

Title: **Make quality of our water a higher priority**

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our view

Make quality of our water a higher priority

As attention-grabbers go, the Iowa Environmental Council the other day struck gold.

Or maybe it should be “struck water.”

The council released a report, “The Slow Reality of the Nutrient Reduction Strategy,” in which the authors concluded — and headline-writers noted — that, at current rates of implementation, Iowa won’t attain its key goals toward clean water anytime soon.

By anytime soon, we point to the study’s estimates of nearly 100 years for implementation of cover crops, almost 1,000 years for acreage treated by wetlands and 30,000 years for construction of bioreactors. Give or take a millennia or two.

The council says the rates of implementation toward these initiatives, which are considered important steps toward cleaning up our waterways and shrinking the Gulf of Mexico “dead zone” to which Iowa and other states upriver contribute, are actually slowing down.

The dead zone, where nutrient pollution — nitrogen and phosphorus, mostly linked to agriculture — is an oxygen-deprived area that cannot sustain fish or other marine life because of pollution. The zone varies in area but is currently about the size of Massachusetts.

This pollution puts more than the Gulf of Mexico and coastal states at risk. Closer to home, groundwater pollution reaches private wells and, as reflected in a major lawsuit filed by Des Moines Water Works, challenges operators of public water systems.

The Iowa Environmental Council’s authors, Ingrid Gronstal Anderson and Alicia Vasto, posit that the slowdown in implementation of pollution-mitigation

practices is because the early-adopters and other conversation-minded farmers have already started to do their part. However, others are unlikely to do so on their own unless they receive significantly more incentives — or government edict.

That’s the thing about Iowa’s water policies and practices. State government is light on the incentives and averse to edicts. In this state, agriculture is a third rail of politics: Get tougher on farmers at your own peril. That’s apparently why Iowa’s nutrient reduction strategy, in place for a half-dozen years, remains completely voluntary for nonpoint sources.

Is it any wonder, then, that we’re slow off the mark? It would be like government taking down all speed limit and stop signs and expecting traffic safety to improve.

But it is no wonder that Mike Naig, Iowa’s ag secretary, takes serious issue with the council’s report. He points to legislation passed in January 2018 — it was the first bill Gov. Kim Reynolds signed into law — pouring some \$282 million into water quality programs. That big number seems less big when considering it is earmarked for spending over a dozen years — meaning less than \$24 million a year. That’s a lot out of someone’s personal checkbook, certainly, but not all that much for a state with a budget of more than \$7 billion and water-quality problems.

The law signed by the governor contains no requirements or benchmarks for compliance. Instead it repeatedly and vaguely states that improvements will be made “over time.”

In that respect, citizens will find out “over time” who is right on these questions. Will those citizens be our great-great-grandchildren? Their descendants? In any case, sometime someone will know who had the firmer grasp on the issue back in 2019.

Things might not be as bad as the Iowa Environmental Council says, but we doubt they are nearly as good as the Reynolds administration contends.

The answer is not to cripple agriculture by rushing in with draconian measures. Farmers must retain their livelihoods; we count on them to feed the world. Farmers must be viewed as central to solutions, not the enemy. Government — that is, taxpayers on and off the farm — must be prepared to help fund those solutions.

However, the longer it takes Iowa officials to acknowledge that those solutions won’t be achieved without adequate funding and without some mandates, the longer it will take to correct the problems.

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where we stand

Iowa’s water quality initiatives, underfunded and without benchmarks and mandates, are not getting the job done. We can’t wait a millennia or even a century to reach the goals.