

Director's Column-Complex Questions and Simple Answers

As I get older I think about key statements or people that have influenced my life and career. One person was an Extension farm management specialist who said “there are no simple answers to complex questions”. I think about this every time I hear someone talk about the solution to nonpoint source pollution.

I've heard “experts” say solving nonpoint requires little effort or cost on the part of the producer. If farmers would put in buffers, adopt phosphorus-based nutrient management, switch to no-till and incorporate their manure, the problem would be solved. The producers I know have more complex problems that require more evaluation, thought, and planning. While the practices outlined above may help with nonpoint pollution, there are no cure-all solutions.

The best way to reduce nutrient and sediment in runoff is to closely evaluate the farming system and identify the areas that have the greatest risk for significant losses. Producers can work with consultants or agency personnel to identify these sources and to suggest changes that reduce these risks. Understanding the farming system, the geographic setting, and the producer is the only way to reduce nonpoint losses.

The problem cannot be solved sitting in an office looking at maps and reading reports. It reminds me of another saying, “Anyone who has never had an animal die, has not raised many animals”. It's the reason farm management people build in a “death loss component in their budgets”. It happens!