



GUEST OPINION

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Steps to move Iowa forward on water quality

By David Osterberg

In "Iowa's watershed moment" (May 22 Gazette), the Gazette editorial board is asking the right questions.

Some of the questions are not really more than rhetorical.

For example, the paper editorial asks, "Should the Nutrient Reduction Strategy continue to be voluntary with no real timelines or deadlines, or should a plan be put in place for its implementation?" The Nutrient Reduction Strategy is not really a strategy at all without timelines, deadlines and a plan for implementation. It is just a wish list.

Next, the Gazette suggests that funding is not the only consideration. Correct.

While there has been a lot of talk about the issue, with no meaningful action in 2016, that talk at least has established that the issue is gaining enough attention that ignoring it may increasingly bear greater political costs than having the courage to do something.

However, the Governor and Legislature must stop suggesting they fund water quality by stealing the funds from some other existing program, such as K-12 education.

At the Iowa Policy Project, we have offered one way to achieve more funding from the very material causing the problem — fertilizer. In a March 5 Gazette column ("Source of Iowa's water pollution should be the source of funding") I suggested plugging the state sales tax loophole on the purchase of ag fertilizer, which — unlike lawn fertilizer — is currently

exempt from the sales tax. Polluter pay is a well-established concept.

Another of the paper's editorial questions "Is more stringent regulation in order if progress isn't made over time?" deserves another comment.

IPP offered in a paper in 2014 to marry the voluntary and regulatory approaches in what we call "Choose 2": Let the farm operator choose from a list of widely acknowledged best practices to reduce nutrient runoff and preserve soil.

Farmers already doing this would not bear an increased burden; farmers not using such practices would be required to — but they would have the option of choosing which ones best fit their operations.

Too many debates over big issues fall to stalemate between warring sides that fear compromise, when solutions can be right in front of them and offer a win-win. It is true that a "No" strategy is frequently effective. It is much easier to block change than to embrace and enable it.

Iowa can no longer afford "No" or "Not now" when it comes to fixing water quality. Iowa needs a plan with teeth. We should get rid of the tax loophole on fertilizer to get funds to address the problem and farmers have responsibilities.

Many farmers accept their responsibilities willingly. It is time for those who do not recognize them to do so.

David Osterberg of Mount Vernon writes on environmental issues for the nonpartisan Iowa Policy Project, which he co-founded in 2001. He is a former state legislator who was chair of the House Agriculture Committee. Comments: dosterberg@iowapolicyproject.org.