



Farmer's Conservation Practices Pay Off with Certification

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Now that the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program is in full swing, farmers across the state are finding out how easy it is to get their farms certified.

This is the case for rural Okabena farmer David Christoffer. The first farmer to be certified in Jackson County, Christoffer began working with the Jackson Soil and Water Conservation District in April to make qualifications. What he found out was he already more than qualified. "They looked at what I had been doing and it was more than sufficient to be certified," Christoffer said. "It was a matter of a couple weeks to become certified."

He added there was nothing he had to do except share with the SWCD how he applied fertilizer and tilled the soil. "That's all I had to do; the rest the Jackson SWCD took care of," Christoffer said. Dane Huinker, Jackson SWCD's land management technician, conducted the field visit to observe Christoffer's conservation practices and deem whether or not his property could be certified. "Certifying David was very easy because he was already doing many of the practices we recommend for increasing water quality," Huinker said. "He was already following all of the BMPs (best management practices) for fertilizer and pesticides rates." Along with proper fertilizer and pesticides rates, Huinker noted the use of strip-till and cover crops gave Christoffer additional credit to become certified.

"Like many of the producers out there, he definitely deserves recognition for everything he is doing in his operation to protect water quality," Huinker said.

Now certified, Christoffer and other agricultural producers who also become certified receive priority status for any upcoming technical and financial assistance. There is 75 percent state cost-share available up to \$5,000 per producer per fiscal year.



A sign posted at the front of David Christoffer's property show his farm in Minnesota Water Quality Certified, giving him regulatory certainty for the next 10 years.

The program itself is the result of a five-year, \$9 million award from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and legislation enacted earlier this year. It is a voluntary opportunity for farmers and agricultural landowners to take the lead in implementing conservation practices that protect water. The MAWQCP transitioned from four pilot areas to being available to any agricultural producer statewide at the beginning of the year.

Not only will Christoffer receive the benefit of priority status for financial and technical assistance, but he will also be exempt from any additional conservation regulations enforced for the next 10 years with his MAWQCP certification.

Christoffer was referred to the program through a friend who knew about his already established conservation

practices. “I used to ridge-till years ago,” he said. “And then I went away from that and started strip-tilling. That’s been my program for the last 10 years.”

Along with strip-tilling, Christoffer implements a no-till practice with some of his soybeans. Christoffer considers himself conservation-minded, especially when it comes to wildlife. Because of his tilling practices, he said he is able to help more critters due to the available shelter for animals in his fields.

Just a few weekends ago, Christoffer said he and his son were in the field and discovered a pheasant nest with a dozen eggs in some leftover rye — one of his cover crops.

“If we were just doing conventional tilling, we wouldn’t have found a pheasant nest out in the middle of the field,” he said.

Christoffer said the strip-till method improves soil health greatly and less soil erosion occurs during heavy rain. By using a minimum tillage, it combines the soil drying and warming benefits of conventional tillage with the soil-protecting advantages of no-till by disturbing only the portion of the soil that contains the seed row.

Along with his strip-till system, Christoffer plants cover crops to ensure his soil stays cool and retains more rainwater. He typically plants the cover crops in late June, rotating among rye, radishes, turnips and rapeseed.

“It’s more beneficial to keep the ground covered with residue and cover crops. The overall health of the soil will be improved over the years,” said Christoffer, adding that at first, it is not a fast process. “There’s a little bit of a learning curve, but there’s always that no matter what you do.”



Despite this, he considers a conservational tilling system to be just as viable as conventional tilling practices.

“I know it works. The yields have been as good as in the past, or as good as the neighbors’,” Christoffer said. “It’s just a different way of doing things. Some people don’t like to change, so it’s going to be a slow process if it continues.”

Rural Okabena farmer David Christoffer's use of conservation practices, such as strip-tilling and planting cover crops, has paid off with a certification from the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program.