

Two Views: Water Quality and Iowa Agriculture

# Common-sense solutions are the way to fix water quality

Much has been written about ongoing water quality stakeholder meetings and who is at the table with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Fortunately, Iowa has an open-door policy and often sits down and talks with interested persons and groups when they are looking at making a change in policy or regulation.

Understanding all perspectives makes for a common-sense approach and better decision-making. The meetings aren't formal; they're designed to seek input from those most affected.

Iowa already regulates approximately 8,000 livestock farms, with more than 170 dairy cows, 300 cattle or 750 head of hogs, but it is looking at changing its procedures due to a threatened lawsuit. That is why Iowa Farm Bureau's perspective was requested.

Iowa Farm Bureau farmers are proud of the progress that voluntary conservation measures have brought to this state in the last 30 years. We know that when it comes to conservation, there is no "one size fits all" approach because our landscapes, our farms and our technology continue to evolve and remain as changeable as our weather.

Farm Bureau encourages each farmer to add conservation measures on their farm, but that is just a start. In addition to encouragement, Farm Bureau, as well as other farm organizations, is tasked with assuring our farmer members understand changes to state and federal regulations to help them meet requirements of Iowa law and the federal Clean Water Act.



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As the state's largest grass-roots farm organization, Iowa Farm Bureau represents a wide array of family farmers — crop farmers, cattle farmers, hog farmers, young farmers just out of college, six-generation farmers, even vineyard and tree farmers. Since 98 percent of Iowa farms are family-owned, this diverse group of farmers expects us to be at the table sharing their perspectives when regulatory groups sit down to discuss the vital issue of water quality.

We are not the only ones at the table. That point has been missing in recent editorials and stories in this publication. Multiple meetings have been held between the DNR, EPA and the very groups critical of a solutions-based, collaborative approach to improving water quality. This collaborative plan has been in the works for years, and Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Sierra Club and other farm groups have equally shared their laundry lists of concerns and opinions on proactive steps to achieve a better environment.

But it is our farmer members who are the primary stakeholder group, tasked with figuring out how to meet new requirements or be penalized by non-compliance. Many factors influence the feasibility of proposed regulations. Clearly, when it comes to water quality, a one-size-fits-all approach

will not work.

We know it would be unworkable and unnecessary for regulators to traipse across all 8,000 of Iowa's livestock farms just to make sure they document the information in their file, especially when they have already visited many of the largest farms over the past five years. The greatest impact of the threatened lawsuit is on our state's small and medium-sized farms that keep their livestock outside and may have challenges in a big rain-storm.

DNR can make reasonable judgments about which farms have the greatest challenges and focus their resources, instead of going on a paper chase that wastes taxpayer dollars.

As Gov. Branstad's office clearly stated from the beginning, all regulatory processes seek comment and participation from people who will be regulated. Changes that are practical and have common sense approaches will lead to better compliance and consumer confidence in the system.

Expecting to be the only ones making the invitation list or speaking on the issue doesn't usually bring acceptance or compliance. That's like trying to build a school without the input of parents, teachers or students who will use it.

That's hardly a foundation that will stand the test of time.

Iowa Farm Bureau believes in providing our family farmers a solid foundation, the tools they need to embrace changes, which will help all of the state improve water quality. Such input takes time, perspective and common sense. Success will be built one brick at a time.

# Erratic weather underscores need for sustainability

Corn Belt agriculture should not be putting all its eggs in one basket. That may be an important message from last year's drought and the wet-dry extremes of the current growing season.

Steps toward a more diversified agriculture are likely to become more urgent as weather patterns become more erratic and volatile. Diversification is going to become more necessary as weather and climate change affects traditional corn-soybean rotations.

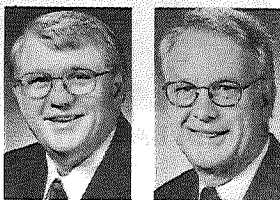
While many farmers have maintained crop and livestock diversity, others have become wholly dependent upon corn and soybeans. Similarly, many farmers are acutely aware of the need to conserve soil by retaining nutrients on their land and protecting water quality.

There are many examples in every county that demonstrate how conscientious farmers are protecting the health of their soil and maintain long-term sustainability. These examples of broad waterways and no end-rows planted on hills are commendable.

However, it is difficult to watch in too many cases where environmentally fragile land is brought into row-crop production, making it susceptible to excessive erosion during wet years. Removing terraces, leveling hills and failing to adopt conservation practices are examples of trying to capture the short-term benefits of row crops while ignoring longer-term environmental problems.

Recent data reported by the Environmental Working Group found that farmers converted 7.2 million acres of wetlands and fragile lands to cropland between 2008 and 2012.

In his recent Register essay ("We Must Do Better," July 27), Hardin County farmer John Gilbert made a persuasive case. Citing record soil damage that occurred this spring, he argues that more attention should be given to cover crops, reduced tillage systems and recommitting ourselves to stewardship and conservation. We would simply add to his recommendations that maintaining crop and livestock diversity will help in



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achieving sustainability. A step toward greater sustainability is a diversified agriculture that integrates more forages with row-crop production. Persistent flooding could be eased or avoided if more land were dedicated to pasture and hay fields for feeding or grazing livestock.

Add in strategic wetlands, field borders and cover crops, and the damage caused by torrential rains we've experienced may have been mitigated. Row-crop losses in drought years can partially be offset by growing forages for livestock. Forage crops also help reduce wind erosion, which can be serious during droughts.

