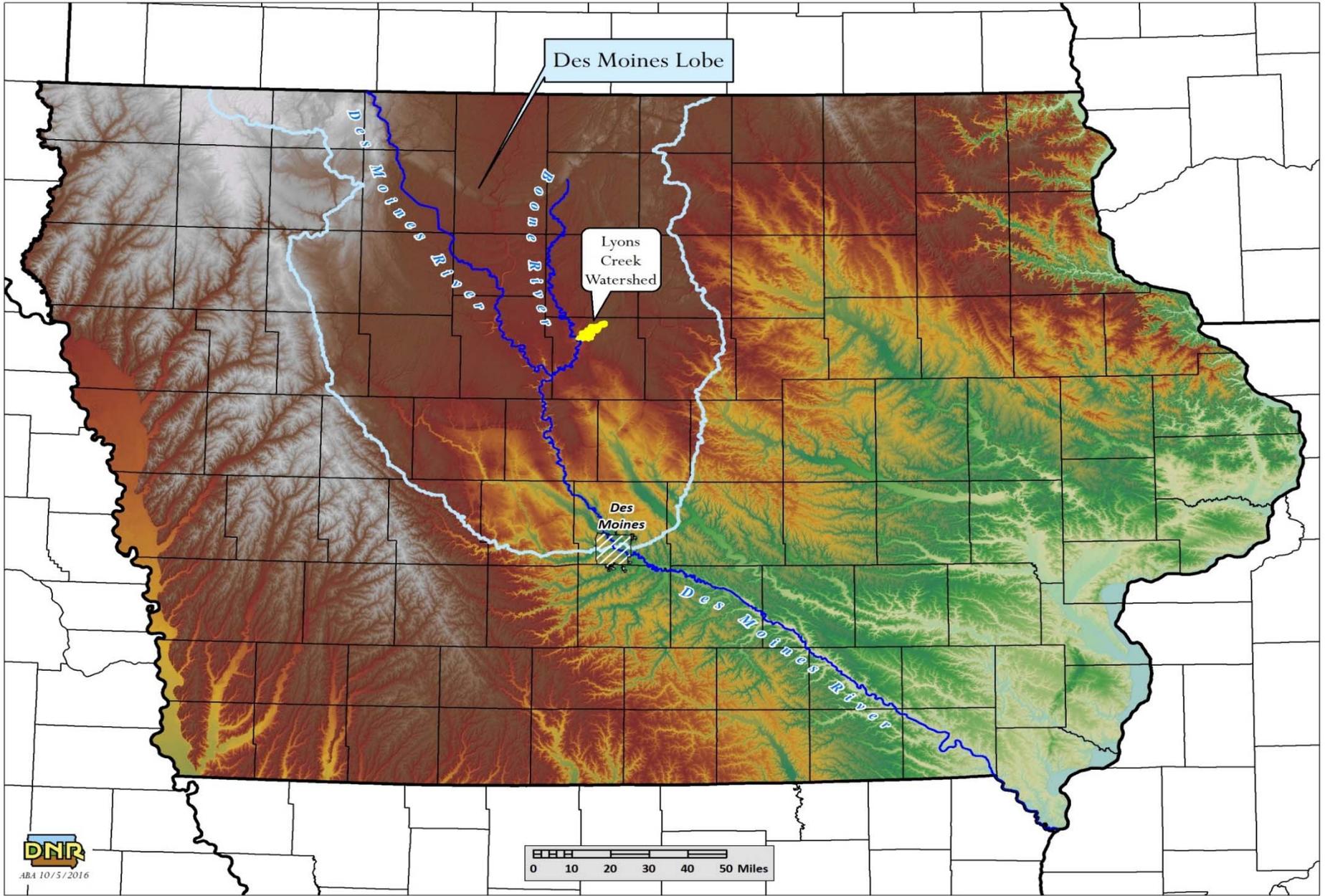


Lyons Creek Watershed Project: Lessons Learned from Partner & Participant Reflections

