

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



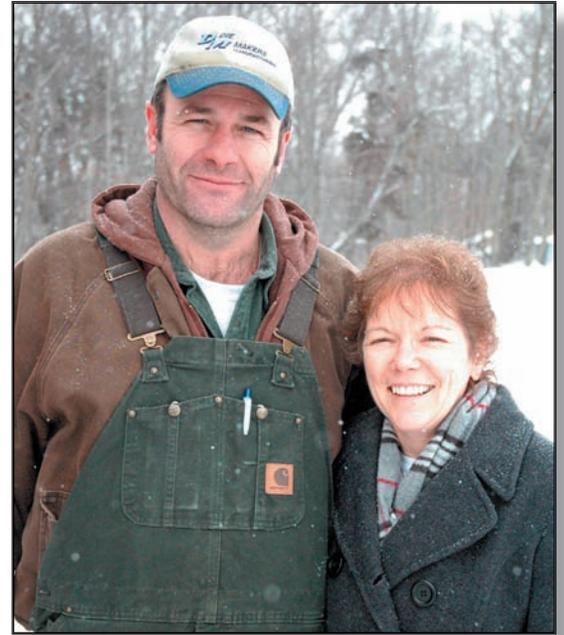
Small Waterway Offers Big Challenges

Farmers Creek is a small waterway with big problems. It twists and turns for 17 miles through Jackson County in northeast Iowa before draining into the North Fork of the Maquoketa River. On the state's 303(d) List of Impaired Waters, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) says Farmers Creek suffers from excessive sediment, nutrient loading, and fecal contamination. The watershed is home to about 6,000 cattle with about 86 percent of the 30,590 watershed acres classified as highly erodible.

While Farmers Creek has its water quality and erosion problems, it also has farmers and conservationists working together to fix them; people like Bob and Judy Kremer, Ernie and Janice Felderman, John Deppe, and watershed coordinator Michelle Turner.

Work to improve the watershed began January 2005 with special funding from IDNR, the Iowa Department of Agriculture

and Land Stewardship's Division of Soil Conservation (IDALS-DSC) and the Watershed Improvement Review Board (WIRB). Technical support and additional funding is provided by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service



Bob and Judy Kremer

(NRCS) with project management provided by the Jackson Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioners.

"When we began the Farmers Creek Watershed Project," said Turner, "our goal was to reduce nutrient and sediment loading by 40 percent. We are working toward that goal by giving individual farmers and landowners technical assistance, solutions and financial assistance packages to meet their needs and the needs of the environment."

Farmers Bob and Judy Kremer were early supporters of the project. On their 440 acres, the couple has worked with NRCS and partner agencies to build seven dams, several ponds, and exclusion fencing to keep their cattle out of Farmers Creek. They've also tackled manure storage issues and adopted



NRCS Soil Conservation Technician Mark Schmidt and Watershed Coordinator Michelle Turner stand next to a map of the Farmers Creek Watershed in Jackson County. Each photo and map label represents a conservation structure or practice that is reducing pollution within the watershed.

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a rotational grazing system. They allow the IDNR access to the mile long stretch of Farmers Creek that goes through their land to monitor the water temperature and conduct fish population studies. They even helped IDNR officials tag and release freshwater mussels into the stream.

Why do the Kremers practice soil conservation? “I am big on fixing erosion,” said Bob Kremer. “It’s always the good topsoil that goes away. Rocks don’t grow much so you have to take care of the soil. That’s why we’ve been so active.”

The Kremers promote land stewardship and conservation practices to their neighbors as well. This past summer they hosted a pasture walk designed to promote alternative watering methods. Other visitors also examined improvements like the stacking area where cattle are fed on a concrete pad and valuable manure can be pushed to the side and collected for later use. Other popular tour sites include their riparian buffers, livestock exclusion fencing, cattle watering techniques, and stream bank stabilization structures. Most of these projects are funded through the Envi-



The Kremers and Michelle Turner stand with the watershed project sign.

ronmental Quality Improvement Program (EQIP), 319 funds, Watershed Protection Funds and Water Improvement Review Board grants.

“There can be all the cost-share and financial incentives in the world,” said Turner, “but producers need to see a benefit to themselves and the environment. Bob and Judy see those benefits and want others to see that value, too.”

Both the Jackson County Soil and Water Conservation District and the Iowa DNR have recognized the Kremers as conservation leaders. In 2005 the Jackson district named them Conservation Owner/Operators of the Year and the IDNR has featured their conservation story and photo in a number of publications.

Across the watershed, individuals have added many water improving practices to their farms. For example, the Feldermans, who were awarded the Water Quality Improvement Award in 2007, have installed sediment basins and waterways, and are in the process of building two more basins, a grade stabilization structure, and 19 acres of tree plantings along with a Timber Stand Improvement project. John Deppe put in terraces, renovated waterways, added sediment basins and grade stabilization structures and practices contour farming.



Bob Kremer stands on a newly built stacking area. The structure allows Kremer to feed cattle on concrete and then push the valuable manure to the side to save it for future use. The NRCS-designed structure was built with EQIP financial assistance and helps keep manure from entering Farmers Creek in Jackson County.

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These conservation practices and their benefits add up. At last count, farmers in the watershed have had 281 acres accepted into the Grassland Reserve Program, added 19 acres of waterways, added 21 erosion reducing structures, 21 acres of riparian buffers, put 573 acres into rotational grazing and stabilized 700 feet of stream bank.

So, how is Farmers Creek doing now? “Over the past three years we’ve seen improved water quality in the watershed,” said NRCS District Conservationist Lori Harris. “We know we are on the right path. Water test results say so and so do the Conservation Districts of Iowa (CDI). Last fall CDI named the Farmers Creek Watershed Project winner of their 2006 Outstanding Watershed Project Award.”

Turner says the CDI award pleases her, but she knows more work needs to be done. “Personally,” she said, “I won’t be happy until we get water quality so improved in the watershed that Farmers Creek is off of the impaired waters list. I hope that happens soon.”

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Watershed Coordinator Michelle Turner and farmer Bob Kremer stand on the bank of Farmers Creek. Kremer has been a conservation leader within the watershed by installing conservation practices on his farm and allowing Iowa DNR access to the stream for stocking and water testing.