

Restoring Water Quality

Every two years, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) produces a list of water bodies that are impaired.¹ Impaired waters are those that are not meeting water quality standards for a range of criteria, including algae, turbidity, bacteria, cadmium, aluminum, arsenic and mercury. Every Iowa county has at least one impaired water body. Water pollution devastates Iowa's aquatic resources by reducing recreation, threatening human health and degrading aquatic ecosystems. Poor water quality affects all Iowans. In Iowa, bacteria contamination results in closed beaches; communities pay for expensive filtering equipment to purify drinking water and fish populations decline. On the other hand, good water quality benefits all Iowans, by encouraging recreational use of the water body and by providing wildlife habitat.

States delegated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to administer the Clean Water Act, including Iowa, must identify water bodies that do not meet water quality standards. After a water body is determined to be impaired, it is added to an Impaired Waters List and the Iowa DNR must develop a total maximum daily load (TMDL) for each pollutant in the water body. TMDL is a calculation of the maximum amount of a pollutant that a water body can receive and still meet water quality standards. The TMDL is written as a plan which will restore the water quality. The water improvement actions will vary based on the source of the pollutant and the type of pollutant. Strategies may be different for each TMDL as the sources of the impairment to water quality are different for each water body.



Water Testing. Photo by Lynn Betts, USDA NRCS

Currently the DNR does not implement the strategies and techniques written in the TMDL to restore water quality. That effort is currently falling on the shoulders of citizens and local governments. Major barriers, including funding and pushback from special interest groups who want to continue with business as usual, have prevented implementation of the strategies identified in the TMDLs. As a result, support and financial resources necessary for TMDL implementation are lacking and water quality in Iowa's rivers, lakes and streams has not improved despite the written completion of TMDLs by the Iowa DNR. Even so, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources periodically offers grants that can assist in implementation of the TMDLs.²

Further, the DNR has fallen behind in writing the TMDLs. Some waterbodies on the impaired waters list needing TMDLs written have been waiting for many years, some since the early 2000s.

Policy recommendations

The Iowa Chapter supports policies that restore water quality to water bodies that have been impaired by pollutants and to prevent on-going pollution from entering Iowa's water bodies. The Iowa Chapter supports:

- Aggressive implementation of the TMDLs

¹ For a list of impaired waters, see www.iowadnr.gov/Environmental-Protection/Water-Quality/Water-Monitoring/Impaired-Waters. The impaired waters list is also called the 303(d) list.

² For more information, see www.iowadnr.gov/Environmental-Protection/Water-Quality/Watershed-Improvement

- Removing barriers to the implementation of TMDLs
- Fully funding clean-up and restoration activities
- Enforcement of existing rules and regulations to eliminate pollutants from entering a waterbody
- An aggressive water monitoring program to determine where the pollution enters the waterbody
- Providing staff to write the TMDLs for waters. Waters should not be sitting on the impaired waters list for a decade or more waiting for a TMDL.

Additionally, the Chapter encourages groups of citizens and local government entities to work together in improving water quality in a watershed. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources provides assistance and grants in developing a Watershed Management Plan and implementing the plan.