



GUEST OPINION

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Stop winking at the problem of water quality

By David Osterberg

We heard a lot of talk this year about how Iowa should do something about water quality. However, neither the governor nor the Legislature did much more than talk.

Dealing with Iowa's serious water quality problems — and the role of the agriculture industry — will take a comprehensive approach that looks at funding, certainly, but more than that. Money alone is not the total answer. State policy needs to push for specific actions to improve soil and water management practices. That starts on the farm, and realistically it will require a combination of public and private strategies.

Iowa Policy Project reports and analysis in recent years, viewed together, offer a pretty good start on a comprehensive solution. All address pieces of the puzzle.

Our latest report, [Saving Resources: Manure and Water](#), deals with the problem of manure application on frozen or saturated ground. Iowa regulations of this practice are far too weak, and we could look to a Midwestern neighbor, Ohio, for good examples of better strategies. Ohio acted because the city of Toledo closed its water supply for some time. We should act before a city in Iowa loses its drinking water system to this problem.

The state's Nutrient Reduction Strategy is toothless and ineffective, and will remain so without clear expectations including date-certain deadlines.

One way to get us there is our "Choose 2" approach, a compromise between the state's voluntary NRS and a hard mandate on practices for farmers to

reduce nutrient release into our water. See our paper, [A Threat Unmet](#), to see how we can use the advice the ag industry gives itself for solutions that would make a difference. Let farmers choose which two practices would work best for them — the voluntary piece of an effective solution.

Where public money is needed, consider an obvious source: the sale of farm fertilizer. If an urban person buys fertilizer for the lawn, there is a sales tax on the purchase. Farmers are exempt from the normal sales tax on fertilizer and a lot of other things. There is no reason for this exemption. [Put the sales tax on fertilizer](#), earmark it to water-quality strategies and you have, conservatively, about \$130 million a year to work with.

Eliminating that sales tax exemption still allows for the option — passed by Iowa voters in 2010 with 63 percent approval — of filling a trust fund for environmental stewardship with a 3/8-cent sales-tax increase for a range of land and water improvements.

Those tax ideas would not take funds away from public schools, [as Gov. Terry Branstad proposed](#), or from everything else in the budget as the House plan did.

Assuring good water quality requires not only funding, but approaches to both incentivize and require good soil management practices.

It's time to act, and stop winking at the problem and shrugging our shoulders when fish die, drinking water systems cost more to run, and we all worry if we can swim in our lakes.

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