

2009 Final Report

Partnership for Conservation Implementation

Each year, farm field runoff of sediment and the associated nutrients, significantly contribute to the aggressive algae blooms in the Red Cedar River, and Tainter and Menomin Lakes (Source: Red Cedar River Partnership). Beginning in 2006, the Red Cedar TMDL (Total Maximum Daily Load) Coordination Team has been working with local farmers in Grant Township in Dunn County to reduce the amount of non-point source pollution to the Red Cedar River from agricultural sources.



The Coordination Team conducted a series of surveys in 2007 and 2008 to identify the barriers which have prevented farmers from utilizing existing conservation programs or adopting current conservation best management practices. The farmers identified conservation tillage and nutrient management planning as the practices they would be most interested in adopting if barriers such as limited access to no-till cropping equipment could be overcome. The draft TMDL plan created by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) states that reduced tillage and nutrient management will bring about the greatest reductions in nutrient and sediment loading to the Red Cedar River Watershed. Based on these two facts, the Coordination Team decided to implement a pilot project in Grant Township, Dunn County, Wisconsin. Producer input was used throughout the entire process and numerous positive results were generated.

Pilot Project Implementation

The Coordination Team and landowners from Grant Township developed a pilot project that used different components of Community Based Social Marketing (CBSM) to not only bring together community and conservation oriented objectives, but also identify ways to lower nutrient loading and sedimentation into the Red Cedar River Watershed.

The project coordinators from River Country Resource Conservation & Development Council (RC&D) and the Dunn County Land Conservation Division collected information from landowners in the Town of Grant via town meetings, surveys, and on-site visits. Based on the information collected, the Coordination Team developed a list of pilot project ideas:

1. **Making a no-till drill and planter available.** There were two ideas for this project. One idea was to have a no-till drill or corn planter available for farmers to use at no charge. The other idea was to cover the costs of having a custom operator plant no-till corn or soybeans.
2. **Host breakfast/lunch information and education meetings.** Meetings would be held either over breakfast or lunch where the landowners in Grant Township could get together and discuss how to implement conservation on their production land. Experts could also be brought in for informal one-on-one instruction.
3. **Funding for nutrient management planning, conservation planning, and soil sampling.** This project would provide funding for farmers to develop nutrient management plans and/or conservation plans. As part of nutrient management planning, the cost of soil sampling and postage would be covered by the grant.
4. **Implementing local cropping demonstration plots.** This project would set up manure management and/or no-till demonstration plots in the Township. The idea of this research is to have data on conservation implementation that originates from Grant Township. This project could lead to the establishment of a Discovery Farm in Grant Township.

The producers were then sent letters and asked to vote on each pilot project idea. They were asked to assign a point value between one and ten, depending on how much they liked each proposed project. A “ten” represented a strong liking or favor towards an idea while a “one” wasn’t preferred. The results are listed in the table below.

Survey ID #	No-till Planter	IE Meeting	NMP or CP	Demo Plots
A	7	1	10	5
B	9	5	9	4
C	6	5	10	7
D	5	6	8	7
E	1	5	10	5
F	5	7	10	10
G	9	8	10	7
H	7	9	10	5
I	9	1	4	2
J	5	0	5	0
K	10	3	7	1
L	8	8	2	4
M	5	5	5	0
Totals:	86	63	100	57

The Coordination Team used the results from this evaluation to design the pilot project that was implemented in 2009. The pilot project covered the costs for soil sampling, renting a no-till soybean drill, and hiring a custom operator who operated a no-till corn planter. A meeting was held on March 6th, 2009, at the Grant Town Hall where sign-up sheets for soil sampling and no-till equipment rental were circulated. All of the 60 active farmers in the Township received letters explaining the pilot project and inviting them to attend the meeting.

Twenty-three producers attended the meeting and there was a positive response to the proposed pilot project. Phone calls were made to producers who were not able to attend the meeting. Twenty-three landowners, representing 2,315 cropland acres, participated in the pilot project. Eight producers planted no-till corn on 236 acres, four producers planted no-till soybeans on 400 acres, and eleven landowners soil sampled 1,680 acres. After producers had signed up for the pilot project, simple cooperative agreements were developed with each farmer. Many of the farmers approved of the simple cooperative agreements and often commented about the reduced amount of paperwork that was needed to participate in the pilot project.



Farmers interested in soil sampling were provided field maps, soil bags, a soil probe, soil bag labels, and complete instructions on how to appropriately soil sample their farm. Shipping and lab analysis costs were covered using grant funds. Once soil test results were received from the lab, the project coordinators met with landowners to review the reports. The operational costs for the no-till corn planter and no-till bean drill were covered by the grant. A private custom operator was used to plant the no-till corn acres. Farmers using the no-till soybean drill worked with a local cooperative that provided the drill.



Education and Outreach



A series of conservation field days were planned to help promote the project within Grant Township. The first one was held on July 30th, 2009, at two adjoining farms in Grant Township. The two farmers that hosted the field day have been practicing no-till crop production for a combination of 30 years. The objective of this field day was to highlight the successes that these producers have had using no-till, as well as to provide an avenue for producers to ask questions about using no-till on their own farms. The field day showcased five different no-till crop scenarios such as corn into soybeans, soybeans into corn, and corn into hay. The field day was attended by 30 people. Attendees included farmers from within and outside of the Township, representatives from the Coordination Team, and interested citizens.

The project coordinators were planning on having a second field day on the same farms after the harvest to review the yield information and profitability analysis from farms that participated in the pilot project. Unfortunately, due to the wet fall and the late harvest, a second field day wasn't organized. A meeting was held in January 2010 at the Grant Town Hall, where yield and profitability information from the pilot project was shared with the landowners.



During the entire pilot project process, the project coordinators were conducting outreach with a wide variety of groups and individuals by delivering PowerPoint presentations to groups such as the Dunn County Land Committee and the Tainter Menomin Lake Improvement Association. The project coordinators also sent a press release to local newspapers and media outlets. The pilot project was the subject of two articles in the *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram* (attached to this report). They have also received phone calls and emails from people interested in implementing this project in other watersheds.

Project Evaluation



Many evaluation tools were used during this project. For example, the project coordinators worked with participants in the pilot project to conduct yield checks on the no-till corn and soybeans. The no-till corn averaged 140 bushels/acre with a range of 96-166 bushels/acre. The three-year average yield for all types of corn grown in Dunn County was 117 bushels/acre. The no-till soybeans averaged 37 bushels/acre with a range of 24-44 bushels/acre. The three-year (2006-08) average yield for all types of soybeans grown in Dunn County is 34 bushels/acre. The project coordinators also met with producers and utilized the University of Wisconsin-Extension's "Profitability Analyzer" to compare the production costs and profits from conventional methods and no-till. On average, there was a \$93/acre profit on the acres that used no-till.

The project coordinators also interviewed the farmers that participated in the pilot project to gather feedback and ask for suggestions for the next phase of the project. There was overwhelming support for the project and at least three of the producers are converting their conventional planting equipment to no-till setups based on their experiences in the pilot project. The producers also provided new ideas for the Coordination Team to incorporate into the next phase of the pilot project.

Partnerships

The Partnership for Conservation Implementation project's success lies in the pooling of expertise from a variety of partners. These partners include local farmers and landowners as well as representatives from the Dunn County Land Conservation Division, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, University of Wisconsin Extension, the Tainter/Menominee Lake Improvement Association, Western Wisconsin Energy, Xcel Energy, Grant Town Board, and River Country RC&D.

Prepared by: Melanie Baumgart- River Country RC&D and Lance Klessig- Dunn County Land Conservation Division