



THE WALLACE CENTERS  
OF IOWA  
DES MOINES · RURAL ORIENT

*The following is a summary of the three Conversations about the Future of Iowa's Water dinners held at the Henry A. Wallace Country Life Center, Whiterock Conservancy and the Wallace House.*

Unlike the fact that water takes the path of least resistance, Iowans who attended the Conversations about the Future of Iowa's Water confirmed that the path of least resistance will not lead to water quality. Instead it will be a great effort requiring quality information, innovation and dialogue.

The Wallace Centers of Iowa recently hosted Conversations about the Future of Iowa's Water. Nearly 100 rural and urban participants were part of the dialogue at the Wallace House in Des Moines, Whiterock Conservancy near Coon Rapids and the Henry A. Wallace Country Life Center in rural Orient.

Through table discussions centered around four facilitated questions Iowans, one table at a time, offered their thoughts and suggestions concerning Iowa's water. Farmers readily shared what they are doing to reduce the risk of flooding and water contamination. City residents wanted to acquire more information about water quality. Farm organizations wanted to make sure that people knew that agriculture wasn't the only polluter of streams and rivers. Water quality organizations wanted people to know that projects and collaborations are in place to address water issues. The audience makeup was 51% general public, 19% farmers, 18% farm businesses and organizations and 12% represented water organizations.

Most of the audience arrived with predisposed beliefs about Iowa's impaired waterways and the solutions. Tables were consciously laid out with nametags to make sure that each cluster was diverse in its makeup. This provided a subtle nudge to listen and learn from tablemates. The results were lively exchanges focused on improving Iowa's nearly 18,000 miles of rivers and streams.

When asked what the biggest worry diners had about the future of Iowa's water, 63% of the participants expressed concern about the quantity and quality of Iowa's water and the long term impact of that on the environment. Along with the usual fears of the pollutants entering the waterways, there were concerns about the cost of tap water, the frequency and intensity of rains, current blame and not enough attention to solutions, everyone being responsible for this resource, not enough accountability,

measurement strategies, soil erosion as it relates to water quality and not all land in Iowa is the same topography which creates challenges.

For the table discussion about what they have observed others doing to improve Iowa's waterways, 56% percent of the positive actions to mitigate water pollutants were attributed to farmers. The 2012 Census reported 88,367 farms in Iowa with 131,535 farm operators and the farmers present were quick to point out that not every farmer does their part. The general public was given credit for 33% of the positive actions which consisted of increasing awareness and more participation in grass roots efforts. Only 11% of the actions were attributed to government and organizations.

Farmers in attendance educated many of those present about nutrient management technologies, buffer strips, no-till, bioreactors, prairie strips, cover crops (don't farm naked), proactive practices and increasing partnerships for clean water.

Many suggestions were delivered about how government could become more involved including elected officials from the county to the federal level educating themselves regarding the issues. The participants were not solely seeking money but wanted more leadership, support, mechanisms for tracking progress, technical assistance and encouraging more collaborations among the public, farm groups and environmental organizations.

Wrapping up the dialogue challenged everyone to disclose what they are personally doing to improve Iowa's water. These comments ranged from becoming more educated about water solutions to engaging the next generation in water conservation and river clean ups. The long list from urban dwellers included reducing lawn fertilizers, hand washing dishes, conserving water, contacting legislators, becoming active in water quality organizations, eat local foods and composting. In addition to the practices listed earlier, farmers said they are sharing information with others about riparian zones, conservation practices, restoration of prairies, wetlands and forests and serving in local leadership positions.

These gatherings were not mandatory, but relied on people's interest to spend some time with others conversing about Iowa's rivers and streams. The level of participation indicates that people are concerned and they are willing to do something about that worry. Before an action plan is written and implemented people need to come together and discuss the issues. The Conversations about the Future of Iowa's Water are a start. And that start focused on solutions to explore, individual responsibility and ways to engage more citizens.

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