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IOWA WATER QUALITY ISSUES

Why we need to test water to improve quality

Let's set politics aside and work to protect Iowa's water

Can Iowa improve its water quality if it can't agree how to measure success?

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67

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in

4

Clean water can increase farm profits, grow Iowa's economy

Luke and Sally Gran 1:38 p.m. CST November 18, 2016



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(Photo: Zach Boyden-Holmes/The Register)

Anyone can tell you that farming is not easy, especially in a year such as this, with predicted bumper harvests and commodity prices at or below the cost of production. A recent study published by Iowa State University researchers estimated that **27 percent of Iowa's row crop land** — about 6.2 million acres — lost \$100 per acre or more in 2015, due to the high cost of inputs and low commodity prices.

That's more than \$620 million of losses on land that could instead be improving water quality, bird and pollinator habitat, and reducing soil erosion, all while retaining profits in the rural economy.

Water quality is an enormous concern for farmers who are trying to make a living, but it should also inspire innovation. Ironically, we are now hearing an old refrain that protecting clean water is bad for agriculture and the economy as a whole.

The best way to facilitate future growth is to ensure that the bedrock resources of our economy can endure for generations to come. Fertile and healthy soil, clean water and ecological biodiversity are critical for a thriving agricultural sector, as well as for a quality of life that makes Iowa a great place to live, work and recreate outdoors.

Countless Iowans travel each year to visit — and often relocate — to other states that have simply done a better job of maintaining natural areas. With **725 impaired streams** and dangerous blue-green algae blooms each year, many places in Iowa are no longer safe for people or wildlife. We are missing out on significant income for tourism and the tax revenue it could bring in to support our state's services.

At our small business, we are trying to do our part to change that. Crop ground that was formerly a drain on farm profitability can be transformed into ecologically valuable prairie, wetland and forest ecosystems, which can generate income through conservation program payments, timber sales, hunting leases, grass-based livestock, agroforestry, energy biomass and other opportunities.

The best part is, these changes can boost water quality while providing revenue for farmers. One of our clients had been losing between \$300 and \$500 per acre each year in a marginal corn and soybean field. After converting it to pollinator habitat, he is now generating more than \$300 per acre, while providing critical prairie habitat for wildlife, and no longer leaching high levels of nitrates into an adjacent stream. To say that clean water protections can't also be good for the economy simply doesn't make sense.

Perennial ecosystems can have an outsized impact on water quality by reducing nitrate and phosphorus pollution along with added benefits of reducing pest pressure and preventing soil erosion. For example, Iowa State University's **STRIPS project** has demonstrated that strategically incorporating just 10 percent of crop fields into diverse, native prairie can reduce surface water runoff-caused nitrate loss by 85 percent, phosphorus loss by 90 percent and sediment loss by 95 percent.

This is just one way we can boost water quality and help our rural economies grow. It's not an either-or choice.



Luke Gran, right, discusses an upcoming wetland restoration project. (Photo: Max Goldberg/Special to the Register)

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Why we need to test water to improve quality

Keith Schilling and Chris Jones



Let's set politics aside and work to protect Iowa's water

By Graham Gillette



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A poll from the American Sustainable Business Council found that **71 percent of small business owners** nationwide believe clean water protections would help ensure economic growth. The percentage that felt they would be a burden? Six. The fact is, clean water is important to all small businesses, and the state of Iowa needs to make it a priority with more than just lip service.



Rather than believing that protecting Iowa's water and native ecosystems would lead to our ruin, we must strategically transform land use changes into opportunities to strengthen our economy. The innovation of small business owners, farmers, and landowners can help sustain Iowa as an excellent place to build a home, start a career, and spend a lifetime exploring our breathtaking farms and natural areas.

LUKE AND SALLY GRAN are the owners of Prudenterra, a small business based in Nevada, la., that works with landowners to restore and maintain perennial ecosystems. Contact: Prudenterra.com



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