



GUEST OPINION

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A clearer picture of water quality efforts

By Sara Conrad

Iowans need certainty on how the state plans to improve water quality. The solution must be economically viable and farmers must participate, or we can be sure Iowans of tomorrow will be facing the same issues, or worse.

We cannot escape the fact that voluntary conservation efforts — plus billions of state and federal dollars over the decades — have not been enough to solve the nutrient pollution problem in Iowa waters and the Gulf of Mexico.

There are approaches that have proven success rates such as keeping more land seeded down to a winter cover crop, using more land in pasture, and implementing permanent buffers along streams or in grassed waterways — these can reduce nutrient pollution.

Additionally, programs designed to protect environmentally sensitive lands have had some success. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) pays willing landowners to seed down land under long-term contracts. However, the state of Iowa remains half a million acres below the 2 million CRP acreage it once had at its peak and it is important to consider how many conservation practices and structures are eliminated.

While the use of cover crops (another helpful practice) expanded by more than 125,000 acres between 2014 and 2015, the new total of 400,000 acres represents less than 2 percent of the 24 million acres in harvested row crops in Iowa. Put another way, if we added 125,000 acres each year, it would take approximately 100 years to protect half the row cropland currently in production.

This leaves us with another inescapable conclusion:

The data show that many claims of success on water quality overstate our progress on practices to reduce nutrient pollution.

How are farmers responding to the challenge on their own? Iowa State University's Farm and Rural Life Poll found 51 percent of farmers had spent nothing on conservation in the 10 years prior to the 2011 survey. A new survey three years later showed more dollars being spent on conservation measures and suggested the new emphasis on water quality may be motivating landowners to do more.

But both polls show that asking producers to voluntarily spend money to protect water is not enough. More than 40 percent of producers in the second survey reported spending less than \$5,000 over the previous 10 years, or less than \$500 per year. Since the average size of an Iowa farm is about 350 acres, this suggests that voluntary action has brought spending of little more than a dollar an acre.

In addition, nearly half of the latest survey respondents are uncertain if their farms contribute to hypoxia in the Gulf or are sure they have not had an effect.

To deal with Iowa's pollution issues and their impact on the hypoxic zone in the Gulf of Mexico, the role of farming must be recognized by those running the farms. At best, the state of Iowa has managed to not increase levels of nutrients in streams. That is not nearly good enough.

Not only do Iowans want cleaner water. They are owed more accountability than they are getting for the effort and investments they have made.

Sara Conrad is a research associate at the Iowa Policy Project, and lead author of a new report with David Osterberg and Michael Burkhardt, "Water Quality in Iowa and the Mississippi River Basin." Find the report and more information at www.iowapolicyproject.org.