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Protecting Iowa's land legacy: Soil and water conservation policy--Past, present and future

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Protecting Iowa's land legacy: Soil and water conservation policy--Past, present and future

Abstract

Bringing together a broad range of stakeholders to consider how Iowa has dealt with conservation and environmental issues in the agricultural sector was the prime focus of this project. The combination of a two-day conference (Sustaining Our Iowa Land 2015), pre- and post-conference surveys, and educational materials gave participants an in-depth view of the situation.

Keywords

policy, conservation, environment

Disciplines

Agriculture Law



Protecting Iowa's Land Legacy: Soil and Water Conservation Policy—Past, Present and Future

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Bringing together a broad range of stakeholders to consider how Iowa has dealt with conservation and environmental issues in the agricultural sector was the prime focus of this project. The combination of a two-day conference (Sustaining Our Iowa Land 2015), pre- and post-conference surveys, and educational materials gave participants an in-depth view of the situation.

Principal Investigator:

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Co-investigator:

Matt Russell
Agricultural Law Center
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Des Moines, Iowa

Budget:

\$62,500 for year one

Q What are the policy opportunities to help Iowa farms advance water quality as well as soil conservation and soil health?

A The yearlong project relied on surveys, focus groups, legal research, and a two-day conference to explore this issue. While disagreements among stakeholders remain, there were many examples of policy options that resonate with a broad cross section of Iowans including focusing work at the watershed level, expanding the use of cover crops, and increased public funding for conservation focused on data-driven solutions.



P O L I C Y

Background

This project created a forum for stakeholders to consider how the existing institutions and policy approaches being used to address soil and water conservation may need to evolve to address a series of new issues and challenges shaping Iowa agriculture. The PIs created educational materials on Iowa's rich legacy of conservation leadership by engaging agricultural sustainability stakeholder groups in regional discussions, and convening a successful statewide conference on these themes in fall 2015: Sustaining Our Iowa Land (SOIL).

Approach and methods

For this project, the Drake University Agricultural Law Center staff:

- Prepared a set of educational materials reviewing Iowa's soil and water conservation policy and history. The materials included resources shared by participants and videos of the entire conference available at: <http://drakeaglaw.org/soil-conference-2015-videos/>
- Convened a two-day conference involving more than 40 speakers and nearly 200 stakeholders from across the agricultural and political spectrum in Iowa. Conference evaluations showed a high level of engagement by stakeholders in using the insights shared and developed at the conference.
- Developed an evaluation device and survey to obtain valuable information concerning the pre-conference awareness of attendees in existing conservation laws and policies, and a post-conference survey revealing insights as to the value of the conference. This helped document potential conservation actions taken by individuals based on the project.

Conclusions

Conclusions can be drawn from this project after more than a year of planning and execution; conversations with workshops for and surveys of several hundred



Recipients of the Stewards of Iowa's Land (SOIL) Awards at November 2015 conference. From right: Roger Wolf, Dan Looker, Richard Cruse, Max Schnepf, Teresa Opheim, Paul Willis, Dennis Keeney, Duane Sand, Mark Ackelson, and Elizabeth Garst.

stakeholders; and conference participation by nearly 200 people. These insights from stakeholders and participants can serve to shape more effective public policies to improve water quality and soil health.

- Ditch the idea of tolerable soil loss and focus on soil health. We need to change our thinking about T or the idea there is an acceptable level of soil erosion. The goal should be no soil erosion. And we need to shift our attention to soil health so we take a more comprehensive

view of our soil.

- Increase the adoption of cover crops. We need to continue and expand the adoption of cover crops and other innovative conservation practices, such as field edge buffers. Cover crops work well with livestock and keeping livestock on the land is an opportunity we shouldn't overlook.
- Engage ag retailers. We need to more fully engage ag retailers in efforts to reduce nutrient loss and promote soil health, in large part because they are the main source of farmer advice on fertilizer use.
- Get landowners engaged in soil and water conservation. The changing nature of land tenure in Iowa means we need to make landowners, especially the increasing number of women, more engaged in efforts to address soil and water conservation.
- Work at the watershed level to develop effective projects. We need to use the watershed planning approach to develop collaborative projects in which neighboring farmers and landowners are invested.
- Harness the opportunities with water quality trading. We need to explore and develop the opportunities to use water quality trading and other market-driven approaches so point sources can help fund efforts at non-point pollution control.
- Support IWILL and a sales tax increase. A key to improved water quality is increasing public funds to support cost-share investments by farmers and landowners. IWILL is the most readily accessible opportunity to do so.
- Engage business and consumers and use data analytics to improve practices. The growing interest of consumer food companies and other businesses in sustainability and supply chain management creates the opportunity to employ improved conservation techniques based on data analytics.
- Enforce the soil conservation laws already on the books. Iowa has a rich history of legislative and judicial support for protecting soil and water resources. The Soil and Water Conservation Districts need to make more effective use of the tools already in place.
- Make sure farm programs work to protect soil and water. Current federal farm programs may be working at cross purposes, some helping protect soil and water while other programs, such as the expanding crop insurance coverage, may contribute to soil and water problems.



