



Collaboration With Farmers Key to Source Water Protection

When we sit down for dinner each night, there are two essential items on the table: a glass of water and a plate of food. We can't live long without either one.

It follows that we need at least two kinds of essential people in the world: people who provide the water and people who provide the food. I don't have to remind *Journal AWWA* readers about the importance of the water people, and it doesn't take much reflection to also understand the critical role farmers and ranchers play. You might say water workers and agricultural producers are two sides of the same indispensable coin.

So it's opportune that the key to solving the most confounding source water challenge of our day hinges on partnerships between water providers and farmers. The challenge, of course, is nutrient runoff—often from agricultural operations—that washes into waterways and ultimately threatens community drinking water supplies. Nutrient runoff was one of the primary causes of the 2014 Lake Erie harmful algal bloom, which shut down water service to 400,000 people in Toledo, Ohio, for three days.

The time is right for a new era of voluntary collaboration and cooperation between the agricultural and water sectors. The coming reauthorization of the Farm Bill provides the perfect opportunity to encourage partnerships among everyone interested in productive farming practices and safe water.

AWWA is asking the US Congress to emphasize source water protection in the Farm Bill's conservation title. Many existing conservation measures address a host of environmental issues, but the direct connection between these practices and drinking water quality has not been made explicit in previous farm bills. AWWA would like to see that change by

- providing strong funding for conservation programs;
- adding a specific goal of protecting sources of drinking water as a priority for all Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) conservation programs;
- encouraging NRCS state conservationists, state technical committees, and working groups to work with water utilities in identifying priority areas in each state;
- increasing the NRCS cost-share for measures that provide considerable downstream water quality benefits; and
- dedicating 10% of conservation funding to protection of sources of drinking water through existing programs.

While many water utilities have developed monitoring, treatment, and response strategies to protect their source

waters, ultimately it's critical that we reduce the nutrient loads that reach water system intakes. Agricultural production often runs on thin margins, and farmers and ranchers who strongly desire to implement practices to protect source water often lack the resources to do so. But there are already examples of how NRCS programs can help agricultural producers and utilities collaborate to get the job done.

In recent years, several water utilities have committed to working cooperatively with agriculture through programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Stewardship Program, Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program. In Beaver Water District, Ark., over \$8.5 million in combined federal and local funds is being applied to protect sources of drinking water, and in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, over \$4 million in combined federal and local funds is going to source water protection. Both projects are being done in cooperation with agriculture. (You can read more about these partnerships in the Sept. 29, 2017, issue of *AWWA Connections*, which you will find at awwa.org).

If you work at a utility with nutrient runoff concerns, I urge you to take a closer look at how these kinds of programs might help encourage dialogue and partnerships with farmers and other stakeholders. And if you're already using this smart approach to addressing water quality before it reaches the treatment plant, please share your story with Adam Carpenter in AWWA's government affairs office at (202) 326-6126 or acarpenter@awwa.org so we can elevate your example in ongoing discussions.

At AWWA, protecting sources of drinking water is part of what we call a Total Water Solutions approach to managing water, recognizing that water serves many important purposes. Working in partnership with other stakeholders in water management, we are always looking for innovative ways to protect drinking water supplies while recognizing the interests of large and small businesses and the wider economy.

Congress would do well to preserve and enhance funding for conservation programs while increasing the focus on protecting sources of drinking water. We look forward to working closely with our friends in the agricultural community to encourage a farm bill that recognizes the critical nature of both agricultural production and safe and affordable water.

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