

Urban, rural interests embrace water quality

Cooperation and innovation are the best ways to solve Iowa's water quality issues, according to experts who participated in a water quality panel discussion last week hosted by the Iowa Soybean Association (ISA).

Participants representing rural and urban interests agreed cities, farmers and agribusinesses need to work together to ensure the success of the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy – a science-based initiative to reduce nitrate and phosphorous loads in Iowa waterways by 45 percent from point and nonpoint sources.

Panelists included Dustin Miller, government affairs manager with the Iowa League of Cities; Harry Ahrenholz, president of the Agriculture's Clean Water Alliance; Webster City farmer Arlo Van Diest and Eagle Grove farmer Tim Smith. Roger Wolf, ISA's director of Environmental Programs and Services, served as moderator.

Nearly 50 politicians, reporters and city officials attended the panel discussion held at Van Diest Supply, an agricultural supply company based near Webster City. It was held in conjunction with ISA's first-ever Environmental Discovery Tour, which featured visits to three farms belonging to ISA members to see conservation efforts.

The strategy embraces proven practices featured on the tour to improve water quality such as cover crops, bioreactors, conservation tillage and other methods. Ahrenholz, who represents 12 agribusinesses in the Des Moines and Raccoon River Watershed, believes cooperation will lead to more innovation that will bolster water quality efforts.

"We really believe there are new things out there we haven't even tried yet. I think with a voluntary approach, we're going to see innovation that we haven't even dreamed of," Ahrenholz said.

Miller said the cost of meeting the strategy's goal --- estimated at \$1.5 billion for point sources --- is a big concern for the more than 870 cities he represents. A partnership between urban and rural stakeholders could help ease the financial burden and help all Iowans, he added.

An innovative concept called nitrogen credit trading, though not necessarily new, could be the answer, Miller said.

The idea is cities or companies can help pay for conservation practices in rural areas to improve water quality instead of much more expensive infrastructure improvements to waste water facilities.

"That's one thing we can do together to address the common concern," Miller said. "If it's better to work with some of the practices we saw today, can a city get credit for doing that as opposed to an infrastructure fix at their plant?"

"If we can do that upstream with a producer in partnership for pennies on the dollar, cities are very much interested in looking at that," he continued.

The league's Environmental Coordination Committee is exploring the possibility, Miller said.

Ahrenholz likes the idea. "The more we understand cities and cities understand ag, the closer we will get to a workable solution," he said.

Jeff May, assistant public works director for the city of Des Moines, is a member of the league's Environmental Coordination Committee. He attended the tour to learn more about conservation practices being used by farmers.

May isn't a fan of finger pointing. He thinks cities and agricultural interests need to work together, and credit trading is one of many ways to do that.

"This whole water quality issue is a statewide problem," May said. "We know what we can do and it's very expensive ... our rate payers can't afford it. We need to think outside the box."

Smith believes innovation and widespread implementation of conservation practices will improve water quality.

Hagie Manufacturing of Clarion displayed new equipment at the Smith farm designed to help the environment --- a side dressing machine that senses nitrogen needs in real time to apply only the amount needed and a ground cover crop seeder.

“Farmers are trying to do the right thing, raise a crop and make a living. But we have to realize what we do has consequences to other people,” Smith said. “As we realize that, maybe we’ll make some changes.”