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Question for Governor Branstad: How will Iowa's water quality be served by transferring programs to the Department of Agriculture?

As the Iowa Legislature goes about deliberating the state budget and proposed efficiencies, we need to make sure decisions are not based on assumptions and politics. Rather, the public needs to know what real dollars will be saved and that we are safeguarding the underpinnings of public health and safety in responsible ways. These are the concerns of the Iowa Environmental Council, as it fields questions and concerns from the public regarding legislation that would move some of Iowa's water quality programs from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources to the Iowa Department of Agriculture.

At the request of the Governor Branstad, a House bill was introduced that would transfer water quality monitoring and the states federally mandated non-point source pollution program from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS). Legislators have told Iowa Environmental Council representatives that this is because water quality programming can be done "more efficiently" if conducted by IDALS.

"I have seen no study or assessment that shows this move will create efficiencies, save money or provide better protections for our water quality," said Marian Riggs Gelb, executive director for the Iowa Environmental Council.

"Why does Governor Branstad want to do this? Where is the explanation or study or data that demonstrates the efficiencies? I think the public would like to have the answers to these questions," said Riggs Gelb.

In every state in the nation, the Clean Water Act responsibilities remain with the governor and his or her appointee, as delegated by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

"In Iowa, waters of the state belong to the people of the state. Yet I have not heard any requests from the people of Iowa to have their water quality overseen by a department whose mission and website banner reads 'Advancing Iowa's Agricultural Interests,'" said Riggs Gelb.

If the transfers are made, rules previous promulgated under the DNR programs being transferred would have to be reviewed and possibly rescinded and their rule making processes begun again by IDALS—processes that could take years and cost the state hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Additional staff would have to be added to IDALS, as they do not currently have the expertise on staff to conduct the programs.

Bill numbers are currently being assigned to these study bills, which passed out of Senate and House Committees last week.

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