

Making Retail Conservation Real – ACWA Co-Hosts National Event

Coming soon to Des Moines, **Making Retail Conservation Real** is a two-day meeting to bring together leaders in ag retail and conservation from across the country to advance conservation agronomy in the private sector. This national, invitation-only meeting will be held **Feb. 21-22** at the Hilton Downtown Des Moines, and features presentations and interactive sessions to move conservation agronomy forward.

The meeting includes more than 20 speakers representing various ag retailers and conservation organizations who will illustrate why this new model is needed and offer examples of how retail conservation is already working. Participants will discuss ideas on ways to advance conservation agronomy in the retail space and find take-home ideas for implementation.

This unique meeting is presented by ACWA, the Iowa Soybean Association and the Soil and Water Conservation Society, with support from the Walton Family Foundation.

If you haven't RSVP'd, please do so soon to ensure a spot. If you haven't received an invitation, but would like to attend, or know of someone who should be part of the discussion, email your request to events@swcs.org. Space is limited but attendee recommendations are welcome. For more information about the event, go to: <https://www.swcs.org/events/conferences/making-retail-conservation-real/>.

ACWA, Iowa Soybean Association Expands the Conservation Agronomist Network

ACWA announced the [expansion of the Conversation Agronomist \(CA\) Network](#) through a partnership with the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS) last spring. The four-year grant includes financial support for the CAs and for increased agricultural conservation practices on the land including cover crops, reduced tillage, improved nutrient management, and edge-of-field practices such as bioreactors and saturated buffers.

Getting these practices in place means more people need to be involved in their planning, promotion, and installation. The conservation agronomist can aid in all of these aspects, but this position is just being realized in the agricultural industry. Five ACWA members will add a CA to their staff through the grant: AgState, Gold-Eagle Cooperative, Landus, NEW Cooperative, and Heartland Co-op, which already has three CAs on board. Iowa Soybean Association, an ACWA associate member, also has five CAs on staff. Mike Gilman, ISA conservation agronomy lead, oversees the CA network and is the project manager for ACWA with this grant.

"I'm assisting the ag retailers any way I can as this project gets going," Gilman says. "They are leaning on me to help bring them up to speed on promoting agricultural conservation. I'm also helping in the hiring process if needed. Most are in the hiring process now and a couple have just hired a CA."

With the Conservation Agronomist Network, Gilman plans to have all the CAs in this position, no matter where they are employed, to meet regularly to build knowledge, collaborate, and share ideas. The new

CAs will be employed directly by the ag retailer, and after the grant project is ended, the intent is to absorb them as permanent staff members.

“This is the vision. The challenge before us is making the CA position sustainable,” comments Gilman. “It isn’t easy to put budget numbers to conservation practices, unlike seed or chemical sales. With this CA network, we will work together to find solutions for making the CA position sustainable for years to come.”

The upcoming national meeting, Making Retail Conservation Real, will be one avenue for discussion to increase conservation through ag retail. The meeting should spur ideas for the CA network as well as for other ways to incorporate sustainable environmental practices for healthy soil and clean water.

Farm to River Partnership Batch and Build Project in Sac County

The Farm to River Partnership is embarking on a Batch and Build project in Sac County, one of the four counties in the state-funded Water Quality Initiative (WQI). A Batch and Build project entails geographically grouping sites for economical installations of conservation practices. Joe Wuebker, Farm to River Partnership project manager, is partnering with the Sac County Board of Supervisors to identify and secure locations across the county to install structures within a similar time frame.

“In Sac County alone, we’ve identified more than 180 potential sites for saturated buffers and bioreactors,” says Wuebker. “We are hoping to have 20 to 30 locations in this first round.”

The sites are identified using Agricultural Conservation Planning Framework, or ACPF, which uses large-scale aerial imagery showing elevations, waterbodies, farmland and other landscape features that would lend themselves to a conservation practice. This portion of the work is completed.

With the Batch and Build project through the Farm to River Partnership, the landowner does not shoulder any costs, rather they are covered from the WQI funding with the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, Iowa Soybean Association and the federal Regional Conservation Partnership project (RCPP).

The Sac County Board of Supervisors is serving as the fiscal agent for the project, which is a significant role. The board will help with permits and other important documents, the contractor bidding process, and working between the grant funders and contractors to ensure payments after installation. None of these are small tasks, which illustrates the county’s commitment to seek solutions for improved water quality within the county, the watershed, and for those downstream.

Agriculture’s Clean Water Alliance (ACWA) is a non-profit association whose mission is identifying and advancing solutions that reduce nutrient loss, build healthier soils, and improve Iowa’s waters. ACWA is recognized for its ability to build upon its members’ extensive relationship with farmers across Iowa.

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