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Use conservation buffers to make dollars and sense

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Abstract
Conservation buffers are one of the best management practices that Iowa producers can use to protect soil and water quality. But buffers go beyond protecting the soil. They are an excellent management tool because they offer multiple benefits. Many Iowa producers already know that installing a buffer can idle marginal land and provide a payoff through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). There are also environmental benefits, such as reduced soil erosion, improved air and water quality, better wildlife habitat, good neighbor relations, and the promotion of a sustainable concept of land management.

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Conservation buffers are one of the best management practices that Iowa producers can use to protect soil and water quality. But buffers go beyond protecting the soil. They are an excellent management tool because they offer multiple benefits.

What is a Conservation Buffer?

Conservation buffers are areas or strips of land where permanent vegetation is established in and around row crops. They are designed to intercept sediment and nutrients, reduce soil erosion, and protect the soil. They also manage environmental attributes such as air and water quality and fish and wildlife habitat, thereby increasing biodiversity and beautifying agricultural landscapes.

Many Iowa producers already know that installing a buffer can idle marginal land and provide a payoff through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). There are also environmental benefits, such as reduced soil erosion, improved air and water quality, better wildlife habitat, good neighbor relations, and the promotion of a sustainable concept of land management.

Iowa producers are already designing buffers with both cool- and warm-season native grasses, shrubs, and a variety of trees (deciduous and coniferous). Buffers enhance vegetative and wildlife diversity on the farm, and some producers are selling hunting rights to their buffers. The benefits and possibilities of a buffered farm landscape are limited only by your imagination. Best of all, because they promote sustainability and diversity, buffers increase the long-term value of your farm.

Once you have committed to installing conservation buffers in your operation, the next step is to talk to your local conservationist about the practices that suit your operation's resources and your goals.

If you made a competitive offer that was not accepted in the CRP sign-up, you still have the opportunity to enroll part of these acres as buffers under the continuous sign-up of the CRP. There are many buffer practices that are eligible, including riparian buffers, contour grass strips, filter strips, shallow water areas for wildlife, grassed waterways, crosswind trap strips, shelterbelts, field windbreaks, designated wellhead protection areas, and living snow fences.

Financial incentives for installing buffers in the CRP are based on the productivity of the soil and the local average cash rent for comparable land. Currently, there is a 20 percent incentive added to the annual rental rate for installing practices such as field windbreaks, grassed waterways, filter strips, and riparian buffers. Another 10 percent incentive can be added to the rental payments for land within designated wellhead protection areas.

In addition to CRP cost-share, there are many programs that offer assistance in establishing and maintaining buffers. For example, Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) offers technical, financial, and educational assistance in designated priority areas and livestock-related natural resource concerns. Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) helps landowners to develop and improve wildlife habitat on private land. Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) helps landowners with financial incentives for enhancing wetlands in exchange for retiring marginal agricultural land. Stewardship Incentive Program (SIP) provides cost sharing for improved management of private forestland through multiple practices.

For more details about buffers and rental payments, cost-sharing options, and other buffer assistance programs available in your area, start at your local conservation district office. Also pursue public and private organizations who may share the cost. Because they support the environmental benefits of conservation buffers, find the local chapter of Pheasants Forever (and similar groups) and talk about cost-share and volunteer help in establishing a buffer on your farm.

Other information sources include Iowa State University Extension for help in determining the economics of conservation buffer systems in your operation; Iowa Department of Natural Resources [1] (IDNR); independent ag consultants; and nonprofit organizations, such as Pheasants Forever [2] and Trees Forever [3].

Using conservation buffers in your operation makes good environmental sense and can help enhance your bottom line as well.

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