FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Thursday, November 21, 2024

Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative Report Gauges Impact of Farm-Level Water Quality Efforts in Upper Scioto Watershed

COLUMBUS, OH – The Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative (OACI) rolled out the findings of its 2024 Assessment Survey Report on practices being used by farmers in the Upper Scioto watershed to manage water and nutrients. The assessment results show ample conservation efforts, as well as areas for improvement and continued farmer education and resourcing by OACI.

"We have had a lot of emphasis on H2Ohio in the northwestern part of the state, so I thought the adoption rates for nutrient management would be a lot less the further south our assessments were taken and that is not the case," **said Kris Swartz, Wood County farmer and Chair of the Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative**. "Specifically, farmers are embracing the economics and the agronomics of precision agriculture which, ultimately, leads to significantly better water quality."

The survey results establish a baseline of adoption for various farming practices in the Upper Scioto watershed. The information will allow for a more targeted approach to help increase some practices, while also displaying that some practices are already adopted at an adequate level.

"For this particular assessment, I think the surprising data is that we are seeing practices adopted voluntarily and that is a real perk to show that farmers are taking water quality seriously as part of their business plan," **said Dr. John Fulton, Professor and Extension Specialist, College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences at The Ohio State University**. "They are both trying to make a living and doing the right things environmentally."

"The comfortability of farmers putting new best management practices in place based on what they learn from other farmers through field days and even social media is a major component of what we are seeing through these assessments," **said Jordan Hoewischer, Director of Water Quality and Research with Ohio Farm Bureau**. "That peer to peer interaction is helping the information transfer so that even though our northwest Ohio farmers have had a little more pressure to enhance their water quality efforts, the positive results and efficiency of those practices are being noticed by farmers across the state."

You can watch OACI's Upper Scioto Watershed Report Webinar here, listen to a podcast on the report here, and find an executive summary of the report here.

The survey assessed cost share program enrollment, acres farmed and ownership status, tillage, nutrient applications and other nutrient management strategies, and water management practices.

Key findings from survey include:

- Approximately 62% of the fields surveyed were currently enrolled in a cost share conservation program, including both state and federal level programs.
- Most farmers were testing their soil adequately, with 76% of the fields surveyed being sampled at least once every 4 years. The vast majority of soil samples (91%) were being done using precision agriculture, via grid or zone methods.
- Approximately 64% of fields surveyed had phosphorus applied using variable-rate technology (VRT); 24% of fields had nitrogen applied using VRT.
- Nearly 77% of the fields were either no-tilled or minimally-tilled.
- 60% of the farmland assessed was owned by the farmer and 40% was in a lease.
- Farmers know their land, as 92% of the fields were managed by the farmer for 3 years or longer.
- Farmers utilized fertilizer retailers and crop consultants for 85% of fields surveyed.

This assessment survey is the third in what is an ongoing program by OACI, conducting survey assessments of watersheds around the state and re-surveying each previously surveyed watershed every few years. The first survey assessed the Lower Maumee watershed, and the second survey assessed the Sandusky watershed.

The assessment survey was conducted by OACI through a randomized sampling of 384 crop production fields within the HUC8 Upper Scioto Watershed. A statistical approach was implemented to determine what practices are being used by farmers within this watershed to manage water and nutrients. In the field survey process, all the cropped fields within the watershed were considered in the randomized selection process regardless of farm and field size. A trained Soil and Water Conservation District employee interviewed the landowner or farm manager for each field surveyed. The Ohio State University and the Center for Survey Statistics and Methodology at Iowa State University helped in designing the sampling strategy and data analysis.

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About OACI: *The Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative (OACI) is a partnership between agriculture, conservation, environmental and research communities to recognize farmers for their dedication to advancing methods that improve water quality in Ohio and increasing the number of best management*

practices being implemented on farms. Ohio Agriculture Conservation Initiative partners include: American Farmland Trust, Environmental Defense Fund, National Center for Water Quality Research at Heidelberg University, Ohio AgriBusiness Association, Ohio Cattlemen's Association, Ohio Conservation Federation, Ohio Corn and Wheat Growers Association, Ohio Dairy Producers Association, Ohio Environmental Council, Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, Ohio Federation of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Ohio Pork Council, Ohio Poultry Association, Ohio Sheep Improvement Association, Ohio Soybean Council, The Fertilizer Institute, The Nature Conservancy, and The Ohio State University College of Food, Agriculture, and Environmental Sciences.