

Bringing it together



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Photo by Stan Buman  
www.fencelinephotos.com

### Our Mission:

Agren, Inc. responds to agricultural and environmental challenges by providing comprehensive, integrated services to groups and individuals to positively impact our natural resources. The Agren team is dedicated to achieving client objectives through a commitment to quality and excellence.

## Planning Ponds Just Got a Whole Lot Easier, Thanks to Agren's Innovative Software Idea

Farmers and conservation planners alike want the ability to plan conservation practices quickly and accurately, without the delays of land surveys and hand-calculated estimates. With new software being developed by Agren, planning conservation structures, such as ponds and water- and sediment-control basins, can be accomplished in less than 15 minutes, with far greater accuracy than is currently available.

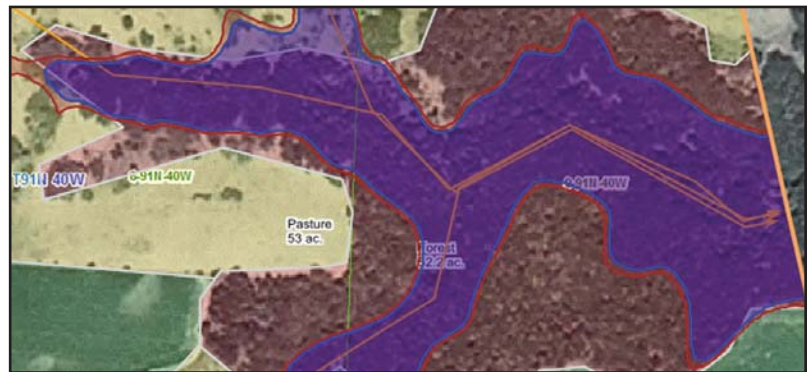
In 2006, Agren secured a three-year NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant to develop software specifically to speed the planning of conservation practices in Iowa and increase accuracy. The software is being designed with a combination of technologies, including LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) elevation data.

At present, LiDAR data is available for about one-third of the counties in Iowa, with the process continuing until all counties are completed. LiDAR is collected and served on-line by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources

(DNR) with funding from several agencies in the state.

Agren's new software has tremendous application for conservation planners who work one-on-one with farmers. For example, a producer may be interested in building a pond on his property to help control erosion. A technician would ask the farmer a few basic questions, enter some specifics into the computer, and the program will rapidly generate a list of pond design options and cost estimates. The list allows the user to select a design based on the desired pond size, depth, size of pipe, or cost.

Once the user selects the desired



This computer-generated drawing illustrates the type of information created by new conservation-planning software being developed by Agren. The dark purple area represents the location of a proposed pond.

pond characteristics, the program generates an aerial photo of the area with the pond's permanent and temporary pool areas clearly drawn, along with other relevant specifications. Within a matter of minutes, the technician and the farmer can consider various "what if" scenarios and discuss suitable alternatives for the farmer.

*(continued on inside)*

## Planning Ponds Just Got a Whole Lot Easier, Thanks to Agren's Innovative Software Idea (cont.)

Agren hopes to develop planning applications for a number of other conservation practices, such as wetlands, terraces, waterways, and contour farming.

Agren president Tom Buman first realized the potential for conservation

planning when it was announced that LiDAR elevation data would be collected for the entire state of Iowa.

“Currently, when a landowner requests a pond estimate at the local conservation office, it may take four

to six months to get the estimate, depending on the time of year,” Tom explained. “With this program, a conservationist can provide a cost and size estimate in 15 to 20 minutes at any time of year.”

## Why We Market Conservation to Absentee Landowners

Much of Agren's focus the last few years has been on trying to better understand absentee landowners and helping them realize the options they have for conserving natural resources on their land. Absentee landowner projects have taken Agren to Michigan, New York, Wisconsin, Montana, Iowa, and other areas of the country.

Agren first embarked on the quest to improve conservation outreach to absentee landowners when they learned that 42 percent of America's agricultural land is owned by people who do not operate that land. Many times, absentee landowners are overlooked in conservation outreach campaigns, yet they own a significant portion of ag land and want to care for it. Only a small percentage of absentee landowners are enrolled in federal conservation programs, and about a quarter of absentee landowners live more than 50 miles from the land they own.

All of these statistics point to the need to educate absentee landowners about their conservation choices.

Now, as we gain experience working with absentee landowners, we find there is even more evidence to support targeting conservation information to absentee

landowners. Results of a 2007 survey of 2,000 absentee landowners in three states clearly show that absentee landowners provide a significant outreach opportunity for natural resources agencies.

Agren has created a Top 10 list of reasons why absentee landowners should be targeted with conservation outreach. While these responses may be in contrast to conventional thinking about absentee landowners, they represent the attitudes of a majority of landowners who completed Agren's survey.

