

## Opinion Article

### **It's Time to Find Out What's in our Water - Better Water Monitoring Needed by Linda D. Appelgate, Executive Director, Iowa Environmental Council**

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Are Iowa's public beaches safe for swimming? Clear Lake leaders have just set aside \$1 million to assure the safety of their lake. Beaches at Saylorville and Red Rock reservoirs are monitored by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. But what about the remaining 90+ public beaches in Iowa?

Which pesticides are in our water and in what concentrations? Recently, pesticides were found in 98 percent of the 130 samples collected from 12 streams in eastern Iowa by the U.S. Geological Survey. But what about Iowa's other streams and rivers? What does it mean for children and adults who swim and fish in these waters, and for communities that withdraw water for drinking?

How widely is livestock waste polluting our streams and rivers? We know at least a million fish and countless other aquatic species were killed by manure spills in Iowa in the past four years. When officials followed up on a recent spill report in Hamilton County, they discovered another spill in the same stream that had gone unreported.

Yet, we also know that one-half of Iowa farmers use conservation tillage that leaves crop residue to hold the soil (and rainfall) in place. They also have restored 50,000 acres of wetlands and kept more than 118,000 acres of buffers along our streams and fields. Are these practices protecting our water?

Is our water getting better? Or worse? The answer: We don't know.

In many areas of the state, Iowa has no information that could answer these questions. In other areas, limited information is available, but it is not comprehensive or even available to the public and researchers. The Iowa Legislature must appropriate money that will increase our monitoring efforts right away, not a year from now and start us on the road toward a comprehensive water quality monitoring system.

In his proposed budget, Governor Vilsack responded to the demands of an overwhelming majority of Iowa citizens who want to know about our water. The Governor earmarked \$1 million this for water quality monitoring and planning, and suggested \$2 million annually in subsequent years. Now the Iowa Legislature must show the same responsiveness.

With the \$1 million for start-up funding, we could:

- 1) Determine monitoring needs that can begin immediately. Immediate monitoring needs

include monitoring the water at our public beaches next summer, and adding pesticide monitoring to the mere 27 sites in our surface water monitoring network. Right now we monitor for pesticides at only seven of these sites a year.

Biological monitoring is another immediate need. This type of monitoring tells us which kinds of animals actually live in our streams, lakes, and rivers. A water sample taken two weeks after a spill might show no contamination, but the fish, frogs, and small animals that live on stream bottoms (larvae, snails, leeches, and others) can tell us much about the health of the stream. The Department of Natural Resources is ready to begin biological monitoring, but has been held back by lack of resources.

2) Develop a comprehensive statewide monitoring program. We must bring together the best water quality scientists in our state, along with farm, business, and environmental interests to carefully plan a comprehensive surface water and groundwater monitoring network for Iowa. Part of that effort must be to carefully evaluate existing data and develop a statewide database of water quality information. Right now, the limited data we do have sits in a variety of locations, unavailable and little used. With a centralized statewide database, we would have a comprehensive source of new and existing water quality information in a form easy for researchers, policy makers and the public to use.

A comprehensive monitoring network will identify areas of concern, but its usefulness will be far greater. It will also identify successful protections and help the state focus its resources where they can be most effective.

3) Invest in analytical equipment, additional stream monitoring stations, and groundwater monitoring wells to be ready for comprehensive monitoring in the year 2000. With these investments, to be determined by the planning team, the state will be ready to begin to fulfill the plan a year from now.

These elements may not be the precise ones the planning team will identify. But we know the need is immense and the amount of money modest compared to risk and the resources we must protect.

Our failure to monitor is costly: We pay far more than we should to treat our drinking water. We put at risk agricultural and manufacturing operations that rely on good quality water. We damage our health and the health of our ecological communities. And we hurt our tourism industry and make Iowa a less desirable place to live.

We cannot wait any longer to find out what is in our water. Our legislators and Governor have a powerful opportunity to work together to help us assess the quality of our water. We are counting on their leadership and teamwork.