Watershed-Based Community Assessments

Key Components to Successful Watershed Improvement Projects

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What is a Watershed-Based Community Assessment?

A community assessment is a description of a community and its people. The purpose is to identify the needs of a community in order to provide services appropriate to those needs. A watershed-based community assessment is a description of the people who live within a watershed. The goals of a watershed-based community assessment are to identify the water quality knowledge of the people, determine the concerns they face and weigh citizen enthusiasm for implementing a watershed improvement project.

A straightforward way to estimate the knowledge, needs and will of a community is to simply ask residents their opinions about water, their understanding of water quality, their satisfaction with water quality in their area, and the methods that could best be used to increase their scientific knowledge of water quality and build their capacity to participate in an improvement plan.

Assessing your watershed community's strengths and weaknesses is an important first step in planning and implementing an effective watershed improvement project. By taking the time to learn about your watershed community's issues, your group can discover new opportunities for increasing community involvement and individual commitment that will help ensure the overall success of your watershed improvement project. Without citizen "buy-in" to your watershed plan, it doesn't

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The following is a guide on how to conduct a watershed-based community assessment for your area. Most community watershed projects, funded by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) and Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS), hire coordinators who have technical expertise to address the water quality impairments. Many of these coordinators are asked to conduct community assessments, outreach and education despite a lack of sufficient training and/or background in social science research and communications.

While the IDNR and IDALS have the capacity to advise and train the coordinators in assessing water quality and implementing technical solutions, expertise is lacking to train these coordinators in building watershed coalitions using community assessments. This guide has been developed for watershed coordinators, local leaders and Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) commissioners to better appreciate the value of watershed-based community assessment, to be able to conduct simple and effective community assessments without being social scientists and to develop a simple, locally-based watershed marketing plan based on data collected in the assessment. The final sections of this toolkit offer tips to holding successful watershed improvement outreach and education events. These tips are composite examples based on successful watershed projects in Iowa and experiences of the Iowa Learning Farms.

The 2011 Iowa Learning Farms publication *Water Quality Matters to Us All* revealed that local watershed stakeholders in Iowa are concerned about soil

and water quality, but in many cases there was no sense of urgency. All the groups represented in a series of soil and water quality discussions—farmers, non-farm residents, SWCD commissioners, and agency specialists—remained ambivalent about specific action steps. They were hesitant to suggest dramatic changes in production techniques that address natural resource concerns. In other words, unless the evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of change, status quo is reasonable and preferred.

To improve Iowa's water quality, we need to improve the environmental literacy of all Iowans. Community watershed groups and Soil and Water Conservation Districts are local frameworks in which to nurture this approach. Effective watershed-based community assessments allow watershed groups to develop goals, outreach and education regarding water quality challenges based on the values of the people living in the watershed.

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