Here's our Top 10:

### Top 10 Reasons to Market Conservation to Absentee Landowners

10. 70% of absentee landowners have at least some college education.
9. 63% have little, if any, agricultural background.
8. Two-thirds have never had land enrolled in a conservation program.
7. Recreation or wildlife interests influence their decision-making a great deal.
6. A majority rent their land to a local farmer instead of a family member or friend.
5. Most feel comfortable encouraging their operator to use certain conservation practices.
4. A majority prefers to receive information by mail or through one-on-one contacts.
3. They have very little knowledge about conservation agencies.
2. A majority do not rely on their land as an important source of income.
1. Absentee landowners indicate that wildlife, soil & water are their three top areas of interest related to their land.



Photo by Stan Buman/Fenceline Photos

To view more of Stan's nature and wildlife photos, visit his new website:

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# More Than 700 Acres Burned During First Year of Volunteer Firefighters Promoting Fire

Getting more prescribed fire on the ground is a goal shared by many conservation-minded groups, individuals and agencies in Iowa. Through its current prescribed fire project with Iowa volunteer fire departments, Agren believes it has hit upon one workable way to achieve that goal.

In 2007, Agren received NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant funding to work with up to 10 pilot volunteer fire departments (VFDs) in western and south-central Iowa, encouraging them to establish a prescribed fire service in their communities.

So far, the success of the project is exceeding all expectations.

In just the first year of the project, more than 700 acres were burned during 19 controlled fires in four counties – Fremont, Mills, Woodbury, and Decatur. Firefighters report that many more acres would have been burned if weather conditions had been more favorable.

During the past year, two educational trainings were offered to firefighters in the target areas. Nearly 60 volunteers took part in the initial kick-off trainings in January, where they were introduced to the concept of a prescribed fire service. The meetings were led by a group from the Smithland Volunteer Fire Department in Woodbury County, which has had great success with a prescribed fire service over the past several years. Smithland volunteers shared how they got started doing prescribed fire, what benefits they've experienced, necessary training and equipment, and other particulars needed to run a successful service.

The second trainings were held in September at actual burn sites near Thurman, Smithland, and Leon. The emphasis at these trainings was the importance of preparing a burn plan, as well as specific suggestions for planning and conducting burns.

To support this fire education, Agren developed a three-ring resource binder for each department. The binder includes chapters on using prescribed fire and its benefits,

working with landowners, developing and promoting a prescribed fire service, samples of burn plans, and other useful information. The binders were developed with REAP (Resource Enhancement and Protection) Conservation Education Program funding. Near the conclusion of the project, these binders will be made available to VFDs statewide that are interested in prescribed fire.



**Volunteer firefighters from Woodbury and Monona counties listen to a presentation by Smithland VFD about developing a prescribed fire service in their communities. This training in Sergeant Bluff was one of three kick-off meetings held last January.**

Another objective of the project is to encourage firefighters to take advantage of available wildland fire trainings and to gain actual in-field experience by volunteering to assist experienced burn crews with prescribed fire. Agren helped facilitate this experience by bringing together volunteers who wanted training with experienced crews that welcomed additional help.

All of these successes reinforce Agren's belief that volunteer fire departments are a logical means to achieving more prescribed fire in Iowa. The volunteers from Smithland VFD agree.

"It makes sense for VFDs to promote the use of prescribed fire," one Smithland volunteer said at a January training. "We just keep refining what we do. We try to get everybody a little training. We get better grants, we get better equipment, and we get better interaction with the landowners."

In addition, Smithland reports that their prescribed fire service has replaced other forms of fundraising to support their department. During the past four years, Smithland has raised more than \$13,000 in donations by planning and conducting prescribed fires.

"We don't flip pancakes anymore," they said. "We've been able to update our equipment, and we get grants a lot easier."

As the prescribed fire project moves into its second year, Agren will continue to present training opportunities to volunteer firefighters, and controlled fire will be used on ever more acres, weather permitting.

# Get to Know... Amy Dreith



Amy Dreith

Amy Dreith joined the Agren staff in May of this year to provide general administrative support. After eight years as a small business owner with her husband in Sac City, Amy said she is enjoying the change of pace at Agren and being able to spend more time with her family.

Amy's responsibilities at Agren include meeting and travel coordination, executing direct marketing campaigns, and website

maintenance. She also is responsible for marketing Agren to federal agencies that use the GSA Federal Supply Schedule, as well as coordinating project implementation tasks. Most recently Amy has become involved with the absentee

landowner project in Chippewa County, WI, and maintains the Access database for all absentee landowner projects.

Amy was raised on a farm in Odebolt, IA, and graduated from Morningside College with a degree in business marketing and management. After graduation, Amy and her husband Brian moved to Fort Collins, CO, where she worked in the banking industry while Brian completed his degree in horticulture at Colorado State University. In the fall of 2000, the Dreiths moved back to Iowa to purchase Marjo Flowers and Garden Center in Sac City. Amy was in charge of marketing and other business aspects while learning the world of flowers and plants.

Amy and Brian have a young son Collin, who is 10 months old and full of energy. Collin keeps his parents busy and always has a smile for anyone. In her free time, Amy enjoys filling in as organist for their local church, camping, motorcycling, cooking, and playing with Collin.

GSA

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