

Further Reflections: We must do better with farming

by John Gilbert

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Following the worst soil damage in decades and an expanding dead zone in the gulf, Iowans can't keep farming the same way.

Iowa's corn and beans are looking better than we ever hoped they might during planting—even if, as farmers, we know there are real problems hidden from view.

What happened all over the Midwest so far this year was some of the worst soil damage in decades, if not generations. Our current situation is not sustainable. We cannot continue to treat our soils like dirt.

We can't deny this is true. The situation would be bad enough, except it's worse because we know the damage is self-inflicted.

Most of us have been farming long enough to know there's a real risk of erosion every time we work the soil. But we like to have our soils as fine and black as the vegetable garden, so every spring we feel compelled to till it all.

We know it can rain hard any time of year, and it seems severe events are getting more frequent. The old-timers had names for heavy rain: "frog choker," "goose drowner" and the apt, a "gully washer."

It's hard to argue that this spring's rains were that extraordinary. So why have they caused so much more soil washing?

Or maybe the question should be: Are we being honest, or are we just finding excuses for why we aren't more prepared? It's like we're saying we didn't have a fire extinguisher because we didn't plan on having a fire.

This kind of damage really couldn't have come at a worse time. Farmers and non-farmers alike are having a hard time understanding why our parched soils couldn't absorb more water this spring. At the same time, vested interests in Iowa have convinced the state government to adopt a voluntary plan to reduce the amount of nutrients agriculture contributes to the Gulf of Mexico dead zone.

There are lots of naysayers who believe we have created the current conditions by being unregulated. We're not really giving them any reason to change their minds.

How do we explain to other Iowans why their beaches are closed, why silt is interfering with fishing, why their drinking water requires extra treatment, why taxpayer dollars are being spent to repair roads and scoop ditches, and why floods seem more frequent and severe?

We should consider ourselves lucky there hasn't been more public outcry. From a public relations standpoint, there are several things we need to do, and several we should avoid.

We must be sincere that we need to—and will—do better. We need to ask for guidance from professionals, such as the Natural Resource Conservation Service, or other Iowa farmers with experience in conservation practices.

We need to avoid getting defensive. It is easy to feel non-farmers don't know enough about farming and shouldn't be meddling in our business. However, what happens on the farm

doesn't stay on the farm, which makes what we do other people's business. Besides, how infrequently do we pay more in taxes than we receive in government benefits?

We've all gotten used to claiming what we do is all right because we "feed the world." We repeat that mantra because we want to believe it's true and because that's what the commodity organizations advocate. We can't deny we're saying it with a wink-wink, nudge-nudge. After all, few of us still raise our own livestock and even fewer are in the fruit and vegetable business.

For generations, the goal of every farmer was to leave the farm in better condition than we found it. It's hard to feel we're doing a good job today of making our farms "better."

The whole concept of stewardship and the moral obligation of looking after the soil as a sacred resource used to be a common value in rural areas, along with being cautious with money, being willing to help our neighbors, and knowing the value of doing a good job.

We really need to ask ourselves if those values have been compromised by our current ways of farming. Government regulations often result when community peer pressure and cultural mores are not strong enough to protect the common good.

We know what we need to do: Cover our soils year-round and reduce tillage, slow water movement and increase infiltration, and regenerate our soil organic matter.

We are right to fear the needed changes will require lots of (sometimes painful) effort. The reality is we don't have the option of continuing farming the way we have. We all must commit to doing better.

Iowa farmers can grow more than crops and bring more than food to the table. In the words of Red Green, "We're all in this together."



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