

Overview

The drained farmlands in the Upper Mississippi River Basin have been identified as a contributor to nutrient loading of receiving waters, that often leads to adverse environmental and economic consequences.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will focus resources to assist in voluntary conservation efforts to reduce nitrates leaving drained farmlands in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and Ohio.

The NRCS will work in close collaboration with partners to develop and implement an action plan that will provide incentives to producers that voluntarily apply nutrient and water management practices to reduce nitrate loading.

A June 2010 draft report, "Assessment of the Effects of Conservation Practices on Cultivated Cropland in the Upper Mississippi River Basin," showed that between 2003 and 2006 conservation practices reduced total nitrogen losses from cropland in the basin by 18 percent, sediment losses from fields by 69 percent, and nitrogen losses in surface waters by 46 percent. The study was conducted by NRCS as part of its Conservation Effects Assessment Project to estimate conservation benefits at national and regional levels.

However, the report also revealed that nitrogen losses in subsurface water were reduced by just 5 percent, identifying the need for comprehensive conservation planning throughout the basin and the expansion of agricultural drainage water management to increase benefits to the environment.



Trempealeau Bluffs in the Upper Mississippi River Basin.

As part of the action plan, NRCS will examine how drainage water management is being used in the basin, identify barriers to adoption, and document lessons learned by drainage water management users. From this information, a team will make recommendations to increase the adoption of drainage water management.

A group comprised of 17 technical specialists from NRCS will then focus on broader conservation priorities in both the Upper Mississippi River and Great Lakes basin states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. With input from many agricultural and conservation partners, NRCS will address two near-term major priorities: developing an action plan and holding a national summit.

Priorities

- Encourage producers to manage water in existing tile and surface drainage systems for environmental benefits
- Evaluate recommendations for feasibility and priority
- Develop and implement the NRCS action plan with partner input and involvement
- Stimulate innovation and creativity
- Evaluate progress, performance and outcomes
- Practice "adaptive management"
- Encourage producers to adopt voluntary, incentive based conservation practices.

Expected Outcome

The outcome anticipated from this effort is an increase in the adoption of drainage water management and its associated conservation practices to achieve diverse environmental benefits in the Upper Mississippi River Basin.

More Information

For more information and updates about the Drainage Water Management Initiative in the Upper Mississippi River Basin and other NRCS conservation efforts, please visit the NRCS Web site, www.nrcs.usda.gov, or contact your local NRCS office.