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Des Moines Lobe

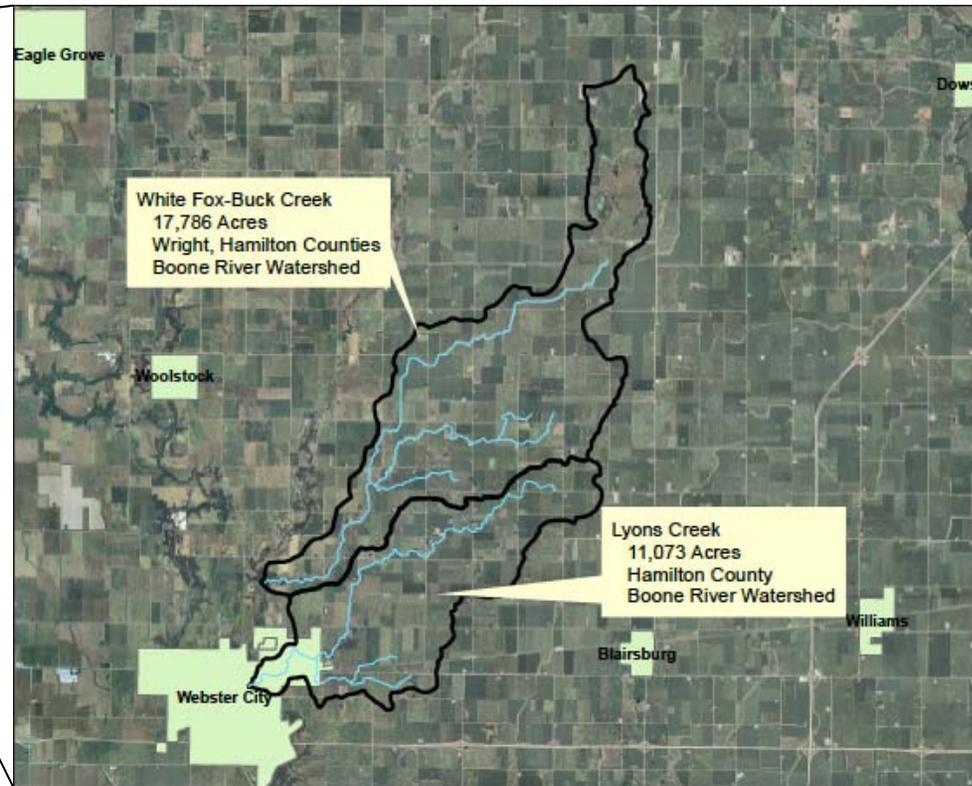
Lyons
Creek
Watershed

Des
Moines

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ABA 10/5/2016



LCWP Background

Highest nitrate concentrations in Boone River watershed

Contributes to high nitrate levels in Des Moines drinking water downstream

Only EPA Section 319 Project in Iowa to focus on nitrate reduction

Project coincided with 2013 Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy

LCWP Results

Some progress, but project ended early due to low farmer participation and practice adoption

Oxbow Restoration



Saturated Buffers



Key Questions

Why weren't more conservation and nutrient-reduction practices adopted?

What were the primary and secondary obstacles to participation in the project and adoption of promoted practices?

Purpose of the Social Assessment

To understand the strengths and weaknesses of the LCWP by gathering perceptions, opinions, and attitudes of stakeholders and farmers in the Lyons Creek Watershed

To inform and increase success of future local and regional efforts to improve water quality

Qualitative Study Design

Phase 1: Key Informants (LCWP staff & partners)

Telephone interviews with stakeholders who promoted and supported the LCWP

Phase 2: Farmers (landowners & operators)

Face-to-face and telephone interviews with landowners and operators in LCW

Data Collection

	Phase 1 Key Informants	Phase 2 Farmers
Study duration	January 11 to February 24, 2016	February 15 to March 28, 2016
n	12	18
Interview length (minutes)	30-45	60-90
Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed		

Analysis

Developed codes for Phase 1 and Phase 2 from interview responses

Used combination of deductive and inductive coding ("hybrid" coding)

Iterative coding process to identify categories and themes that address the research objectives

Key Findings

Analysis identified:

areas of correspondence

areas of divergence

Areas of Shared Perspective

Key role of partnerships

Importance of champion farmer

Complexity of landowner-farmer relationship

Difficulty changing long-standing practices

Reframing “blame” approach

Key Role of Partnerships

LCWP partnerships deemed a major strength

“...here you had an ag organization working with the DNR, local NRCS Office and the District’s, all coming together to work for a common goal of developing the watershed plan to improve Lyons Creek.”

“...the Soybean Association is largely the one that got these others involved and were an advocate for the farm side... Had it just been the Nature Conservancy, no, I would not have even gone to the meeting.”

Importance of Champion Farmer

KIs and farmers cited “champion farmer,” who shared experiences and equipment, as benefit

“...we had a good...champion farmer type, that was doing some of these practices and really promoting them. He believed that they were a good way to reduce nitrogen and to save money on his farming operation... He had good rapport with the farmers and good credibility.”

“When you have a well-accepted successful person in the community that’s promoting something you pay attention.”

Complexity of Landowner-farmer Relationship

Complex relationship between farmers and landowners may influence decision-making in unanticipated ways

“...we had one farmer in particular that was really hesitant from the beginning because he felt like if he was getting [funds] to try a practice and then his landowner found out [the landowner] would want a cut of those incentive payments.”

“...the landlords have the ability to motivate the tenants. If the landlord is for it, the tenant is going to be for it...”

Difficulty Changing Long-standing Practices

Change is difficult and age of farmers may contribute to resistance to change.

“It’s kind of a matter of getting over ourselves to recognize that what we’re talking about with conservation stewardship doesn’t have to be a death note for farming profitability, it just means some change.”

“Change is, number one, admitting you’re wrong, which people don’t like to do. ... A lot of times change costs money, if you have to change your operation, change your routine, you get used to doing something and it just becomes a way...”

Reframing “Blame” Approach

Call to action on water quality and focus on farming practices perceived as placing blame on farmers

“Projects like this are always better when the locals see a problem and want to solve it rather than coming to them and telling them they have a problem and need to solve it.”

“You take the town of Des Moines, the guy who’s spreading fertilizer across his driveway and he doesn’t shut it off on his concrete and it rains, where do you think that fertilizer’s going? Into the sewer system. I mean, it’s all over the place.”

