Down on the farm for Field Day: How the MWRD, Illinois Farm Bureau and partners are collaborating to protect water

Despite humidity, heavy central Illinois rains and a pandemic, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) and partners returned to Fulton County, Illinois for an in-person Field Day to demonstrate innovative practices that farmers can take to reduce nutrient loss on farm fields.

As part of the annual event, agricultural professionals team up with water experts and soil scientists from the MWRD and partners from the Illinois Farm Bureau, Illinois Sustainable Technology Center and Illinois Nutrient Research & Education Council (NREC) to showcase a variety of techniques that can increase crop yields while reducing nutrient runoff that can plague downstream water quality. About 50 farmers and other participants boarded hayrides through the MWRD site in Fulton County to view several demonstrations that included cover crop inter-seeding, denitrifying bioreactor improvements, drainage water management and multipurpose riparian grass buffers.

"Just as water flows across streets and sidewalks and funnels through pipes and sewers, water can also run off farm fields into area waterways and move downstream with nutrients that come with it," said MWRD President Kari K. Steele. “That is why we are proud to host our annual Field Day and invest in studying improved nutrient loss reduction strategies.”

The Fulton County research site has evolved in a sweet spot for rural-urban collaboration,” said Illinois Farm Bureau Director of Environmental Policy Lauren Lurkins. “This land reclamation project site is unique because its focal point is showing how to use the solids (continued)
Established in 1889, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD) is an award-winning, special purpose government agency responsible for wastewater treatment and stormwater management in Cook County, Illinois. Learn more at mwrd.org.

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processed from treating wastewater to create fertile soil – a win-win for everyone in the Chicagoland area. It’s been an expanding, effective partnership and we hope to see the success of these best management practices spread beyond Illinois borders.”

This unconventional collaboration was borne out of the USEPA's goals to reduce the hypoxic zone in the Gulf of Mexico, restore and protect local and regional water quality in the Mississippi River basin, and improve land management throughout these communities. Based on these goals, the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy (NLRS) was established in 2015 to reduce total phosphorus (25 percent) and total nitrogen (15 percent) loads by 2025 with the long-term goal of a 45-percent reduction of the loss of these nutrients to the Mississippi River.

To tackle these Illinois NLRS goals, point sources like the MWRD, which transformed an average of 1.24 billion gallons of wastewater each day in 2020 and discharged it as clean water into area waterways, joined forces with non-point sources representing the agricultural industry. In addition to recovering clean water, the MWRD recovers nutrients, like phosphorus and nitrogen, each day and converts it into products like fertilizer and compost for beneficial reuse.

“From farm fields to Chicago area water reclamation plants, we are all working together to achieve improved water quality for our region, nation and international waters,” said MWRD Vice President Barbara McGowan.

To learn more about the Fulton County Farm Bureau Nutrient Stewardship Field Day and watch video content to hear more about the techniques introduced, visit http://www.ilfb.org/Fulton.