

We're All In This Together

By Jacqueline Comito, PhD

The key to the success of Iowa's Nutrient Reduction Strategy (NRS) will be farmer participation. It is crucial that farmers recognize the importance of nutrient reduction and participate in the NRS to both improve environmental health and safety and preserve Iowa's agricultural economy for generations to come.

Luckily, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Iowa State University, and various other organizations have partnered to provide Iowa producers with a variety of nutrient reduction solutions that can be tailored to each individual farm. These organizations also provide information and financial support for farmers. The only step left is for farmers to embrace the opportunity.

Unfortunately, many in the agriculture industry feel that conservation efforts and business are mutually exclusive—i.e., environmental benefits hurt farm revenues. At first glance, this appears to be true. For instance, land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program or Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program does not earn as much money as cropland.

The benefits of conservation and environmental practices rarely “win” the economic argument because many of the costs are not factored into farmers' accounting. Water pollution from traditional farming practices results in numerous economic external costs, including costs to municipalities for water treatment, health care costs for surrounding communities, lost tourism revenue, and costs to other economies such as the gulf shrimp industry, which is directly affected by Midwest water pollution.

There are also the long-term economic benefits to conservation that are ignored, including erosion control and soil retention, flood control, natural filtration of pollutants, carbon sequestration, animal and plant habitat for sportsmen and birders, natural areas for recreation and tourism, and ecological stability for future generations.

Once the narrative that conservation and business are in competition is dismissed, it is easy to see that there are opportunities for win-win solutions between business and the environment. In fact, various industry, government, and citizen organizations around the country are working

together to find innovative, economically efficient, and environmentally beneficial ways to solve problems. Sustainable solutions—meeting current needs without compromising the needs of future generations by examining the economic, environmental, and social dimensions of a given problem—are becoming increasingly common.

For instance, a non-profit organization in Oregon recently partnered with a municipal wastewater treatment plant to take an innovative approach to reducing a local river's temperature. The treatment plant's options for mechanical solutions, such as cooling towers, would have cost almost \$20 million. However, through the state's water quality trading program, the treatment plant was able to obtain credits for a downstream riverbank restoration project. The trees planted on the stream bank provided shade for the river, reducing its temperature and protecting endangered salmon habitat. This solution cost significantly less than mechanical temperature controls and provided additional benefits such as habitat for other plant and animal species, stream bank stabilization, erosion control, and recreation and tourism opportunities.

Here in Iowa, there are innovative approaches to pollution problems that can result in a win-win-win for industry, regulators, and the community. Nothing can happen until the majority of Iowa farmers, agricultural business leaders, and industry groups not only embrace these new ideas but work together toward large scale adoption of the practices recommended by the NRS.

The support that organizations such as the Iowa Farm Bureau and the Iowa Soybean Association have shown for the NRS is a good sign that industry groups are taking the need for change seriously. Positive change can come in the form of big efforts like restoring or constructing wetlands or implementing a water quality trading market or smaller efforts such as buffer strips, cover crops or moving acres into CRP.

The most important thing to remember is that we all live together and share the same resources, and there are many ways for us to work together for the benefit of all. Participation on everyone's part cannot be optional!

Comito, an anthropologist, is the program manager for Iowa Learning Farms.

This is the last in a series of monthly op-ed articles that discuss various nutrient reduction methods outlined in the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy and the costs and benefits of each potential method. To

read other articles in this series, visit the Iowa Learning Farms website:

<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/ilf/content/ilf-opinion-articles>

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