



New Agreement Advances Opportunities to Improve Iowa's Water Quality

In Iowa, and across the country, the rising costs of engineering, design, and operations for new or redesigned wastewater treatment facilities are becoming difficult for most communities to meet.

An agreement between the City of Dubuque (and its wastewater utility) and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources is the first of its kind in Iowa. It creates a pathway for the city to use water quality improvements from nearby farms to meet a portion of its pollution discharge permit requirements. Farmers are often willing to farm in a way that will reduce the amount of nitrogen and phosphorus leaving their farms in exchange for payments from cities that want credit for doing so.

In many cases, reducing farm nutrient runoff can be dramatically less expensive than wastewater facility upgrades.

This agreement – which could be replicated for any city, town, or industrial point source – is a Memorandum of Understanding that lays out the purpose of such an arrangement and secures key points of agreement that give decision-makers confidence in future investments they might make.

What does the agreement do?

- The agreement requires no funding commitment from a jurisdiction. It's an agreement on how and when watershed investments would be "counted" by Iowa DNR, not a requirement for a city or town to use watershed approaches. When a community wants to use watershed projects in the future, the rules for doing so and the value of nutrient improvements are clear.
- Through this agreement, a city will be able to meet some nutrient reduction requirements under its permit from Iowa DNR. For Dubuque, this means the city will work with area farmers to help finance conservation practices that reduce the amount of nutrients leaving farm fields and flowing into the watershed. Farmer participation in the partnership is voluntary. In future agreements, other cities could easily adapt the agreement to allow them to purchase improvements made on farms rather than working with farmers directly. In fact, nothing in the agreement prohibits Dubuque from using either approach.

- The agreement establishes that the city and Iowa DNR will use a specific model to quantify the benefits the city can count under its permit. This is important because the model gives a city much more certainty about how its investments will be treated, regardless of weather, drought, and other conditions.
- The first step requires the city to make a plan to address water quality at the watershed scale. For Dubuque, work is already underway on such a plan and on strengthening collaboration with farmers. Many communities already have such plans, and the agreement wouldn't require changes in those plans before allowing the community to further operationalize the agreement.
- The agreement allows the city to get credit for any conservation work dating back to 2013, as long as documentation of baseline conditions, before conservation practices were installed on farms, is available.

This new approach to water quality compliance changes the focus from mostly industrial, “end-of-pipe” chemical and biological treatment to one that lets the city find the best options to improve water quality anywhere in the watershed.

As many communities already know, farm-based or green infrastructure provides many benefits beyond simple permit compliance by delivering co-benefits of reduced flood risk, more recreational opportunities, and enhanced soil carbon. It also opens the door to other collaborative funding opportunities and cooperation among all citizens in the area.

For information on crafting a similar agreement for your municipality or permitted entity at no cost, contact Bartlett Durand, bdurand@sandcountyfoundation.org, 608.333.1251.

Our nonprofit's work is fully funded, and we can help communities develop their own agreements and secure approval for those agreements with Iowa DNR.