

Riparian Forest Buffers Are the Right Thing to Do

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In 1994 I installed a riparian forest buffer system along Bear Creek on my farm in north central Iowa. I had learned about the buffer system by watching the one that was installed on the Ron Risdal farm, just downstream from my farm.

Some of the worst flooding on record occurred in 1993 and made it difficult to cultivate much of the floodplain on my farm. The same flood did no damage to the four-year old buffer system of trees, shrubs, and native grasses that had been planted on the Risdal farm. I was interested in improving the wildlife habitat on my farm as well as improving the condition of the creek.

The Agroecology Issue Team (AIT) of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University installed the system. The trees in the buffer help to stabilize the banks and store nutrients. The shrubs add diversity for wildlife and help slow flood waters because of their many stems. The native grasses are great for trapping runoff from the crop fields and for providing cover for pheasants.

The system also includes streambank bioengineering techniques that use plants and rip rap to stabilize banks. Small wetlands are also used to clean field drainage tile water before it enters the creek. The Clean Water Action Plan recently named the buffer system on my farm and several adjacent ones as one of 12 National Restoration Demonstration Watersheds.

Because I installed my buffer before the present CRP program, I was not able to enroll it when the program became effective. The AIT used research dollars and funds from Pheasants Forever and the Stewardship Incentive Program to install it. While this agroforestry practice is presently not providing any direct economic benefits to me, it will provide quality timber down the road.

It does provide me with excellent habitat for pheasants, deer, and other birds and animals. I would recommend it to neighbors who want to help improve water quality, wildlife habitat, and timber production. They can also get good cost-share from the present CRP. I think buffers are the right thing to do.