

Curiosity Alive and Well on the Farm and in the Focus Group

By Anne Queenan

It was a beautiful yet blistering July afternoon when Hollis Weber took some time off from managing his livestock and crop farm in western Minnesota to go see a well-designed hole in the ground, a large pile of wood chips, and a saturated buffer, all sitting at the edge of a dry field. He also walked a few yards to check out the view of the Yellow Medicine River. So did farmers Jerry Nelson, Kate Winkleman, and 125 others involved in research, environmental conservation, soil, water, and agriculture.



On the Yellow Medicine River a new toe-wood sod mat had just been installed by a hydrologist from the Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Lucas Youngsma, to help stabilize its eroding banks. On the edge of

the field, a crowd learned about a new practice to remove nitrates from subsurface tile water called a bioreactor filter, while others listened to new ways to convert from open surface tiling to pattern tiling. And on an adjacent buffer under the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), a new experimental practice called a saturated buffer was underway, also designed to remove nitrates from drainage water before it enters the waterways. “It’s always helpful to see things up close to see how they are going to work or how they engineer them to work,” said Weber.



The Focus Group

A month later, Weber drove to Granite Falls to share a meal and exchange ideas with two dozen others about what could be learned from this event. So did his daughter and seventeen other people who attended this field event at Doug and Lois Albin’s farm. They participated in a focus group, sponsored by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) and convened and facilitated by Clean Up the River Environment (CURE), to talk about how agriculture and conservation can collaboratively work together on the ground. The combination of what can be



done to restore the riverbanks, innovate the way farming is practiced, and help the farmer produce was in full display on Doug Albin’s farm. What was the feedback?

Diverse ideas were shared between a cross section of people—agency employees, landowners, and environmentalists—as they sought sweet spots on what to work on together to keep the ball rolling and build



First, when it's real and it's local, it works. More conservation drainage projects on real farms nearby seem to be an effective way to educate for new state-of-the-art practices and conservation/restorative options.

"It really helps to see somebody doing it and to see what it looks like on the ground. You can print up pamphlets and have the best sales story in the world, but until you see what is going on out there it doesn't really make too much sense until you get to the demonstration project," said Jerry Nelson, a crop farmer from Stony Run Township.

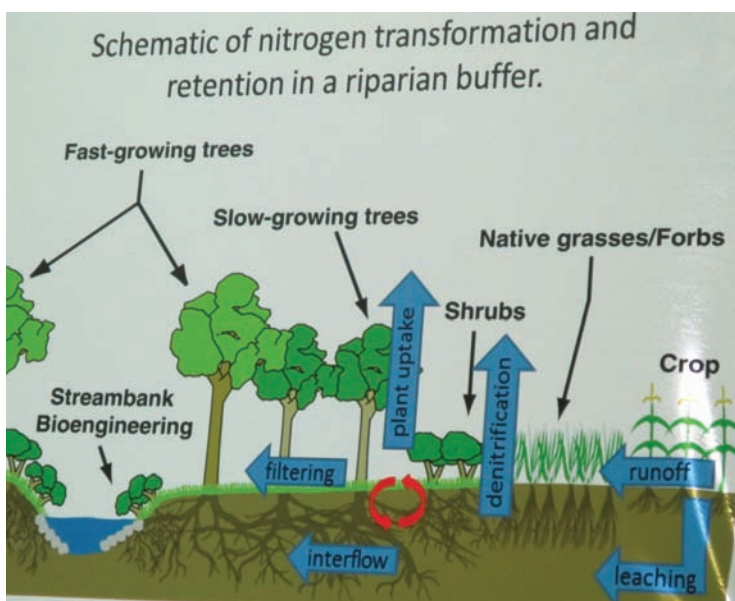


momentum. **All cared greatly about the well-being of the people, the land, the water, and the resources here in Minnesota.**

What can be done to help the farmer make a living on the land, manage the water in times of drought or floods, while at the same time, reduce the high levels of nitrate, as well as the water velocity, coming from subsurface drainage before entering the rivers and lakes?

What other conservation measures and opportunities can be taken now to support the landowner on marginal land while addressing a river, its tributaries and the surrounding ecosystems in great peril?

Not easy topics, but all on the table. Here's what they found.



