

R VALLEY

Seeking a show of support

Governor Branstad makes one last push for water quality bill

CHRISTINIA CRIPPES

christinia.crippes@wcfcourier.com

DYSART — Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad took the opportunity to make one last push for water quality legislation this year during a stop in Dysart to learn about the soil and water conservation practices in nearby watersheds.

"We're trying to urge the Senate (to) debate the House-passed bill, because it's got strong support," Branstad told more than two dozen farmers and conservationists gathered at the Weber Farm in Dysart Wednesday morning. "They're still in session — whether they get done this weekend or not, I don't know — but there's still an opportunity to get that done, and we're pushing to try to get that accomplished."

Branstad, a Republican, praised the bipartisan House bill as one that would meet the level of funding he proposed in his original water quality legislation, which was tied to an extension of school infrastructure funds, through 2029.

Senate Democrats, who have no current plans to bring forward the House bill, have criticized the House proposal as a "shell game" that moves state money from one area to another. Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle had balked at the governor's original proposal.

The farmers gathered at Weber Farm voiced support for any proposal that would aid them in their efforts to implement better farming practices, though they also stressed all they are doing already to keep nutrients in the soil.

"We have been a firm believer in the nutrient reduction strategy, the voluntary approach. That's what got us started here," said John Weber, a Dysart pork producer and seed corn farmer. "I do believe that farmers do need incentive ... to try some of these things, to try new technologies."

Weber said those incentives



PHOTOS BY BRANDON POLLOCK / COURIER STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

John Weber shows photos of the project to Gov. Terry Branstad during a visit to the Middle Cedar Partnership Project at the Weber farm near Dysart Wednesday.



Gov. Terry Branstad speaks during a visit to the Middle Cedar Partnership Project at the Weber farm.

may not need to be long-term but rather just long enough to educate and encourage farmers about the better practices.

"Farmers are very competitive by nature, so when they see success, their neighbor having success with a project, I think it spreads by nature itself, and I'm just amazed what has happened here in our watershed and neighbors around here," Weber said.

Shannon Mitchell, coordinator of the Benton/Tama Nutrient Reduction Demonstration Project, said the work she's seen in the

92,000 acres of watershed her project covers is ahead of many others in the state.

She said she sees a lot of farmers in the region experimenting with conservation practices and always willing to try new things. She and Weber pointed to conservation practices like cover crops, saturated buffers, no-till or strip-till, and nitrogen monitoring.

Shane Wulf, coordinator of the nearby Miller Creek Water Quality Improvement Project that covers 42,000 acres in mostly Black Hawk County, added that

most farmers had already been implementing conservation practices before projects like his began in 2014.

"It's not like nothing was happening before our project was here; there was thousands of acres of no-till and strip-till already established," Wulf said. "This has been going on for a long time, and I think we're just increasing the speed of implementation."

Branstad, after listening to the conservation practices and collaborative efforts, praised the regional watersheds for their work and contrasted that with the ongoing legal dispute between Des Moines Water Works and three rural counties over the nitrates in the capital city's water.

"That just divides people and creates controversy; instead, the cooperation and collaboration that you're doing in this area is exactly the kind of thing we want to encourage throughout the state," Branstad said, pointing particularly to collaborative efforts between the rural counties and the city of Cedar Rapids.