

CONSERVATION Showcase



Dickinson Co. Wins National Conservation Competition

Out of 3,000 counties in the country, the Dickinson County Soil and Water Conservation District in northwest Iowa was recently recognized as the best district in the nation in the Urban, Community and Coastal Resources category by the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD).

NACD is a nonprofit organization that represents America's 17,000 men and women who serve on local conservation district governing boards that help manage and protect land and water resources on all private lands and many public lands in the United States.

Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey, a former Dickinson County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) commissioner, said of the award, "It wasn't New York City. It wasn't Miami. It was Dickinson County, Iowa. Getting this award is kind of an amazing thing. First for a bunch of farmers and others in a little county to understand this matters, and second of all to do enough to able to qualify, is wonderful."

Besides doing right by the environment, Steve Anderson, Dickinson County urban conservationist, believes local residents are committed to improve water quality because their livelihoods oftentimes depend on it.



Representatives of the Dickinson SWCD receive their Excellence Award and a \$1,000 check from the National Association of Conservation Districts. Participating in the ceremony were Steve Anderson, Dickinson County urban conservationist; Scott Mitchell, Dickinson County SWCD commissioner; John Redding, NACD treasurer; Bill Northey, Iowa Secretary of Agriculture and former Dickinson County SWCD commissioner; and Orville Berg, asst. Dickinson County SWCD commissioner.

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Located in the Iowa Great Lakes region, one million visitors per year spend an estimated \$131 million enjoying the scenic beauty of area and recreational opportunities. Visitors fish, hunt, enjoy water sports, golf, hike, and enjoy attractions like Arnolds Park Amusement Park, the Iowa Great Lakes Maritime Museum and the Iowa Rock and Roll Hall of Fame & Museum.

Leading local conservation efforts are the commissioners of the Dickinson County SWCD. The elected commissioners set local conservation policy and provide leadership to address local resource concerns. District directed conservation activities are carried out by a partnership of federal, state, and local conservationists lead by a full-time employee of USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) District Conservationist Carroll Oskvig.

"For many years the Dickinson SWCD has worked to install conservation practices on agricultural lands within the counties' watersheds," said Oskvig. "In recent years we've also worked to protect water quality from dirty urban storm water runoff that dumps directly into the lakes. We started to involve both rural and urban landowners in water quality."

That water quality involvement began in earnest in 2004 with an EPA grant that funded nine monthly seminars featuring national experts on water quality and low impact development. Former NRCS Urban Conser-



Dickinson County residents look at a rain garden and displays at an open house of urban conservation practices. Dickinson County's economy depends heavily on clean water to attract tourists to its lakes and attractions.

vationist Wayne Petersen arranged many of the Dickinson County storm water seminars. He said he told attendees, "Runoff from frequent, small rains delivers the majority of urban pollutants that enter Iowa's lakes and streams. They pickup motor oil and pollutants from parking lots, streets, highways and other impervious surfaces and flush them, unfiltered, into our state's water bodies."

The storm water experts recommended using infiltration-based best management practices (BMP) that capture 90 percent of urban runoff and infiltrated it into the soil profile. These practices include bio-retention cells, permeable pavement, rain gardens and bioswales.

"When storm water runoff is infiltrated into the soil profile," said Petersen, "it is cooled and cleaned. Its likely path is then either to replenish an aquifer or seep into a lake, river or stream. Infiltration-based BMPs help mimic benefits of the deep-rooted prairies. The end result is cleaner water and a reduction in flooding."

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At first, local groups used a Farm Bureau grant of \$2,500 to start labeling storm sewers with stickers reminding residents that the storm sewers dump directly into the lake. Then the focus became managing and treating urban runoff to protect water quality in the lakes.

Other grants were secured. Conservation demonstrations of BMPs were built in highly visible locations like adjacent to the Arnolds Park Amusement Park and at the local little league baseball fields. Cost-sharing was also offered through a state grant.

Installing conservation practices became very important to the community and some started leading by example. One conservation leader was State Representative Mike May of Spirit Lake. May's family owns a 47-unit resort on East Lake Okoboji next to a Department of Natural Resources (DNR) boat ramp. Original plans were to install pervious pavement over two stalls in his parking lot to intercept the first flush of polluted rainwater runoff, infiltrated it into the soil profile and prevent polluted water from entering the lake. May liked the concept so much that he decided to install a type of pervious pavement called AquaBric™ on his entire parking lot.

"My business," said May, "and my future depend upon water quality. The pervious pavement parking lot absorbs that first inch and a half of rain and it's a great addition to the resort."

The conservation work in Dickinson County is having a positive effect on water quality. Tests show that the quality is getting better, but community leaders are doing more. In 2006, the city of Okoboji, a resort town of 820 people, revised their zoning and subdivision ordinances to begin requiring on-site capture and infiltration of runoff from 1.5 inch of rain or less on new building construction. The next year, the City of Spirit Lake began an ordinance revision that would require on-site capture and infiltration of 1.25 inches of rain as well.

The Dickinson County water quality work even extends to Minnesota where one-third of the Iowa Great Lakes watershed is located. To improve water quality on the Minnesota side of the watershed, the Dickinson Water Quality Commission, a unit of Dickinson County government, sent \$20,000 over the last four years to Jackson County for water quality improvements.

"This county is pretty aggressive when it comes to water quality issues," said Carroll Oskvig. "The reason for it is very really pretty simple. The people of Dickinson County want the water in their lakes and rivers to be clean."

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