



GUEST OPINION

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Osterberg: Reduced funding impedes DNR's ability to do its job

By David Osterberg

The Des Moines Register's July 19 editorial "[EPA Letter Should Be a Wakeup Call](#)" rightly pointed out the considerable headwinds facing efforts to clean up Iowa's waters, most notably the inability of Iowa legislators to stand up to the powerful farm lobby in this state.

The EPA's investigation clearly showed that there are serious inadequacies in the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' efforts to watch over Iowa's animal feeding operations.

We know that this is not the fault of DNR staff members, who work hard and make do with the limited resources they have. It is, instead, a problem of the agency not getting the resources to do its job from the Legislature and the governor.

If it were not for the efforts of groups like Citizens for Community Improvement, the Sierra Club and the Environmental Integrity Project, who submitted a letter to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency back in 2007 outlining their concerns, the public (and the EPA) might be unaware of DNR's inadequate job keeping our waters clean.

DNR data are showing that permits applied for and issued for animal feeding operations in the first half of 2012 are higher than the 12-month totals seen in most years.

The EPA was already concerned that DNR staffing levels devoted to monitoring these feeding operations had fallen over the last decade and now there are even more facilities to inspect. The EPA believes this decline in field staff plays a role in preventing the DNR from carrying out its duties.

The DNR cannot carry out its responsibilities without adequate funding. As the Iowa Policy Project pointed out in a March 2012 report on Iowa water quality funding, inflation has slowly eroded the agency's budgets for water quality.

Some programs have seen dramatic declines in funding (up to 70 percent) since fiscal year 2002. It would take at least \$5 million per year just to get these programs back to funding levels of a decade ago, funding levels that probably were inadequate even then.

Iowans spoke two years ago when they overwhelmingly supported the creation of a trust fund devoted to protecting the state's natural resources. The DNR has a new director in Chuck Gipp, who understands agriculture and has in the past shown a willingness to work on environmental initiatives.

Gipp needs to explain to legislators and his boss, Gov. Terry Branstad, that when the EPA steps in, it is a signal to Iowans that their state leaders have fallen short.

The way to keep the EPA out is for our lawmakers to give the DNR the resources the Iowa department needs to protect what Iowans want protected — our rivers, lakes and streams.

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