Agricultural Conservation PLANNING FRAMEWORK

ACPF USE EXAMPLE: COLEARN in Iowa Watersheds

A Q&A with Jean Eells, PhD, consultant from E Resources Group, LLC
by Mariana Castro Azpíroz

How were the ACPF results used within the watershed?

Researchers and conservation professionals involved with the Central Midwest COLEARN project worked together with women landowners across Iowa and used the ACPF tool in storytelling-driven sessions. The project was funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Climate Program Office.

Landowners participated in individual, online sessions to explore how to use the ACPF output to empower them to collaborate with NRCS, their tenants, and others in their decision-making circle. They received the maps of their land and follow-up support. As a result of the project, each landowner applied conservation practices both to reduce erosion & run-off and to improve soil health.

How did the ACPF fit into the watershed planning process?

The sessions enabled landowners to think on a larger scale and to recognize the role that their farm played in improving water quality and flow in the entire watershed. The ACPF maps helped them see how their farm received water from neighbors and sent water down the watershed. Understanding this encouraged them to seek conservation practices not only on their own farm but also in possible collaboration with neighbors.

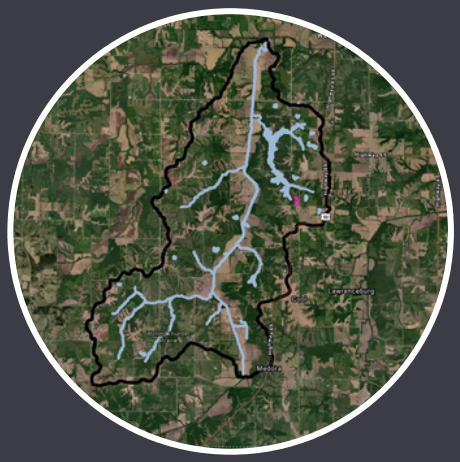
Who ran the ACPF? Who shared the results?

Researchers at the University of Iowa and Iowa State University with conservation professionals ran the ACPF and shared the results. Researchers also included graduate and undergraduate students who learned how to operate the ACPF, support the storytelling, and co-facilitate meetings. Students and researchers performed an ACPF analysis of the farmland to identify which conservation practices best suited both the landowner goals and needs within the watershed. After the sessions, landowners received customized mapping information and resources.

What about ACPF made it helpful?

Landowners could observe their land on a farm to HUC12 watershed scale and see how it was connected to their neighbors'. Historical aerial views





"I'm very familiar with the history of the farmland I manage with my siblings. I could share the maps with them. And I like seeing where our farm is in the watershed. That really helps us to understand where the water is coming at us and how important our farm is to everyone downstream."

Map creation by COLEARN team.

were used as a conversation starter to discuss family history and changes of land use that the farm had undergone as different generations took over. Data-driven maps allowed landowners to make a plan with their conservation and production goals in mind, by learning about the land's topography, soil types, drainage, and understanding the potential of their land.

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How was ACPF used?

Tailored conservation practices

Customized ACPF output maps allowed landowners to identify and apply conservation practices suited to their specific goals.

Understanding their role in the watershed

By visualizing how their farm was positioned within the watershed, participants could better understand the repercussions of their land and water use on a larger scale. This became an initial step to foster future potential collaborations with neighbors, strengthening relationships, and promoting resilience.

Customized individual sessions with landowners

In each session, program facilitators asked landowners about their land, goals, and concerns, as well as the types of practices they would be most willing to adopt. Then, conservation practices proposed by the ACPF were displayed on a shared screen where participants were able to make their own suggestions on the map.



Woman landowner sharing her experience with others in a learning circle.

Photo: Linda Shenk

What tips or advice would you give to others working with ACPF?

Tools that support conservation planning are often used to tell landowners what they should be doing on their land, and this approach does not support landowner autonomy, which is very important. What we learned with our partners is how to use ACPF features within a collaborative brainstorming conversation where each member—landowner, conservation professional, researcher, or graduate student—brings their own knowledge and expertise. The maps and conversation allowed landowners to see new opportunities, and landowners allowed researchers to see how aligning these opportunities with their values helped move from the data in maps to action across the watershed.

Every landowner we worked with took action, improving the health and resilience of hundreds of acres of Iowa farmland. For more information on ACPF watershed planning sessions, visit the Central Midwest COLEARN webpage at **https://cmcolearn.org**

Interested in scheduling a collaborataive session or learning more about the storytelling model?
Contact:
Linda Shenk, Iowa State University
shenk@iastate.edu

For more information and learning resources, visit acpf4watersheds.org

Central Midwest COLEARN A NOAA RISA team

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