Some farms are demonstrating equal or greater profits and enhanced sustainability through increased diversification instead of specialization.

Over the years, the conversion of pasture and hay acres to row crops contributed to a decline in cattle grazing. Experts have written about how revitalizing the cattle industry would contribute to rural communities. In 2009, scientists at University of Minnesota and Iowa State University wrote "Grassland: Quietness and Strength for a New American Agriculture," a book to increase awareness of the vital role grassland plants have in a sustainable future for agriculture.

Many rural communities struggling to create or retain jobs to stem out-migration should look at ways to increase forage production that can be used by livestock. Adding forage production and more livestock would create more local employment while at the same provide additional environmental benefits. More livestock production and processing would create jobs in communities struggling to find ways to retain young people.

A mix of crops and grazing livestock may better serve farmers and provide a measure of managing risks. If we are entering a period of unpredictable weather patterns, we should explore ways to help landowners and farmers to diversify.

Long-term conservation easements, subsidies or payments for land devoted to managed grazing systems and incentives to strengthen the cattle industry should be viewed as diversifying agriculture, reducing its vulnerability to climate change and providing additional environmental benefits.

Just as conservation practices require private and public investments, efforts to increase the diversification of agricultural production will also require public-private partnerships. Specialization in agriculture generally has been a response to federal farm policy. Because economics drives decisions made on the farm, benefits of diversification will require new thinking in policy circles.

We question whether the current farm and conservation policies are providing the desired results of improved sustainability. Recent evidence of the unintended consequences of greater farm specialization suggests that policies encouraging diversification should be considered. Policies must encourage results to ensure economic competitiveness as well as maintain the long term quality and health of farmland.

Beyond policy, a step in this direction brings up research questions such as genomic selection of livestock that are better suited for forage diets, higher yielding forage systems and reintroducing the interconnectedness of forage with row crops.

Greater diversification can reduce erosion and improve water quality while creating jobs and protecting farm income from the boom-bust cycle. Increased diversification can result in a better, more sustainable system.

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# Opinion

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The Register's Editorial

## Iowa's water quality disconnect

### State's wholesome image of agriculture doesn't square with reality of pollution

**T**he Iowa State Fair is now in full swing. This is a grand showcase for livestock, produce and farm machinery, and it is the closest most people will get to the industry that produces the annual bounty for which Iowa is famous around the world.

Iowans, however, may have a hard time squaring this wholesome image with growing evidence of the environmental consequences of large-scale agriculture.

It is time to end this disconnect between the nostalgic view of agriculture and the reality of 21st-century farming in the Midwest.

Iowa agricultural interests should work just as hard the rest of the year after the fair ends to demonstrate their dedication to clean water and soil conservation. Unfortunately,

just the opposite is happening.

Exhibit A: Closed-door meetings earlier this month with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency hosted by Gov. Terry Branstad to discuss the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' strategy for getting this state into compliance with federal clean water standards. Also at the table were representatives of the Iowa Farm Bureau and agriculture groups representing pork, cattle, chicken and turkey producers.

Staff members for the governor's office and the EPA dismissed objections by Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement that the very businesses responsible for Iowa's water problems were allowed to participate in the meetings, while environmental groups were not.

The excuse was that affect-

ed "stakeholders" are consulted when new regulations are written. But, as the Sierra Club points out, the EPA rules are already in place, and Iowa is not in compliance with them. The only question now is what Iowa intends to do about that.

It seems obvious the affected "stakeholders" in these discussions should, at the very least, include the groups that originally forced the EPA to crack down on Iowa, including CCI and the Sierra Club. And what about the people of Iowa? After all, they must tolerate rivers and lakes fouled with manure and fecal bacteria. They were not invited to the meetings, either, while the businesses the state has failed to properly regulate were given a seat at the table.

Something is wrong with this picture, but it is not out of the ordinary.

The fact is, the political leadership of Iowa — including the governor, the secretary of agriculture and too many members of the Iowa Legisla-

ture — is far more attentive to the interests of big ag groups than the interests of ordinary Iowans who enjoy boating, swimming and clean drinking water. That's because big ag spends a lot of money on elections and lobbying.

As a result, Iowa counties that have zoning laws regulating the placement of factories and homes are forbidden by state law from regulating the sites of animal confinements. Farmers are asked only to voluntarily comply with conservation programs designed to reduce nitrates in rivers, lakes and ultimately the Gulf of Mexico.

Meanwhile, cities are required to meet federal clean-water regulations. In the case of Des Moines, that means the operation of a \$7 million nitrate-removal plant at a cost of \$7,000 a day to water customers.

The net effect is that agricultural groups convey the impression that farmers are immune to the rules that apply

to everybody else. This surely does not represent the views of the typical Iowa farmers who want to be good stewards of the land and good neighbors, and who also want clean water for their families.

These farmers are ill served by industry groups such as the Iowa Farm Bureau that refuse to accept any hint of regulation of agriculture and insist they are doing everything in their power to protect the environment when the evidence points in the other direction.

Rather than further driving a wedge between conscientious farmers and the people of Iowa who demand better environmental quality, livestock and crop commodity groups should become advocates of change. Iowa government officials, likewise, should be partners in making that change rather than conspiring to oppose it.

Then, perhaps, the image of agriculture at the Iowa State Fair will match the image on the land in all 99 counties.