

IOWA'S NUTRIENT REDUCTION STRATEGY FALLS SHORT

The Iowa Environmental Council proposes policy solutions to actually reduce pollution in Iowa's waters



Solution 1: Restore the Balance of Public and Private Rights

Iowa's water is a public resource that must be protected for the public's use. The state has largely abdicated its duty to protect Iowa's waterways for the common good. Instead, state leadership has allowed water quality to become a casualty of agricultural production.

The state, with public input, should convene a review board to evaluate the current Nutrient Reduction Strategy (NRS). This board should establish individual duties, interim goals and benchmarks, and triggers to reevaluate the effectiveness of NRS. This review should include the three-agency structure of NRS responsibility and determine whether responsibility for and oversight of nonpoint source pollution should be approached differently.

Solution 3: Adopt Numeric Nutrient Criteria



The continued and worsening problem of nutrient pollution in Iowa waterways underscores the need for additional tools to identify and address pollution. Establishing numeric standards to protect against excess phosphorus and nitrogen in surface water is not only necessary to protect Iowa waters, but also quite practicable. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has developed the scientific support and other states have adopted such standards.

Adopting numeric standards would add to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) tools to interpret the state's existing narrative standard, which prohibits excess nutrients without specifying a limit. Moreover, the Iowa DNR already uses an advisory concentration of microcystin, a toxin released by cyanobacteria, to evaluate recreational use of lakes.

Solution 2: Create an Individual Duty to Protect Surface Waters



A large proportion of Iowans get their drinking water from surface water or influenced groundwater sources (46 percent), and Iowa businesses and communities rely on safe surface waters to prosper.

Iowa Code section 455E.5(4) creates a responsibility for everyone to protect groundwater. Iowa Code chapter 455B could be amended to include a similar provision for surface waters. Additionally, to let citizens directly protect their rights to public resources, we should allow citizens to bring lawsuits for environmental degradation or violation of environmental standards.

Solution 4: Address Livestock Operations and Manure

Manure from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFO) is being spread on nearby farm fields as fertilizer for crops. We are faced with a situation where fields can receive more nutrients from manure and other fertilizer than crops can take up, resulting in excess nutrients leaving the fields through surface runoff or subsurface drainage tile lines and entering our waterways. Plainly put, the state of Iowa is far too lenient in its approach to CAFO regulation. These operations are allowed to be sited near each other in high concentrations, producing more manure than the surrounding landscape can possibly handle.

1. Sensitive areas must be protected from CAFOs. These include areas of karst topography, where groundwater and surface water have frequent and unpredictable interactions.
2. State law currently allows manure application on frozen and snow-covered ground except for specific circumstances. This makes it more likely that manure or its nutrients will enter surface water as a result of precipitation or snowmelt.
3. Increase the amount of financial resources available to address nutrient pollution and regulation CAFOs. DNR needs greater capacity and courage in its oversight of animal feeding operations.



Solution 5: Fund the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund



In 2010, the citizens of Iowa voted overwhelmingly in favor of creating a constitutionally protected trust fund for environmental purposes, where 3/8 of one cent of the next sales tax increase would go toward the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund. Since then, state sales tax has not been raised, and thus the Trust has remained empty. It is past time to fund the trust to aid as a tool to improve Iowa's water quality.

Trust fund dollars would be beneficial in supporting Watershed Management Authorities (WMAs) and corresponding watershed coordinators. WMAs are well-suited to bring state and local partners together at a watershed scale to coordinate projects and measure water quality improvements. Unfortunately, these entities suffer from a lack of resources, which leads to high turnover and a lack of stability for watershed coordinators. Reliable funding for watershed coordinators is necessary to increase the efficacy of these organizations.