

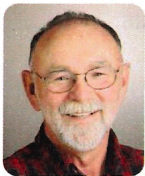
Vilsack urges more action on water quality

On tour, the U.S. ag secretary praises a farmer's efforts



U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack (right) talks with David Neil (from left), La Porte City Mayor, and Nick Meier about the equipment on a saturated buffer during a tour of Meier's farm in La Porte City on Friday, Oct. 16, 2015. (Stephen Mally/The Gazette)

Oct 17, 2015 at 10:41 am | [Print View](#)



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LA PORTE CITY — Iowans need to place more emphasis on and allocate more money to reducing nutrient pollution, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said Friday.

Unless Iowans demonstrate a stronger commitment to reduce nitrogen and phosphorus pollution in the state's waterways, the issue may be decided

by a federal judge, Vilsack told more than 100 people gathered at the Nick Meier farm a few miles west of here.

The former Iowa governor, at the Meier farm to observe a suite of conservation practices, was referring to the controversial lawsuit filed by the Des Moines Water Works against three northwest Iowa counties.

Farmers and farm interest groups fear they will lose much of their autonomy if the utility prevails in its effort to regulate nitrate discharges from tile drainage districts to the Raccoon River, a source of drinking water for 500,000 customers.

Noting that the litigation could impact Iowa and the nation, Vilsack said a cooperative effort by rural and urban Iowans "would be better than having a guy in a black robe deciding it."

"This needs to be a priority. We fund our priorities," he said.

One way to raise substantial state money for conservation efforts would be to fund with a sales tax increase the Iowa Natural Resources Trust Fund, which voters overwhelmingly approved in 2010, Vilsack said.

Another way, he said, would be to establish a grant pool similar in concept to the tourism-boosting Vision Iowa Program he inaugurated as Iowa governor.

Vilsack said the federal government is doing its part, having awarded through the USDA since he took office in 2009 more than \$2.2 billion to help Iowa farmers pay for conservation projects to reduce nitrogen and phosphorus runoff into rivers and streams.

Vilsack commended Nick Meier and his family's commitment to conservation after observing the denitrification bioreactor and the saturated buffer they installed this year to reduce the volume of nitrates leaving their fields for Miller Creek, a tributary of the Cedar River. Those new practices complement the Meiers' use of cover crops and ridge-till cultivation.

"This is the way it's going to work, the way conservation will be advanced," Vilsack said.

Both the Meier farm and the city of Cedar Rapids are engaged in the Middle Cedar Partnership Project, a \$4.3 million effort to reduce nutrient runoff into the Cedar River.

Unlike litigation, which tends to separate rural and urban residents, "the Middle Cedar project brings us together for improved water quality," Mayor Ron Corbett said.

"We care about clean water and we realize how important agriculture is to the state of Iowa," Corbett said.

Iowa Agriculture Secretary Bill Northey praised Cedar Rapids for both its leadership and its partnership with others in the effort to reduce nutrient pollution.

"Cooperation is what's going to get this job done," Northey said.