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Environmental group gets its hands dirty

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Regular readers of this space know we don't always have a high opinion of environmental groups. To us, most are more interested in staging publicity stunts than in making a difference in the environment.

Thus, when an environmental group seems to be genuinely interested in working to find solutions to such problems as reducing the nutrient load going into the nation's waterways or growing food more safely, we take notice.

That appears to be the case with the Environmental Defense Fund, a New York-based organization that claims on its Web site to partner with businesses, governments and communities to find practical environmental solutions.

Unlike some other environmental groups, the folks at the Environmental Defense Fund want to get their hands dirty, said Tom Morris, associate professor in the Department of Plant Science at the University of Connecticut. It is an organization that is concerned about having adequate food production and environmentally safe food production.

Morris comments during a session of the Iowa Soybean Association's On-Farm Network Conference in Ames, Iowa, Feb. 22, were greeted with some skepticism by audience members.

He explained the EDF has been working for six years on the Bay Farms program, for which Morris is a technical consultant. The program's goal is to reduce nutrient runoff that finds its way to the Chesapeake Bay.

It's one of the few organizations that is willing to come down to the field and the farm level and get to know the farmers and their practices, he said. In the Chesapeake Bay Region, Suzy Friedman has gotten to know the 120 farmers we work with, and she is more than accepted on all their farms and in all our meetings we have with farmers to discuss our data.

(Friedman, the regional director for the Chesapeake Bay for the Center for Conservation Initiatives at the Environmental Defense Fund, was scheduled to speak on a manure management project being conducted with EDF at the On-Farm Network Conference, but couldn't make it because of weather problems.)

Morris was one of several presenters who discussed the adaptive management strategy that is being developed by some university researchers and agronomists to better match the form and timing of nitrogen application to crop needs.

Adaptive management appears to fit hand in glove with the Iowa Soybean Association's goals of using on-farm strip trials to help farmers make better use of nutrient applications to improve profitability and prevent runoff of excess plant nutrients into Iowa's streams and into the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico.

The Environmental Defense Fund has helped shape the work on managing plant nutrients in Iowa and in Ohio and Indiana along with the Bay Farms On-Farm Network project.

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