



The Iowa Policy Project

www.iowapolicyproject.org

Guest Opinion • *The Gazette*, Cedar Rapids • January 31, 2015

Guest opinion: Iowa should ‘Choose 2’ to reduce water pollution

By David Osterberg, founding director of the Iowa Policy Project

Governor Terry Branstad spoke of “war on rural Iowa” after the Des Moines Water Works announced its board of trustees voted to issue a notice of intent to sue the supervisors in Sac, Buena Vista and Calhoun counties “in their role as governing authority for 10 drainage districts that are discharging pollutants into the Raccoon River,” threatening Des Moines’ drinking water.

There doesn’t have to be “war.”

The answer is first an acknowledgment that the water problems are real and can be addressed without causing great pain — financially or in health — to anyone inside or outside city limits, upstream or downstream.

Supporters of the new Nutrient Reduction Strategy (NRS), which was hailed as a promising effort to improve Iowa water quality by reducing nutrient pollution from the state by about half, plead for more time. A century is enough, say detractors. Agricultural interests have had about that much time to use totally voluntary approaches and nutrient pollution is now a serious problem.

At least part of the answer could well be “Choose 2,” which stems from the July report

from the Iowa Policy Project, “A Threat Unmet: Why Iowa’s Nutrient Strategy Falls Short Against Water Pollution.” The IPP report offered six ideas to make a voluntary system better.

The list is not exhaustive, but the proposals are serious and science-based. The “Choose 2” concept is part of the list, and it is simple: Mandate that every producer, farm owner or renter, adopt two runoff-reducing steps — but let the farmer choose which steps.

For the many farmers already taking meaningful steps to reduce nutrient runoff, there is no impact.

Those who are not currently taking any steps, and thereby causing the lion’s share of the problem, would get to choose from among meaningful approaches that have been promoted by the Iowa Soybean Association, such as cover crops, grassed waterways, contour farming, terraces, bioreactors and conservation uses for oxbows. Producers could take two actions that best fit their operation, land and economic situation.

The proposal is simple but effective, and keeps a voluntary component to a solution. Isn’t it worth a discussion?

David Osterberg, co-founder of the nonpartisan Iowa Policy Project, is a former state legislator who chaired the House Agriculture Committee and is a professor in the Department of Occupational and Environmental Health at the University of Iowa. Contact: dosterberg@iowapolicyproject.org.