



USDA-CSREES 2006 National Water Quality Conference

Performance Measures to Evaluate Water Quality Accomplishments

For sustainable water resource protection, watershed citizens must understand local nonpoint source water problems, participate in planning solutions, and have means to measure their progress. Agricultural producers are often skeptical of management plans created by technical specialists if these challenge their trusted production methods and supplier recommendations. This is especially true when they can't complete the cycle of performance-based management by evaluating whether environmental goals are being attained and by having the flexibility to refine their plans for continued improvement. In a priority agricultural watershed in northeast Iowa, a council of crop and livestock producers is addressing these issues. They have voluntarily assumed responsibility for sustainable water quality protection and improvement *by implementing a locally-managed incentive program that allows cooperators to define and demonstrate for themselves performance measures for environmental stewardship that have a reasonable cost and are linked with accountable farm management decisions.* Iowa State University Extension is assisting their efforts by providing educational programs and access to technical and scientific specialists from additional agencies and institutions, and managing field days and on-farm demonstrations. The Hewitt Creek council has used their research-based knowledge to establish specific watershed improvement goals and objectives. In 2005 they began implementing an incentive program for targeted practices and performance measures. The Iowa and Dubuque County Farm Bureau are funding their program. Cooperators self-select the work they will undertake. Many have spent time and funds beyond their program commitment to establish new practices and take additional tests. The result has been increased water protection practices over a majority of watershed acres at substantially less cost than current publicly-funded programs. The council's management of the incentive program is also performance-based. Incentive payments, and the extent to which they specifically reward environmental performance at the whole-farm level, are flexible and will be evaluated from year to year and adjusted as necessary to help meet the council's environmental goals.

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