

# Vilsack doubts lawsuit will speed water-pollution cleanup



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Vilsack on water: USDA will get further with its efforts than a lawsuit



(Photo: Andrea Melendez/The Register)

A "holistic" conservation approach to curbing fertilizer runoff polluting Iowa and U.S. streams will work quicker than litigation, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told The Des Moines Register's editorial board Monday.

Vilsack fielded questions about Des Moines Water Works' decision this month to notify three rural counties that it plans to sue them. The utility charges that drainage districts in northwest Iowa are contributing to high levels of nitrates in Raccoon River, one of the metro area's sources for drinking water.

The Des Moines utility has said it expects to file a lawsuit within 60 days, unless an agreement is reached. Experts say the Water Works lawsuit could have broad ramifications for farmers, who use drainage tiles to help

raise corn, soybeans and other crops.

Vilsack said a faster and better solution to reducing nutrient loss in U.S. waterways is a "holistic approach" that he predicted will have "a profound impact" on water quality, although he cautioned that it could take five to 10 years to see measurable improvements.

Still, he said those efforts will move the issue farther than the "three, five, seven, nine, 10 years" it will for Water Works' lawsuit to be litigated.

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Vilsack said Iowa and U.S. farmers are adopting conservation practices that help reduce the nitrogen and phosphorous runoff blamed for polluting Iowa waterways, as well as contributing to the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico that each summer is unable to support aquatic life.

Iowa has adopted a plan to reduce by 45 percent the nitrogen and phosphorous entering state waterways. But the strategy has been criticized by environmentalists because it's voluntary and has no deadline to hit its goals.

Vilsack said he sees Iowa farmers building conservation practices, with more than 20,000 farmers and landowners putting four million acres in federal conservation programs. Since 2009, he said, the agency has invested \$1.7 billion in Iowa conservation.

Vilsack said the federal agency is funding research that provides more insight "about the biology and biochemistry of nutrient application, runoff and water quality." It will help farmers and officials to "better measure what's happening in the soil" and craft better responses.

"It's all extraordinarily complex," he said.

Among the technology being developed is "time-released" nutrients, so they're available longer for corn and soybean plants to use.

"The fact that one-half to one-third of what we do apply on land is not ultimately used by plants ... strongly suggests we need to figure out ways in which we can create more efficient fertilizers," Vilsack said.

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