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WATER QUALITY

Vilsack talks conservation, Waterworks suit during Iowa visit



FT photos by Gene Lucht

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack had praise for farmers but some criticism of Iowa lawmakers when he spoke in Iowa Oct. 16.

October 22, 2015 5:07 am • [By Gene Lucht, Iowa Farmer Today](#)

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LA PORTE CITY — Tom Vilsack had words of praise last week for farmers and lawmakers who are working together to try to solve water quality issues.

But he also had some criticism for the Des Moines Waterworks' lawsuit and a warning for the Iowa governor and legislature that they need to do more than they have thus far.

Vilsack, a former Iowa governor who now serves as U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, was in the state to recognize the cooperative efforts of several cities that have worked with farmers in the hopes of improving water quality.

The mayors of Cedar Rapids, Waterloo and La Porte City all joined him for an event at Nick Meier's farm in rural Black Hawk County Oct. 16.

"This is the future, right here on this farm," Vilsack said after a tour that allowed him to see some of the conservation practices Meier is using in an effort to improve water quality. "I'm hopeful we'll be able to replicate this."

While recognizing "this is a complicated issue," Vilsack said the USDA is firmly behind voluntary conservation efforts aimed at improving water quality and has spent considerable money on trying to incentivize conservation.

He criticized the lawsuit Des Moines Waterworks brought against counties in Northwest Iowa, saying he didn't think litigation was a very efficient or useful way of dealing with the issue.

"You do not want a federal judge deciding this, in my view," he said.

But he also challenged the state to back up its words with money.

"We need the state to put additional resources (into the effort)," Vilsack said.

When Iowa approved its water quality strategy in 2013, it included some funds toward the voluntary effort. That funding has been continued.

But Gov. Terry Branstad vetoed bi-partisan legislative language that would have provided additional funds in 2014. And conservation groups have argued that without a greater funding level from the state, the voluntary approach is doomed to failure.

Vilsack said Iowa has provided some funding, and farmers have joined with the USDA to provide more funding. Private organizations and even cities have joined in, as in the case of Cedar Rapids helping to fund efforts in the Cedar River watershed. But the state needs to step up and do more, he said.

Several years ago, voters approved language saying that the first 3/8 cent of any sales tax increase would go toward conservation efforts. When asked about the idea of raising the state sales tax by 3/8 of a cent, Vilsack said he had talked with the governor about that and other items.

"You've got to figure out something," he said. "It needs to be a priority. We need to fund our priorities."

Meanwhile, Vilsack made clear he was impressed by the work Meier is doing on his family farm.

That work includes buffer strips, cover crops, saturated buffer strips, no-till and strip-till and a bio-reactor. Solar panels power at least one research project related to water quality on the farm. Meier says he is hopeful that some of the work being done here will help other farmers to deal with water quality issues.

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