2015 Iowa Water Conference

Water Resources Priorities

As part of the 2015 Iowa Water Conference, a wrap-up session was held to gain input and insight from the attendees relative to Iowa’s priority water issues. The following is a summary of their responses based on their life experiences and presentations/posters experienced at this conference. This document is meant to serve as a discussion starter and idea springboard for Iowans as we work toward better water management.
Somewhat surprising was the lack of calls for greater investment of public money in Iowa’s natural resources. But, at the same time, stability of existing funding was repeatedly identified as a prerequisite for effective programs that could lead to improved water resources. Iowans do not focus solely on water without making a clear link to soils and management of the soil in both the rural and urban settings. How nutrients are managed and management of programs addressing the Nutrient Reduction Strategy was the water quality topic mentioned most often by the attendees.

Soil quality was highlighted as an important consideration for both urban and agricultural watershed efforts. Public awareness of the importance of functional soils was seen as a priority. Urban homeowners should be aware of the current topsoil requirements for new developments.

Establishing water quality goals and timelines for those goals, along with water monitoring, will be vital to public acceptance of the Nutrient Reduction Strategy. Success of any program must be based on measurable metrics and this program is no exception. Not only will additional acceptance be garnered by providing quantifiable results, but knowledge of whether or not the program is working should be a high priority for the state.

Building partnerships was seen as absolutely critical to success. Having individuals working in isolation was deemed a recipe for failure. Team building and partnership maintenance were viewed as a long-term (multiple-year and multiple-cropping season) venture. For this reason, funding stability was repeatedly recognized for its value. Watershed programs seen as successful had at least one thing in common – the watershed coordinator had remained in place for multiple years. Opportunities to build coalitions between groups, such as Water Management Authorities, are rather extensive. For example, Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Watershed Alliances, school groups, and commodity groups within the larger watersheds offer important communication, education, and partnering opportunities. Of more importance, different individuals within a watershed tend to be aligned with different interest groups. The opportunity to engage with critical human components of a watershed through involving different groups cannot be overemphasized and is linked with longevity of a given watershed coordinator’s position and the personality of the position holder. Furthermore, additional ‘soft money’ resources to support water-related activities increase as the network of interested partners grows.

Program and policy elements recognized for their existing and potential positive impact included:

- realigning Soil and Water Conservation Districts with watersheds as opposed to Iowa’s current political boundary structure (Nebraska was cited as a successful example of this realignment),
- developing more land owner tax incentives for conservation implementation,
- increasing edge-of-CAFO water quality monitoring,
- promoting watershed plans and programs through radio and television, and
- utilizing the IDNR 319 funding model to sustain and prioritize watershed water quality programs.

Finally, education about soil- and water-related issues is an absolute requirement. Favorable soil and water conservation ethics are learned, not inherited, by most citizens. An improved soil and water curriculum in grade and even high schools is a necessity. In fact, many schools have no curriculum addressing soil and water conservation, even though these are STEM-related topics. Programs like Water Rocks! that “teach the teachers” about soil and water conservation are critical for establishing a long-term commitment to water quality in Iowa. Many commenters believed that most adults in the state are unaware of the Nutrient Reduction Strategy and its implications. A statewide media campaign to raise watershed awareness was proposed as a potential educational opportunity. This would be best implemented through a partnership effort and incorporate some of the themes used from the Cedar River Basin campaign.
Continue the discussion…

How can we build on this summation of collective thought and move forward to better water management in Iowa? Consider using these questions as a discussion starter with your lawmaker, watershed coordinator, class, colleagues and neighbors. Share your responses and ideas with the Iowa Water Center on Facebook, Twitter, by phone or by e-mail.

1. What does greater stability in funding look like? From where does it come? What vehicles are in place to secure funding?
2. What size of watershed would delineate new Soil and Water Conservation Districts?
3. What framework exists or could exist for additional tax incentives for conservation implementation?
4. How can we incorporate soil and water conservation into K-12 curriculum?
5. What organization(s) is/are the appropriate body to spearhead a campaign for watershed awareness and education? From where does funding come from?

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