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August 6-10, 2018

## New mapping project highlights soil conservation



Travis K. Fischer  
Mid-America  
Publishing

A major effort to map soil conservation practices across Iowa has reached a big milestone.

Last week Iowa State University released the preliminary version of the Iowa Best Management Practices (BMP) Mapping Project, an interactive map that provides a comprehensive count of six different soil conservation practices across the state.

The mapping project began in 2007 when, over the course of three years, planes flew overhead photographing the state with aerial imaging and LiDAR scanning, a laser based system similar to radar.

Realizing that the LiDAR images could be used to identify certain kinds of practices, the Iowa Department of Agriculture, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Iowa State University, and Iowa Nutrient Research and Education Council combined their resources to start a program to create the most comprehensive inventory of conservation practices in the nation.

The massive undertaking made the team-up between the various entities necessary. Looking over an entire state's worth of maps would have been an incredible challenge for one group alone.

"If the Department of Natural Resources tried to do this on their own, it would have taken many more years than it did," said Adam Schnieders of the Iowa Department of Natural

Resources. "There's so much information this could be used for and it wouldn't be possible without everyone."

To create the map, ISU trained students and hired them to pour over every inch of Iowa's 1,711 HUC12 Watersheds to identify and mark pond dams, grassed waterways, terraces, water and sediment control basins, contour buffer strips, and strip cropping. These six practices are only a small number of the strategies utilized in soil conservation, but they are the ones that can be identified with LiDAR.

Even with the combined resources of ISU and multiple government agencies it's taken three years to study these images, but the first phase of the mapping project is finally complete. The map is now live on ISU's website, though much of it is still going through quality control, a process that could run through next April. Once complete, the interactive map will allow anybody to click on any watershed in the state and receive a report about the conservation practices in the area as of 2010.

The practical use of decade-old information may not be immediately apparent, but these maps serve as an important data point for tracking soil conservation practices for comparison with practices of both the past and the future.

"When you're trying to track progress, we need to know where we're starting," said Schnieders. "Are we seeing more of them? Are we seeing some of them go away? These are the types of questions we will be looking to answer with this information."

The next stage of the project will

be to compare the 2010 map to imagery taken in 1984, creating an overlay to show what has changed over the years.

For more contemporary uses, the map is also being compared to more recent aerial photography to see how these practices are being utilized today, particularly since the recent push for improved water quality in the state. Having an accurate count of which practices have been implemented where will make it easier to determine what's working and what isn't.

The maps don't just have utility for long-term study either. For watershed coordinators, these reports will be a valuable time-saving resource.

"A lot of times they might not know what's already out there," said Schnieders. "This could save them hours of time because they can look at it at their desk prior to going out in the field."

As water quality and soil conservation becomes a higher priority in Iowa, the hope is that these maps will not only serve to help conservationists determine which practices are work-



ISU has released a comprehensive count of six soil management practices across the state. The interactive map can be found at <https://www.gis.iastate.edu/gis/projects/conservation-practices>.

ing best, but also to highlight how far Iowa has come over the years.

"To me it's very encouraging information and it's something that could be used for a lot of purposes," said Schnieders. "It makes the ambitious goals of the strategy more realistically achievable knowing we have a strong record of conservation in Iowa."

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