



“Farmers have a great story to tell. We are using responsible conservation agronomy practices on the farm. We want the world to know.”

- **Betsy Bower**
Ceres Solutions Agronomist

Thanks to its rich, fertile soil, more than 80% of the land in the Big Pine Watershed area is devoted to agriculture. Increased focus on aggressive stewardship practices such as water, nutrient and soil management, and the use of cover crops as shown above, are helping local farmers protect their investment in the land, and in the crop it produces.

In a paraphrase often attributed to Will Rogers, Americans have long defended their passionate pursuit of land by acknowledging that this precious commodity is in finite supply. We’ve learned to treasure the land because “they aren’t making any more of it.”

No one is more keenly aware of this fact than today’s farmer.

That’s why finding a balance between working area farm land and protecting that same soil... and the natural resources around it... is so vital to producer success. For farmers in Indiana’s Big Pine Watershed, finding balance means using new tools and strategies to introduce crop nutrients more efficiently. It means reducing what ends up in local waterways. It also requires more careful documentation and demonstration of efforts. Sustainable agriculture is a complex issue that commands collaboration from a variety of partners throughout the agriculture industry.

In the last 18 months, local farmers, Ceres Solutions, Land O’Lakes, Inc., Winfield United, the Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) and The Nature Conservancy, among others, have teamed up to develop a Big Pine Watershed management plan that lays out water quality goals and how to reach them over a multi-year period. One of the primary goals has been to reduce the amount of phosphorus and sediment that flow into the Watershed by more than 50 percent.

The Why Behind the How

For those who are not involved in agriculture, Ceres Solutions is a farmer-owned cooperative based in Crawfordsville, Indiana, that provides seed, nutrients, supplies, technology, education and more to help local farmers achieve their production goals. For decades, the Ceres Solutions staff has found success by partnering with local farmers for the long term. Part of that strategy naturally means prioritizing protection of the land and natural resources for the benefit of future generations.

When describing Ceres programs, one of the most intriguing questions local Ceres Solutions Agronomist **Betsy Bower** hears is this: “Why?”

“I admit, I am sometimes taken aback by the question as to why a local retailer is so invested and so committed,” Betsy laughs. “We have been engaged in these practices my entire career... long before sustainability was a trending topic. Protection of the soil, maximizing potential and helping farmers achieve production goals is just what we do. It’s right to do.”

Plus, she adds, “Good stewardship is actually good business.”

“Ceres Solutions has had a passion for sustainability since Day One,” agrees **Tom Stein**, location manager for Ceres Solutions in Templeton, Indiana. “We’ve always tried to foster a culture of environmental stewardship as a key part of our business model.”

Not surprisingly, when improvement at Big Pine was first discussed, Ceres Solutions quickly saw the value they could bring to the project.



“You’ve got to take care of what you have. And most farmers do.”
-- **Tom Schwenk, Farmer and Ceres Director**

Farmers Find a Way

“We took action on this issue because we saw this as an opportunity to help our customers—farmers—implement conservation practices to improve water quality outcomes for Big Pine Creek,” says Tom.

Since the collaboration began, Ceres Solutions agronomists and others on the project have helped farmers implement nutrient management plans. Team members have demonstrated and educated farmers on practices that reduce soil erosion. For instance, farmers can use reduced or no-till systems, which allows them to grow crops without disturbing the soil. They can also plant cover crops on their land to protect the soil between growing seasons. Information drives more informed decision-making, and a variety of tools can help farmers to not only measure soil and nutrient loss but the actual economic magnitude. Together, farmers and Ceres staff investigate alternative scenarios to adapt field-by-field to meet objectives. These strategies help prevent costly nutrients from leaving the field as run off, and also help keep more of the precious soil in place for the future.

Making Headway... and Headlines

Conservation momentum is building, thanks in part to education and also promotion of the EQIP funding available to farmers. A pilot group of Ceres Solutions customers have committed to formal long-term conservation agronomy practices, and some of those early adopters farm in the Watershed. Their experiences have been shared on Ceres Solutions Cooperative’s social media and YouTube channel to build awareness in the general public.

While farmers in the Big Pine Watershed still have work to do, they are also being recognized for progress made. According to **Jane Hardisty**, recently retired from her leadership post at NRCS, Indiana farmers are making headway. For example, in 2017, 1,500 contracts were written to implement conservation initiatives on local farms, touching more than 276,750 acres. Plus, with support from retailers like Ceres Solutions, \$23 million was invested in EQIP incentives in 2017 alone. Ceres Solutions employees volunteer both their time and expertise to these efforts. Last month, the Ceres team was proud to accept Indiana SWCD’s Friend of Conservation award, recognizing leadership in local conservation improvement projects.

A Continuous Improvement

For CTIC, a conservation organization dedicated to protecting land and water, the Big Pine project offers the opportunity to make a difference. “We are pleased with the focus on conservation. Our hope is to replicate some of the momentum within Big Pine in nearby watershed projects,” says **Chad Watts**, CTIC project director. “We expect the long-term outcome to be thousands of new acres of cover crops and nutrient management plans, which are tools that can help greatly reduce the amount of nutrients that leave farm fields and end up in our waterways.”

Bower, a vocal sustainability champion for decades, summed up her customers’ sentiments with her signature directness and passion... the same passion farmers see her bring to her work every day. “As a farmer, you know the challenge is not in doing the right thing... but in more intentionally documenting, managing and leveraging your decision. You already watch your inputs. You follow stewardship principles. Let’s use new funding options, new tools and technology to optimize output per unit of input on every acre,” she said. “By nature, you continuously adapt to improve the delicate balance between productivity, profit and preservation. That’s the conservation agronomy story... your story.”

For farmers in the Big Pine Watershed, the story is a compelling one.

Stay tuned. ■