Jason Weller, Chief of USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, speaking at the SOIL conference.

Impact of results

Short-term impacts include:

- Iowa agriculture stakeholders will use materials from the conference to better understand the challenges and opportunities for improving Iowa water quality.
- Iowa agriculture stakeholders and water quality advocates will continue conversations started at the conference to find common ground and win/win strategies for improving Iowa water quality.
- More Iowa farmers will be encouraged to use practices like cover crops and longer crop rotations.
- Iowans will better understand existing policies and Iowa's precedent from the legislature and Supreme Court in protecting soil.

More than 500 individuals have been reached, as measured by visits to online resources and attendance at regional workshops and the conference.

Long-term impacts, which are more speculative, include:

- Policy solutions to water quality issues will be explored by farmers and municipal water users working together.
- Farmers will innovate to develop and implement more effective farming practices for improving soil health and water quality.
- Stewardship of Iowa farm land increases by integrating strategies for greater soil health and improving water quality.

Education and outreach

Publication:

Keeping the Farm and Farmer in Food Policy and Law, Neil Hamilton, *Journal of Food Law & Policy*, (Volume 11, No. 1, Spring 2015)

Conference planning and results:

Four focus groups were conducted with conference partners who helped shape the conference. Among them were participants at: the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (20), NRCS (8), Iowa Soybean Association (12), and Centerville, Iowa landowners and conservation professionals (18). A 20-question survey was generated directly from these workshops. There were 116 people who attended the conference that completed the survey. Drake staffers also developed a checklist of 22 questions for landowners and farmers to consider in helping them better manage their land for positive soil and water conservation outcomes. All of the follow-up resources are available here: <http://drakeaglaw.org/conference-follow-up/>

Full videos of each panel and most of the keynote presentations from the SOIL Conference are available online: <http://drakeaglaw.org/soil-conference-2015-videos/>

- More than 100 water quality and soil health stakeholders answered 20 questions about sustaining Iowa lands. The results, including new ideas to help Iowans improve water and soil, are available online: <http://drakeaglaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Survey-results-pre-SOIL-conference.pdf>
- A conference evaluation included important insights into how Iowans are

thinking about solutions to soil and water issues. That survey is available online: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/results/SM-33MWJ5CW/>

- Participants at the SOIL conference shared 29 links to a broad spectrum of resources. These links appear here: <http://drakeaglaw.org/conference-follow-up/>

Presentations:

- Edward Cox presented at Indian Hills Community College Sustainable Agriculture Seminar, Centerville, Iowa, January 2016; and at a Women, Land and Legacy meeting on Conservation Programs and Farm Leases, Laurens, Iowa, August 2015.

Neil Hamilton made multiple presentations related to the conference and its themes:

- USDA Agricultural Outlook Forum, on a panel about land tenure and transition: “How Land Tenure Will Shape the Future of U.S. Agriculture,” February 2016. This presentation drew on several years of research from Leopold Center SALT funded projects including the SOIL conference.
- American Agricultural Law Association annual meeting in Charleston, SC, October 2015. Two presentations: the Des Moines Waterworks clean water litigation, and land tenure and sustainability with a focus on the 2015 SOIL conference.
- Iowa State University, invited lecturer for graduate students in Natural Resources and Environmental Management, November 2015, on the Des Moines Water Works litigation and its relation to soil and water conservation issues.
- Iowa Water Future Advisory Committee, December 2015, on the role of law in protecting Iowa soil and water resources, and updates on the results from the 2015 SOIL conference.
- National Sustainable Funders meeting in Des Moines, December 2015, facilitated a panel discussion on clean water issues.

Leveraged funds

Funds to help sponsor the SOIL conference came from Wells Fargo, USDA Agricultural Research Service, and conference registration fees. Any remaining funds were used to further develop and share products from the conference sessions.

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