Unique Perspectives of Key Informants

LCWP mixed success at best

Need full-time coordinator with multiple skillsets

Concurrent programs muddled identity of and opportunities available through LCWP

Get landowner-farmer input early

Increase focus on data, technical assistance, and follow-up

Longer-term timeline for watershed projects

LCWP Mixed Success at Best

“So I think that was successful in the fact that additional practices got put out there. And some people may quibble with this but I’m more of the opinion that even if conservation might be better applied in a particular quadrant of section, the fact that it’s applied at all anywhere, I think, is an important piece.”

Need Full-time Coordinator with Multiple Skillsets

“...[the position] was also part-time in [another county] in a project there. So there was two watershed projects and two – [the PC] was part-time in both and that made full-time then with both.”

Concurrent Programs Muddled Identity of and Opportunities Available Through LCWP

“...some of the people we piggybacked some of the programs like we did some basic funding through EQIP and we topped that off with some of the funding from the Lyons Creek and it kind of helped the funding for both the projects go a little bit farther.”

“We had [MRBI] going on at exactly the same time and so some of the people who were in Lyons Creek actually did some things through MRBI and they may or may not have gotten reported through Lyons Creek.”

Get Landowner-farmer Input Early

“I think if we could have them tell us what practices or approaches they feel would work in the watershed, I think that would go a long way to getting buy-in when we ask people to do things in the watershed...I think having input from farmers would be, input and buy-in, would be a good addition to the project.”

Increase Focus on Data, Technical Assistance, and Follow-up

“...data is important for them. When you are asking a farmer to make a change and adopt a practice, they’re also taking on the risk of that practice either working or failing, and this is their business. So, farmers really like to make a sound decision and to do that they want some data and science behind it.”

Longer-term Timeline for Watershed Projects

“...a longer-term strategy and sort of bringing farmers and landowners along for maybe a longer period of time where you have maybe more outreach and education prior to offering the incentives instead of vice versa, getting the funding and then pushing for farmers to try those practices within that one or two or three-year period for whatever time you actually have the funding available.”

Unique Perspectives of Farmers

Recognize importance of healthy soil and good water

Associate current farming practices with improved water quality

Perceived high cost and incompatibility with current farming practices

Incomplete understanding about negative impact of Nitrates

Inoculation against blame

Recognize Importance of Healthy Soil and Water Quality

“...I live on the farm that I farm and I’ve lived in Hamilton County my whole life so I’m drinking the water out of the well and go boating in the local lake or whatever and I’m as concerned about water and where I live as anybody or more so. So no matter what I’m doing, I’m trying to take care of the land and water...”

Associate Current Farming Practices with Improved Water Quality

“I’m glad to see that a plowing board is over where they used to plow everything because that, when we got a hard rain, it did wash a lot and then you’ve got wind that blows your soil into the creek. So I’m glad to see that’s gone. And I do think what they’re practicing now is, to me, a lot better than what we ever had before.”

Perceived High Cost and Incompatibility with Current Farming Practices

“There are some programs available through the government or have been where they will pay some dollar per acre payments based on some of these tillage practices but for the most part those are a five-year contract or multi-year contract and my leases are only one year at a time. That's pretty much the standard and norm here so you can't really participate in any of those...”

Incomplete Understanding about Negative Impact of Nitrates

“I mean I know they've got problems with all the nitrogen that comes out in the Mississippi and there's big areas that, where there's no fish and they tell you that but how long has it been that way? Was it always that way or is it just because they make it sound like it's because we put down all this fertilizer. Maybe that's a natural thing.”

“[T]here is so much naturally occurring in organic nitrogen in the field to begin with, and even if we didn't apply I think we're still going to have nitrates in the water.”

Inoculation Against Blame

“And at least having been in a project like this, you’d have at least a foot to stand on that we were making some sort of good faith effort.”

“...part of it was just the wanting to comply or be a part of it rather than worry about being told what he could and could not do in the future. I think that would be a fair answer to that question. You know, do it voluntarily so that it wasn’t mandatory.”

Recommendations

Existing components to continue:

- 1) Partner with knowledgeable and trusted groups
- 2) “Champion farmers” add value and credibility
- 3) Increase technical knowledge of conservation practices

Recommendations – cont.

Existing components to consider strengthening:

- 1) Limit overlap with other ongoing activities
- 2) Active recruitment strategies
- 3) Sufficient support for staffing to ensure adequate effort
- 4) Emphasize communication, administrative skills, and agricultural knowledge when recruiting project staff

Recommendations – cont.

New components to consider adding:

- 1) Incorporate educational information emphasizing geography and location of LCW, and address incomplete understanding of contamination and pollution
- 2) Gather input from operators and landowners during planning phases to identify and address potential issues and barriers between these groups early
- 3) Be careful with project framing and communication to eliminate instances that could be interpreted as “blaming”

Limitations

It is important to note that this study was qualitative in design and represents only the perceptions and views of those interviewed

These may not be representative of those from other projects and areas or even other farmers in Hamilton County

Thank you

Questions???