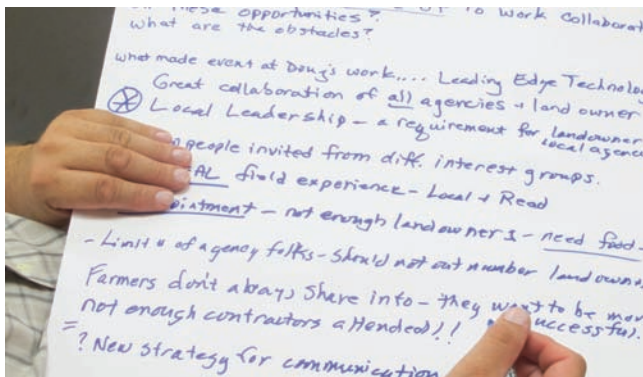
Nelson currently farms 870 tillable acres with 35 acres in CRP. He is considering applying for some of the new conservation drainage grant money available. In addition to bioreactors and buffers, Nelson is very interested in native prairie restoration as an option on his land. His volunteering with Pheasants Forever introduced him to the virtues of prairie burns. "When you light a match to that big blue stem, it's almost like you've dumped all kinds of fertilizer on it because it rejuvenates it so much, you know."

Second, coordinated efforts with local and state agencies and current research make it direct and easy for the landowner.



A Tie-In Opportunity for a Field Day

When a landowner like Hollis, who attended Doug Albin's event, walks into the Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) office and wants to do something to fix a problem or improve his water management, this is a key opportunity to turn this into a similar field event for further educational efforts. Tying funding into more local events would help spread the word. "It was pretty amazing to see how all of the agencies came together and put that together for the Albin project," said Weber.



"Communicating how these events work to other counties will also be crucial

to expose more of the Minnesota River Basin to these practices," said Kyleen Olsen of the Chippewa River Watershed Project. "Let's



encourage them to promote these events with landowners in their area who are seeking a solution." The Chippewa River Watershed Project (CRWP) monitors the state of the Chippewa River watershed across seven counties in the Upper Minnesota River Valley.



Engaging and educating the contractors on these conservation measures was important to Lou Ann Nagel and Ian Olson at the Yellow Medicine SWCD. Along with landowners, several recommendations were made to prioritize communication with these contractors as a key focus.



Third, where is the landowner? How do we reach him or her?

Landowners attended both the field day and the focus group, but in low

numbers. It is going to be a **slow but steady** change, described Dave Sill of the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) in Marshall, one of the funding agencies behind the new conservation drainage practices—specifically, the bioreactor system. Agencies are doing what they can now to make money more accessible locally in the counties like the Yellow Medicine and Lac Qui Parle SWCDs who just received a \$60,000 grant, he explained, but the landowners need to want to apply for these. Nagel reported that calls are just starting to come in inquiring about these opportunities.

Olsen stressed how we needed a **strong outreach effort on the ground** with the landowner. "Ultimately any change that's going to happen is going to happen on the landscape and its landowners. I can provide all of the tools, but I am not the one making the changes." The CRWP also helps the landowner with additional cost-



shares, at times, up to 75% for certain conservation measures.

Ian Olson, the farm-bill assistant at Yellow Medicine SWCD, believes this will take some time to catch on. "It's a new practice. It's no different than when we started setting aside programs in grassland conservation after the Dust Bowl. Seems like a win-win for everyone."



Fourth, how do we simplify this, speed it up and be flexible?

Use local Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Meetings and County Listening Sessions to Access Funds.

Through these dialogues, Kylene Olsen now plans to bring local landowners in seven counties with her to the local EQIP meetings to request more of these conservation drainage practices and field days. In addition, she wants to bring landowners to county listening sessions by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). She learned from Gary Watson that the landowners' needs were represented from both of these meetings at the state technical level for NRCS funding consideration. It was also suggested to have these county listening sessions by the NRCS facilitated as well. This is a local way of simplifying how to access needed funds. In addition, she can then provide additional funds to landowners with 50% cost share from, say, NRCS, up to 75%.

Cut Down on the Paperwork and Large-Scale Concerns

Landowners explained that the active farmer is out there on his or her own. It can be isolating. Compliance with all of the rules and regulations from the various agencies can be daunting. The sentiment from the group suggested there are times when the landowner feels it's best to take care of processes related to water management or eroding banks on his or her own.

Contrary to that expectation was Albin's actual experience with the entire process. The Clarkfield farmer who collaborated with these agencies to install these practices described how this process was made very easy for him to be able to do this. "I thought it was going to involve 80% of my property, but the flexibility of the experts here focused on 20% and got it done," stated Albin. All of the paper work was handled by someone else. And that's exactly what Watson wants to see happen, "We've got to make it simple and affordable for the landowner."



Many believed that **the farmer who leads the way** will set an example for others. The sentiment was, if someone nearby has tried something that's going well for him, then that sparks curiosity to learn more.

Some outreach to landowners, the groups reported, requires **targeting niche markets** like the **absentee landlords** living in the cities or out of state, who own almost 50% of the land.



