

**Opinion Article**  
**Iowa, the clean-water state?**  
**by G. David Hurd**  
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If Iowa ever lost its reputation for high quality water, it could take decades to regain it.

What is the quality of Iowa's groundwater, our underground aquifers? What is the quality of our rivers and streams? Our lakes? For the most part, we don't know. Our present monitoring is not a system; it is only done in a few isolated spots. It does not cover the range of pollutants possibly present.

We need to say we are a clean water state -- that agriculture and industry can meet their needs, that children can wade in our creeks, that anglers can eat their catch, that swimmers in our lakes and ponds are safe.

But we don't know. Our inaction implies we think there are no consequences. We take refuge in our ignorance, and we (subconsciously) seem to believe our ignorance protects us.

To attract businesses and workers and keep them here, we need high-quality water. To ensure clean water, we need a comprehensive and professional monitoring network.

How does clean water boost Iowa's economy?

Nearly all manufacturing operations need a clean and reliable source of water. For many commodities, such as soft drinks and dairy products, water is an essential part of the final product; whatever is in the water is in the product.

Barilla, an Italian pasta company, is building a large manufacturing plant in Ames. Marco Petroni, research and development director of the company, recently made it clear that the quality of water in the Ames community was a strong factor in its decision to build there. Barilla will be using water from an alluvial aquifer, which currently provides high-quality water. However, the aquifer is vulnerable to contamination because it is shallow.

Barilla has made a long-term investment in our state. In return, the pasta company deserves, over the long-term, the commitment that the state will protect its water resources. A monitoring system will help us provide assurances to Barilla and other companies that might locate or remain in our state.

Clean water is key to our strong agricultural economy. Clean water is key to recreation. People have a strong tendency to head toward the water when they take a weekend respite or vacation. Iowa's rivers and lakes would be more attractive if a well-established and publicized monitoring system helped us keep rivers safe for canoeing, beaches safe for swimming, and rivers and streams healthy for fish and other aquatic life.

Unfortunately, Clear Lake is a very good example of the economic consequences of failing to monitor. The three public beaches on Clear Lake were closed several times during last summer because of high levels of E. coli bacteria.

No routine monitoring had been conducted on the lake to identify problems before they became health concerns and a public relations nightmare.

The Clear Lake City Council realizes how closely water quality and economic health are related; it recently voted to spend its own money for a monitoring study to try to understand the problems.

Clean water would protect our wildlife. Ducks and geese and upland game birds use Iowa's water, as do game fish. And not just these, but all forms of life that are dependent on water - the frogs, newts, insects and microorganisms that use our surface water in their life cycle. They are all part of the web of life that makes our Earth's biosphere function.

Although Iowa has a budget surplus and a healthy economy, we spend only \$243,000 each year for water quality monitoring, and three-fourths of this is paid by the federal government.

States that are committed to environmental stewardship tend to have the healthiest economies and less difficulty attracting and keeping workers. Oregon and Minnesota are good examples.

What does our state's lack of action say about our commitment to quality of life and our economic future?

How much would it cost? The Iowa Department of Natural Resources believes comprehensive water monitoring can be begun for \$2 million per year. A water quality monitoring network is fiscally responsible, and will help us document and deal with concerns before they cause harm to our communities and businesses.

Just as important, a monitoring network will show us that in many places we have water to be proud of, and we can use this information to get others to join us.

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