

Water-quality concerns real



Guest Editorial

By LOIS WRIGHT MORTON

IOWA has a water-quality problem. But when Iowans are asked about our water quality, perceptions as to whether there is a problem differ greatly.

A random sample survey of water issues in Iowa conducted in 2006 by Iowa State University revealed similarities and differences in beliefs about water quality, as well as expectations for solving water pollution problems.

Less than 1% of Iowa's land is covered with water. Our streams and lakes are a valuable but limited resource. This resource is used and valued for drinking, industry, agriculture, aquatic habitat, power generation and recreation by all Iowans. While rural residents and townspeople use and experience water differently, all Iowans realize it is a natural resource we need to protect.

What the survey said

Results from the survey showed that almost 50% of rural residents believe that the quality of their groundwater is good, excellent or improving. In contrast, a little over a third of those living in towns and cities rate groundwater quality as good, excellent or improving; another third said they don't know about the quality of their groundwater.

Farmers have the most confidence in the quality of streams and lakes where they live, with 59% reporting their water to be good, excellent or improving. Rural non-farm and city residents have less confidence; more than 53% of townspeople and 46% of rural non-farmers said surface water is fair to poor.

All groups identify crop production and livestock/poultry production as the two major sources of pollution in Iowa's rivers and lakes. Fertilizer/nitrates, pesticides, animal waste and high bacteria counts were reported in the survey as known or suspected problems affecting water quality.

Within the overall sample, 43% believe their local government, county or city should be responsible for protecting local water quality. Another third think it is state government's responsibility, 10% say it is the individual citizen's responsibility, and 6% believe it is the federal government's problem to protect local water quality.

Who is responsible?

There are significant differences in opinion about responsibility when the sample is split by place of residence. Almost 39% of farmers believe it is the individual citizen's responsibility to protect local water quality. But only 5% of those living in towns or cities and 20% rural non-farm believe water protection to be an individual responsibility. These groups expect their county, city or other local government to be responsible.

It is noteworthy that 48% to 63% of all groups reported they don't know if state, federal, local government or citizens are actually fulfilling their re-

sponsibilities for water protection. This suggests that respondents do not have indicators to help them know whether there is real progress being made in solving water problems.

The land use decisions we make affect our local waters and of those who live downstream from us. Recent U.S. Geological Survey research shows that Iowa and eight other Midwestern and Southern states contribute 75% of the nitrogen and phosphorus pollution that

finds its way to the Gulf of Mexico via the Mississippi River.

It is not enough to acknowledge the problem; we must work together to find solutions. There is no silver bullet, but there are multiple pathways we can use. We must reconfigure our conservation ethic to include evaluation of how our business decisions affect our waters.

The Iowa Learning Farm is working with farmers and local and state agencies to discover ways to reduce nitrogen

and phosphorus leaching, and soil loss. Farmers are leaders in helping Iowa get better water-quality outcomes.

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■ Visit www.extension.iastate.edu/store/ListItems.aspx?Keyword=water%20issues for survey details.



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