

Iowa farmers say they prefer to work with municipalities to limit contamination



Adam Kiel, water resources manager for the Iowa Soybean Association, reports on nitrate levels in the Miller Creek watershed during a tour Friday of conservation projects in the Middle Cedar River watershed. Based on monitoring at nine sites in 2014, nitrate levels ranged from just 1.07 parts per million in an area with many natural wetlands to 14.2 ppm in an intensively farmed region. Monitoring data can help pinpoint areas in which conservation practices will do the most good, he said. (Orlan Love/The Gazette)

Orlan Love, The Gazette

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WASHBURN — Iowa farmers much prefer cooperative rather than confrontational approaches to improving water quality, several of them said Friday during a tour of conservation practices in the Middle Cedar River watershed.

“I really appreciate what Cedar Rapids is doing — being proactive, working with farmers” to lower nutrient pollution in the Cedar River, said Nicholas Meier, who farms in the Miller Creek subwatershed on the Cedar River.

Meier, who demonstrated his strip-till practices during the tour, said the lawsuit filed recently by the Des Moines Water Works against ag tile drainage districts in three northwest Iowa counties, “is not a good thing.”

In marked contrast, the Cedar Rapids water utility has formed a partnership with farm-related agencies and organizations to invest \$4.3 million in conservation practices intended to reduce nutrient runoff into the Cedar River.

“We want to work with Cedar Rapids to make it happen,” Meier said.

Ben Fehl, who farms in the Wolf Creek watershed, said he adopted cover crops to reduce erosion, increase yields, and improve the quality of the water leaving his land.

Fehl said he also regards cover crops as the “next step” in meeting the goals of the state's nutrient reduction strategy.

“We don't want to be regulated, but if it's coming I'm going to be ready for it,” he said.

Masonville farmer Dennis Lindsay, one of about 75 participants in the tour sponsored by the Cedar River Watershed Coalition, said more Iowans need to know about the Cedar Rapids initiative.

It offers constructive solutions, while the Des Moines Water works lawsuit fosters division, he said.

Cedar Rapids Utilities Director Steve Hershner said the city initiated the Middle Cedar Partnership Project because “nitrates are a key factor for public water supplies.”

Because the Cedar River feeds the alluvial wells from which the city draws its water, the city regularly tests nitrate levels in the Cedar.

The annualized average nitrate level, as tested at Mohawk Park, has increased from 6.4 parts per million in 2008 to 7.4 ppm this year, Hershner said.

Though the average remains below the safe drinking water standard of 10 ppm, the upward trend is a concern, he said.

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Hershner said the city hopes to avoid building a denitrification facility, which would cost “multiple tens of millions of dollars.”

Hershner said Cedar Rapids “is a different animal than Des Moines — different rivers, different nitrate levels, different relationships with ag processors and producers.”

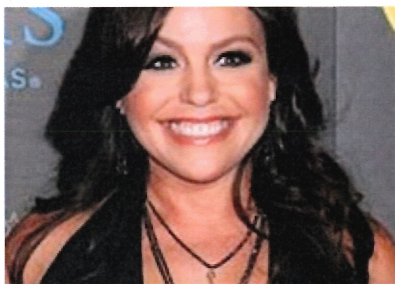
A lawsuit like the one filed by Des Moines Water Works “is not in our DNA,” he said.

State Sen. Rob Hogg, D-Cedar Rapids, co-chairman of the Cedar River Watershed Alliance, agreed that the two water utilities operate under different circumstances.

“Des Moines is paying a lot of money to treat its water for excessive nitrates. They have a real problem they need to address,” he said.

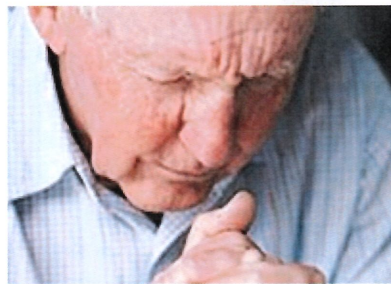
Hogg said he hopes hard feelings over the lawsuit won't stifle the cooperation needed to ensure continued progress in reducing nutrient pollution,

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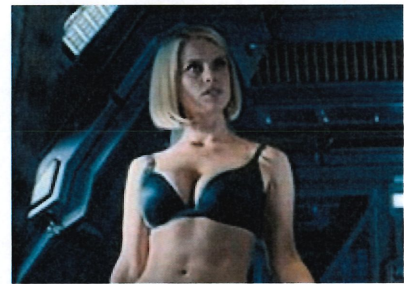
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