

ACPF USE EXAMPLE:

Polk County Iowa Saturated Buffer Project

A Q&A with the Polk County Saturated Buffer Project Team including Keegan Kult with Ag Drainage Management Coalition, Michael James with Polk Soil & Water Conservation District, Clint Miller with NRCS, Tanner Puls with Iowa Department of Agriculture & Land Stewardship and John Swanson with Polk County Public Works.

How were the ACPF results used within the watershed?

The ACPF was used as a part of a county-wide “Build and Batch” Saturated Buffer Project. From 2015 to 2019 Polk County had only installed six saturated buffers in the county, and we knew we needed more of these practices to reach our nitrate reduction goals.

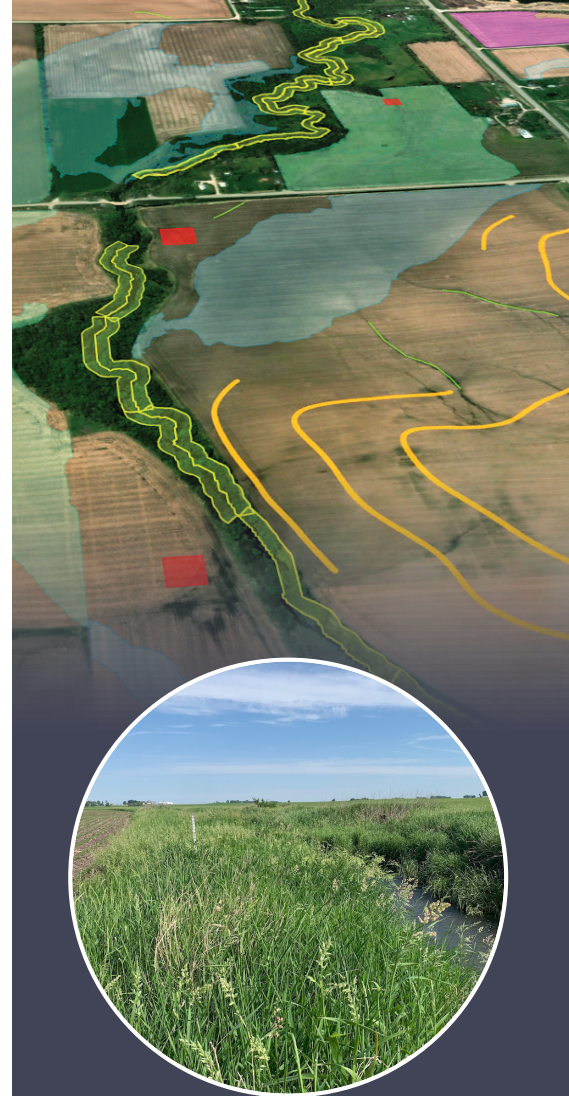
The project sought to eliminate landowner barriers to achieve the goal of installing 50 saturated buffers in a two-year period. We analyzed the ACPF results for the watersheds in the county to identify the top 50 fields that were identified as suitable saturated buffer sites and created an outreach list of those landowners.

From there, we developed a fiscal agent model where state and federal cost-share funds were held by the county who then handled all bidding for the projects. The landowner never has to see or touch the money or handle contractors. They are approached about installing a public improvement practice on their land – a saturated buffer – and should they agree they are given a small payment for their participation. The fiscal agent works with the designer and the contractor to install the practice on their land through a temporary construction access conservation easement.

This took the burden off the landowner as they were not expected to front the payment for the buffer or handle the logistics. This was especially important as saturated buffers provide very limited benefits to the landowner – the benefits are all downstream. By treating it as a public improvement project and eliminating the financial commitment and hassle for the landowner the number of folks who were interested increased ten-fold.

How did the ACPF fit into the watershed planning process?

The ACPF helped us develop a list of producers to reach out to and helped ensure there were enough potential saturated buffer sites in the watershed for the project to be successful. After identifying a list of landowners, we sent a letter to each letting them know one of their fields was identified as a potential saturated buffer site and included a simplified map so they could tell which field we were referring to. Most importantly, we also told them someone from our team would call them within 7 days. That first phone call was exploratory – discussing what a saturated buffer is and why we felt their land might be a good fit for the practice with the goal for the landowner to allow us to come out and survey the field. From there, we outlined how the fiscal and paperwork process would work and asked them to participate should their land be an ideal site.



“The ACPF gave us the best chance for success because it identified the fields in the watershed that had the best standards for meeting the parameters as a saturated buffer site.”



Who ran the ACPF? Who shared the results?

The Iowa Soybean Association ran the ACPF tools for watersheds in Polk County, Iowa several years before the “Build and Batch” Saturated Buffer Project began.

We didn’t use the ACPF map in our outreach as we wanted it to be much simpler. Plus, we didn’t want to show them the exact ACPF results because we felt that could create preconceived ideas. Sometimes the exact location identified in ACPF worked for a buffer, but sometimes another spot worked. ACPF was our starting point, but we didn’t want to be too prescriptive about the location.

How was ACPF used?

Facilitates precision conservation



We didn’t make any modifications to the default toolbox settings. Even at the default settings, we had great success in finding potential saturated buffer sites and in installing saturated buffers on the landscape.

Promote stakeholder engagement



The ACPF helped the producers we contacted know that we knew what we were talking about. People are incredibly busy with farming, working, kids, you name it. When they know you are reaching out to them for a specific reason and that it is targeted, they are much more likely to be open-minded. Especially when you aren’t asking for any upfront investment, it makes it easy for them to say yes.

Saves time and resources



Using ACPF in this way allowed us to focus only on saturated buffers. The repetition and repeatability of the batch process created efficiencies within our team and with contractors. We came in and worked with the landowner and contractor to install a saturated buffer and then once it was installed, we moved on. That made it more appealing for the landowner as it was a specific ask, the contractors were more willing to work on larger projects, and for us, it allowed us to efficiently install many buffers in a year – the first year of the project we had 60 full buffer designs in the first six-months.

What about ACPF made it helpful?

The ACPF gave us the best chance for success because it identified the fields in the watershed that had the best standards for meeting the parameters as a saturated buffer site. That said, the ACPF isn’t perfect. There were times when a landowner had another field they wanted us to look at that ended up being a great fit for a saturated buffer even though it wasn’t identified as a site location in ACPF. We never said no to a site based on the ACPF results alone – but the ACPF allowed us target fields and start the process based on the data available.

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

Create a team! For us, the team-based approach really helped us be successful – from a project manager and a designer to a fiscal agent. Establishing the fiscal agent model really took the financial and administrative burden off the landowner and got a lot more folks to participate without those headaches. Another tip? Be very clear about when you are going to reach out next and what information you will have when you do. Having clear expectations and deadlines from a project management perspective was critical.

This material is based upon work supported by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under agreement number NR213A750008C007. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In addition, any reference to specific brands or types of products or services does not constitute or imply an endorsement by the U.S. Department of Agriculture for those products or services. USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

