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Performance Incentives Enable Stewardship Ethic and Systems Approach to...

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Abstract Text:

Producer watershed councils in three northeast Iowa priority watersheds (HUC12) are implementing a locally-directed program of performance-based incentives for environmental crop and livestock management. Incentive funds are provided by the Iowa Farm Bureau, the Iowa Corn Growers, and the Iowa Watershed Improvement Review Board. Performance incentives are an innovative conservation program model, based on education, to promote and sustain action toward environmental stewardship goals. Social impacts are central to the performance incentive concept. In addition to implementation of flexible, adaptive management, performance programs are a mechanism to establish widespread adoption, peer pressure and community support for nonpoint source management improvement. This paper will report on a survey of performance cooperators that explored a) the educational and management outcomes of their participation, and b) their satisfaction with various aspects of the incentive program and how it could be improved. The paper will also describe environmental performance and cost/benefit results, and participants' efforts to influence public and private organizations. Between 45-55% of producers in the targeted watersheds are participating in the program. They receive incentives, at rates determined by the local council, for improved scores in performance indexes: the Phosphorus Index, Soil Conditioning Index and Stalk Nitrate test. They can also select management practices to improve their performance scores. ISU Extension provides council facilitation, science-based information, and technical assistance provided as an educational program. Participants find the performance program structure and implementation to be practical, profitable and fair. They believe they are having a positive effect on the environment and on their neighbors' practices. They undertake additional management changes at their own expense and initiative, and are motivated to target change on their own farms. Leaders of the councils are discussing and promoting the value of this flexible performance approach in their communities, with project sponsors and to elected officials.

Impact Statement:

A locally-directed program of performance incentives has engaged a majority of watershed farmers in management changes to improve water quality. The program has gained support from the public and private sector, and local cooperators are actively advocating the performance-based environmental management approach as a way to act on their stewardship ethic. Extension has facilitated the process through assistance with computer models provided as an educational program to individual program participants. The program has resulted in significant improvements in qualitative performance indicators for P loss reduction and soil quality improvement at the farm and watershed level.