To reach **women landowners**, who are older and widowed, a possible collaboration with other **local citizen's groups** successfully engaging this population was suggested. Another recommendation

was made to get the **sportsmen's groups** involved in engaging the local landowners as well.



More Streamlining of the Process for Conservation and Innovation

More streamlining of the approval process for implementing new conservation measures would be helpful, many focus group members suggested. The permit process through using land in CRP for new experimental conservation practices like the saturated buffer currently



requires administrative consideration and expense. Conservationists would like to be assured that land set aside for conservation will only be used that way. Likewise, the procedure used to restore the bank of the Yellow Medicine River on the Albin farm, the toe-wood sod mat, is not yet approved for funding with state money due to its experimental status. The project team, in this case, found funding with help from the DNR. More of this type of resourcefulness and flexibility is needed.

Lou Ann Nagel of the Yellow Medicine SWCD, whose office helps get state and federal funds available to landowners explained, “We can’t spend money on something experimental that hasn’t been done before unless it’s approved by the state, which could include a pilot grant.” Many stakeholders here will be looking for the measurements from two of these experimental practices with hopes for good results to make them more widely available.



For landowners interested in the new denitrifying bioreactor system, it is approved now for cost-sharing by both the state (BWSR) and the federal government (NRCS). The state monies are part of the Clean Water Legacy Fund.

Messages from the focus group seemed to indicate that acceptance of new experimental conservation practices requires an openness for ways to expedite good ideas from all stakeholders involved in conservation and agriculture.



Timing of installation, farm size, and availability of drainage contractors matter.

Weber is ready to put conservation drainage into play, but has a few **roadblocks**.

“I’m ready to adapt to what we’ve seen out at Doug’s. We’ve got one field we’ve been talking about putting in one of those gated structures that retain water back on our farm to keep as much back as we can. It’s just timing of how we can get the crop off and find enough time to get somebody to put in the structure and then to put the tile in.”



The installing of the new conservation measures, like the saturated buffer, explains Dan Jaynes can be done in between the planting and the harvest season. And it is **convenient** as it only uses a control structure and perforated tiling, placed under a buffer that already exists.

For Weber, the **small size of his farm** has not helped his ranking on the drainage contractor waiting list. “To have a small project that you want to run a gate on that covers 80 acres and they’re looking at a larger farm, maybe 600 acres, they are more compelled to go that direction,” he said.



Fifth, how do we access money to accomplish this and support the landowner? There's money to be had.

"Money is not the only consideration here," said Sunny Ruthchild. It is possible that other values and interests will influence a landowners' choice on many options available to him or her for conservation.



This new conservation drainage approach provides an **opportunity to layer practices, in the field, at the field's edge and in the stream.** Other measures that involve taking land out of production may also be layered if the landowner chooses to do so. Growing table food on smaller farms, and prairie restoration, on marginal land are some of the options suggested for consideration.

However, from most diverse viewpoints, the predominant message was that money was ample and the rate of access to it varied. For the established crop farmer, the price of corn and soybeans has never been higher. The demand for land for crop production has also never been higher.

For the conservationist, Tom Kalahar pointed out the vast reserves in the state of Minnesota that are accessible to pay the landowner for his or her land to make it profitable. He referenced a recent success in preserving a large portion of land and granite stone outcrops and encouraged collaboration on seeking these funds for the landowner.

For Olson who works everyday with this growing trend of drainage in the heartland, this is an opportunity for the producer's extra income to be used to put these conservation measures in now. He believes that now the landowner can afford to explore these options that will help improve the condition of our water.



Upstream Downstream Friendship Tours

Another suggestion supported by Lyndsey Weber was to include the Lake Pepin community in this process of learning new options. Weber helped coordinate



the upstream downstream friendship tours initially held in 2010 between concerned citizens of Lake Pepin and the farming community in the Upper Minnesota River Valley. Similar to this event, field days on the farm and downstream were followed by dialogue with several audiences to help increase understanding. Patrick Moore, Executive Director of CURE, reminded the group that there's a vested interest in supporting efforts for progress on cleaning up the Minnesota River by those downstream living with the sediment. "We are all connected here," he said. While it may take a while for some of this change to happen with the larger agencies, there may be some private support available more readily if there is clarity on what landowners want to do.

Learning Together

Unanimously, the message from all was to start. Start small. But start, they said. "We build the road by walking. We learn together as we go along," said Moore.



The next EQIP meeting in this area of western Minnesota is in August. The group hopes to have built a list of local landowners who would like to install these practices, or others more amenable to the situation on their own land, and hold an event like the conservation drainage field day at the Doug and Lois Albin's farm to continue the momentum and build from there.

