



McGraw's Water Initiative Makes 1st Splash

The McGraw Center for Conservation Leadership's Heartland Waters Initiative – a proposal to harness technology and unleash innovative financing for conservation in the upcoming Farm Bill – had its unofficial national unveiling at the U.S. Water Alliance's national "One Water Summit" in New Orleans at the end of June.

Making the presentation was Alex Echols of Virginia, who serves as the Center's team leader on the project. He led off a panel discussion that included another team member: Roger Wolf, director of environmental programs and services for the Iowa Soybean Association. A third team member, Kevin Shafer, is executive director of the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District and chairman of the water alliance's board of directors.

Echols and Wolf were part of a discussion on "Embracing the Transformation: One Water and Sustainable Agriculture." It was especially appropriate for McGraw to be a part of the discussion, as the Heartland Waters Initiative aims to improve water quality across the continent by promoting ways to filter agricultural runoff.

It is hoped that the initiative's proposals will be included in the Farm Bill, the single most important piece of federal legislation for conservation.

Yet unlike many conservation proposals, the initiative recognizes the need for agriculture to produce returns on investment, like any other business. “We’ve got to figure out how to expand agricultural productivity without affecting conservation outcomes,” Echols explained.

“Farmers have to stay in business – that’s really important,” Wolf added.

The initiative grew out of meetings held at McGraw over the past year. Charlie Potter, McGraw’s president and CEO, and Kerry Luft, the Center’s director, worked with Echols to assemble a team with broad and deep experience in agricultural conservation – from Capitol Hill staff and wildlife experts to business leaders working with GPS and other advanced strategies to maximize farm profitability. The resulting proposal consists of nine concrete recommendations promoting technology and innovation, as well as sound business principles.

That is especially important to ensure that taxpayer dollars are spent in the most efficient manner possible – a key tenet of the Center’s philosophy.

“There’s not going to be more money for programs,” Echols warned. “We have to figure out a way to revolutionize conservation delivery.”

Also key to the Center’s proposal is the goal of expanding support for conservation issues beyond traditional constituencies. The Heartland Waters Initiative is aimed at improving water quality, a vital issue for all of the nation’s citizens whether they live on a farm or in a city.

“The water and environmental communities has been absent (in Farm Bill discussions,” Echols said. “If we care about water quality, we need to stop being absent.”

The Center for Conservation Leadership now is in the process of distributing a white paper on the Heartland Waters Initiative. Because McGraw is a nonpartisan entity that does not lobby, it will be important to build a broader audience to help advance the proposals.

Besides clean water advocates, potential supporters include agricultural associations, garden clubs, food groups and traditional environmental and wildlife groups such as The Nature Conservancy.

“Not one of us can do it alone,” Wolf said.

For more on the Heartland Waters Initiative, go [here](#):