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## **IEC Comments to Polk County Board of Supervisors on CISWRA**

My name is Michael Schmidt and I am General Counsel for the Iowa Environmental Council. IEC is the state's largest nonprofit coalition, working to create a safe, healthy environment and a sustainable future for all Iowans.

I'm here to thank you for undertaking the Central Iowa Source Water Research Assessment. We appreciate that this report was a thorough study peer-reviewed by many water resources experts. It's fantastic that Polk County engaged in such detailed, comprehensive analysis. We appreciate that the report pulls together so many facets of water concerns. From what we've seen, the report is an accessible way for the public to learn more about water quality issues and solutions in both the county and the state.

The Currents of Change report confirms that central Iowa's waterways are significantly impacted by agricultural pollution, particularly nitrates and fecal bacteria, which pose serious risks to public health. It highlights the need to change our approach because we have not made significant progress on water quality since the adoption of the Nutrient Reduction Strategy in 2013.

While there are many individuals voluntarily undertaking conservation practices, including members of Iowa Farmers Union and others, we need larger-scale changes to protect our source water supplies. The nitrate levels in the Raccoon, Des Moines, Cedar, and Iowa Rivers continue to provide evidence that we need to involve everyone upstream. We can't continue to rely on treating the problem downstream, especially because the problems aren't limited to one watershed.

I've seen public statements claiming that the problems we see this year are a seasonal issue or the result of a drought. But after hearing that, I feel compelled point out that their argument is like a drained wetland – it doesn't hold water. The drought ended last year, not this year. We had above-average rainfall in 2024, with DNR noting "the 2024 growing season experienced unusually wet weather."

Meanwhile, IDALS reported that 2024 had the highest fertilizer sales out of the 11 years it has posted online. DNR records show we added another 55,000 animal units in the state in the past year. Now, central Iowa faces the second-highest nitrate levels on record. If you look below the surface – which is difficult in most Iowa lakes – you can see that the problem is not just a drought or wet weather, it's what people are putting on the land upstream.

The report's recommendations of comprehensive watershed planning, clear benchmarks for progress, funding for additional water monitoring, and improved manure management practice will be key steps to safeguarding public and environmental health in the future.

We look forward to Polk County using these findings and recommendations to increase education and awareness among central Iowa residents who drink and recreate in our water resources, and we are happy to partner in those efforts. We also look forward to the county's efforts to advocate for the recommendations in the report at the local and state level to ensure every Iowan can be part of the solution.