Your watershed project will likely be used for permit or regulatory compliance. If this is the case there are additional steps you must take and information you must document. At the beginning of the project it is critical to establish a baseline and to develop a common understanding of the requirements for permit compliance with the appropriate regulating agency or agencies. Keeping track of your methodology at every step of the project is critical.

Credit: Soil and Water Conservation Society Conservation Media Library

At the very beginning of a project be sure to take photos and document existing land practices from day one. This will ensure you can get appropriate credit for every action implemented. The key is to be able to show change over time and tell a story of nutrient reduction. In ten or twenty years you will want to show what the project has accomplished. This can only be done by being very thorough from the beginning.

When initiating the project and thinking about regulatory compliance certain aspects of the project will need to be agreed upon between the project partners and the appropriate stakeholder groups. These include:

- Project timeline (including implementation)
- Project scale and boundaries
- Nutrient reduction levels

Credit: Soil and Water Conservation Society Conservation Media Library

Key output: establish baseline conditions for your project area and develop common understanding of requirements with regulating agency(s).

- Nutrient reduction models and monitoring to show compliance
  - Talk to the municipality and the regulating agencies to figure out what model is best to use based on the project area. If possible take a training course to learn more.
  - Beyond just knowing what model is being used, familiarize yourself with the necessary documentation and data collection for appropriate modeling)
  - You may hire someone else to do the modeling. If this is the case make sure you record any underlying assumptions and background information used in the model.
- Progress reports to appropriate agency (Feel free to call the agency and ask what they like to see in a progress report, or even ask for an example)

Regardless of the arrangement it is important to keep track of all your progress and methodology throughout the project. As you work through the process of setting up the project be sure to take note of any and all meetings you have, how many people came and what actions resulted. Basic data analysis should also be done regularly to keep track of your progress and review the success of your project. Data you might need to report on such nutrient levels, dissolved oxygen, abundance and variety of aquatic life, etc.

Credit: Soil and Water Conservation Society Conservation Media Library

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