

Green Fields: Lake Darling project wins award

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(Photo: Iowa Department of Agriculture/Special to the Register)

Lake Darling project wins award

The landowners and partners in the Lake Darling watershed project in Washington County received the Water Quality Initiative Leader Award from Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey last week.

"Local landowners and project partners have taken real leadership on this project, and the impact it has had on Lake Darling is impressive," Northey said. "This type of project shows the broad support we have received for conservation efforts."

As part of the watershed project, in the last 10 years there have been 162 construction projects completed on private land. These projects involved 59 different landowners, which is 83 percent of all landowners in the watershed.

These landowners provided \$458,035 in funding to support conservation projects, which was matched by \$1.5 million from state and federal sources, Northey said.

He said landowners continue to be interested in conservation work, including building 13,309 feet of terraces.

The drainage area into Lake Darling is 12,500 acres. About 8,100 acres are in Washington County, 2,000 acres are in Jefferson County and 1,900 acres are in Keokuk County. There are 71 different landowners within the watershed.

Reports show signs of rural slowdown

An index that tracks the rural Midwest economy declined for its fourth straight month, driven by declining farmland and equipment sales.

The Rural Mainstreet Index moved to its lowest level in more than two years, according to the September survey of bank CEOs in rural areas of 10 states, including Iowa.

The index has been trending lower since June 2013 when the reading stood at 60.5. In September, the index fell to 48.2 from August's 48.3. A reading of 50 represents neutral growth.

"From this time last year, grain prices are down by an average of 29.4 percent, according to government data. This huge decline has had a significant negative influence on most of the factors from our surveys over the last several months," said Ernie Goss, an economist at Creighton University in Omaha who conducts the survey.

Goss said an index used to track farm and ranch land prices is slumping, falling to 33.7, its lowest level since March 2009. It was 41.4 in August.

"Much weaker crop prices are taking the air out of agriculture land prices. This is the 10th straight month that the index has moved below growth neutral," Goss said.

Bankers reported that one-fourth of recent farmland sales were for cash, down from 29 percent reported last year at this time and lower than the 26 percent reported last month.

The September farm-equipment sales index also tumbled to a record low 17.6 from August's record low of 25.5. The index has been below growth-neutral for 14 straight months, the report said.

Bankers said they are beginning to see farm equipment dealers going out of business. "The rapid decline in agriculture commodity prices has pushed farmers to shrink their equipment purchases," Goss said.

Despite the softness, rural hiring continues at a solid pace. An index used to track hiring declined to a still solid 56.5 in September from 56.8 in August.

"Despite weaker conditions in the crop farming sector, businesses in the Rural Mainstreet economy are adding jobs at an annualized pace of 1.6 percent, which is well above the historical average," Goss said.

A separate report last week showed that Iowa's cropland values fell 3.4 percent during the last six months.

Iowa's cropland had an average value of \$8,000 an acre as of Sept. 1, down from about \$8,222.67 an acre in March, according to an Iowa Realtors Land Institute report released Wednesday.

The state has seen its average crop prices fall 8.8 percent in the last 12 months.

"The commodity prices probably account for 80 to 90 percent of the decrease in the land market," Kyle Hansen, a Hertz Farm Management land consultant, said.

Pending harvest raises safety concerns

Iowans are reminded to use caution in the weeks ahead as the state's nearly 90,000 farmers hit the field for harvest.

"Iowa looks to have very a large crop this year, which means long days and more trips on the road," Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey said. "It is important everyone in rural Iowa keep safety in mind throughout the harvest season. Harvest is a great time on the farm, but it is also very busy and can be stressful.

"It is important everyone working on the farm and Iowans traveling through the rural parts of our state stay alert and take the necessary time to make sure we have a successful and safe harvest season," he said.

Tips for farmers include using the slow-moving vehicle emblem on all appropriate tractors and equipment and making sure they are in good shape and visible. Also, be aware of and avoid flowing grain suffocation hazards while unloading bins and wagons. Retrofitting older tractors with a rollover protective structure is another important safety measure, Northey said.

MidAmerican Energy also encourages farmers to use caution around power lines when moving equipment. For a reminder about best practices for staying safe, go to www.midamericanenergy.com/safety (<http://www.midamericanenergy.com/safety>).

ISU wins grant to study taller wind towers

The U.S. Department of Energy has awarded Iowa State engineers \$1 million to study how high-strength concrete can be used to build taller wind turbine towers, the university said last week.

The project will build on earlier work from Sri Sritharan, an ISU engineering professor, to develop and test concrete wind turbine towers. The tower technology, called Hexcrete, uses precast and easily transportable components to build hexagon-shaped towers from concrete panels connected to concrete columns.

Sritharan and former graduate student Grant Schmitz tested full-size tower segments and connections last year. The tests found the concrete technology could be designed to handle the load expected for taller towers at extreme conditions.

"I think this will revolutionize wind energy," Sritharan said. "We won't need to transport these big tubular towers on the highways and we'll harvest energy where it's needed."

Sritharan said the concrete towers can reach beyond today's 80-meter steel towers, provide energy companies with access to faster and steadier winds at 100 meters and higher, and increase the amount of time turbines are productive.

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