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Letter to relevant leader: Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig

Dear Mike Naig,

First of all, I'd like to say that I really appreciate your work as Iowa's Secretary of Agriculture. The Iowa Farm Environmental Leaders Awards are a great way to motivate farmers to adopt greener practices. You also care deeply about Iowa's water quality. The Nutrient Reduction Strategy plan is exactly what Iowa needs to protect its land and water for future generations.

Over the last 100 years, nitrate concentration in Iowa's drinking water has increased by a factor of 7. Thanks to water treatment facilities, Iowans' drinking water meets safety standards, although the high nitrate concentration still places them at a higher risk for cancers and diseases. But as shown by Des Moines Waterworks' 2015 lawsuit, it is difficult for these facilities to keep up with constant fertilizer runoff from farms. Additionally, lower income communities are being disproportionately affected by nitrogen runoff due to the high cost of nitrogen removal systems being out of budget. According to [a study](#) from the EWG, 85% of communities with nitrate levels at or above the legal limit have a median income lower than the state's average.

By using voluntary participation from farmers, the Nutrient Reduction Strategy fights the problem at the source, but it is not working fast enough to keep up with the growing problem. [Studies](#) have found that overfertilization does not make a large difference in crop yield, and the environmental and health risks of high levels of nitrate runoff outweigh any small benefits to yield. Your department needs to put out more education and incentives for farmers to avoid this practice, or otherwise help communities in need receive funding for necessary water treatment equipment.

Iowans like me rely on agriculture, and they also rely on clean water. We care about the problem and want to work together to find a solution

From your concerned constituent,
Corinne Fox



Corn, Pigs, and Soy

Iowa earns tens of billions of dollars every year from its largely monocultural agriculture system. Its largest exports are corn, pigs, and soy. Consistent growth of corn and soy without intercropping degrades the soil, causing farmers to reach for GMOs, pesticides, and nitrogen-based fertilizers.

What is Overfertilization?

When too much fertilizer is applied for the crops to absorb it, fertilizer makes its way into the air, ground, and most importantly, the water. This is harmful for the environment and, as nitrates get into drinking water, can be **detrimental to human health**, leading to increased rates of cancers, birth defects, and infant deaths. Nitrate levels in Iowa's water have increased **sevenfold** over the past 100 years.

The Nitrogen Problem

Water treatment facilities keep the nitrate levels under the legal limit, but they are still often high enough to cause health problems, **particularly in rural and low-income communities**. According to a study by the EWG, 85% of communities whose water tested at or above the legal limit of 10 mg/L of nitrates had an average income below the statewide median. Due to the small scale of individuals served and inability for customers to pay higher bills, many wastewater treatment facilities are **unable to purchase expensive nitrate removal equipment**.

What can we do?

- **Recognize** Iowa's unsustainable agriculture techniques, and encourage elected officials to make policy changes that move towards sustainable farming
- **Eat fewer animal products**, particularly meat, to create less manure which ends up in the fields as fertilizer. This also reduces demand for unsustainable corn and soy farming for animal feed.
- **Support organizations** like the EWG, Sierra Club, and the Iowa Environmental Council who fight for the environment and climate justice.
- **Raise awareness!** The more people who understand the problem, the more people who can help work towards the solution.

Sources

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