



The Iowa Policy Project

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Guest column, The Gazette, Cedar Rapids — As published 7/23/14 **Voluntary measures aren't enough**

By David Osterberg

Iowa state agencies took two years to produce a 204-page Nutrient Reduction Strategy (NRS) with a goal of reducing nitrogen and phosphorus discharges by 45 percent.

The Iowa Policy Project evaluated that 2013 report and new programs started in the last year to improve water quality. The result: Big limitations in the NRS make the goals very hard to meet.

For one thing, goals need target dates and the strategy does not include them. Do we want this corrected in 10 years or 100 years?

For another, agriculture — unquestionably the biggest source of the problem — is asked to reduce nutrients by voluntary actions by farmers, while urban areas (municipal waste treatment and industry) are placed under mandates.

The NRS does one good thing: It settles any questions about how much of nutrient pollution comes from urban areas and how much from agriculture. The NRS documents that 90 percent of Iowa's nitrate problem comes from "nonpoint" sources, which are almost all from agriculture.

We have relied on voluntary compliance from the ag industry on water quality improvement for years and years. More and more nutrients in many of our rivers and streams are what we have to show for it. Why would we expect a similar strategy to magically become effective?

Evidence from surveys of Iowa farmers is not reassuring. The Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll, an annual survey of about 1,200 Iowa landowners and farmers, asked about conservation in 2011. More than half of respondents reported spending no money on conservation in the previous decade.

Add in the loss of about a quarter of acres protected under the federal Conservation Reserve Program in the recent years of high corn prices and it becomes evident a voluntary program to control water pollution cannot work.

Our new report offers six ways to improve the NRS. Consider two:

First, stop shortchanging environmental quality in our budget. The NRS needs funding. Governor Branstad this year vetoed bipartisan legislation to supply significant funds for water quality improvement. Cost sharing to help farmers invest in conservation already was too short, before the vetoes.

Second, Iowa should expect at least two conservation practices to be implemented on all farms.

The Iowa Soybean Association lists many practices that can improve water quality, such as vegetative buffer strips along waterways. Other practices are cover crops, bioreactors, grassed waterways, conservation uses for oxbows, contour farming and terraces. Establishing wetlands could be added to the list.

Allowing each producer the choice of two practices keeps a voluntary aspect in place. When half of Iowa farmers report zero conservation actions to be their commitment, they need a nudge forward. Voluntary-only is not enough.

The new NRS must demand more than just happy talk and examples of some really good farmers taking action. More money and more acceptance of the need for new practices on every farm have to be part of the solution if Iowa is to reduce nitrogen and phosphorus loads by 45 percent.

David Osterberg is founding director of the nonpartisan Iowa Policy Project in Iowa City, www.iowapolicyproject.org. He is co-author with Aaron Kline of a new report, "A Threat Unmet: Why Iowa's Nutrient Strategy Falls Short against Water Pollution." Contact: dosterberg@iowapolicyproject.org.