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Cities must do more to slow storm runoff

All Iowans have role in water cleanup.

Iowa's drive to clean up its lakes, rivers and streams has focused mostly on agriculture, a reflection of the dominance of farming on the Iowa landscape. But increasing urbanization means that cities large and small are contributing to dirty water, too, and they must step up their efforts to change that.

A report released last week by the Iowa Policy Project focused on the consequences of inadequate efforts by Iowa cities, industries and institutions to properly contain storm water. A few communities are making improvements, and a growing number are taking steps in the right direction, but the report suggests Iowa has more work to do. Some of it is public awareness and even citizen action; some will require more assertive government action.

Without more aggressive measures, the result is the same as well-documented agricultural pollution. Storm water that runs rapidly off streets, parking lots, roofs, construction sites, industrial plants and chemical-saturated lawns can be just as harmful to water quality as runoff from farm fields and animal feedlots. Sediment from construction sites where soil is laid bare without adequate protection can be just as devastating as when it comes from a freshly tilled field.

The negative impact includes tainted drinking water, erosion, fish kills, and rivers and lakes placed off-limits to swimming and fishing.

Historically, Iowa cities figured they were doing the right thing if they simply channeled rainwater into storm sewers. They've paid too little attention to what happens next: Where does it go, and what is the effect?

The Iowa Policy Project report, "Managing Iowa Stormwater Quantity and Quality," points out that urban runoff water is a problem for two reasons: First, it may contain pollutants (i.e., toxic waste accidentally or illegally dumped into storm sewers, or road salt and sand or oil and gas spills from streets and parking lots). Second, improperly managed, storm water during a heavy downpour in the summertime quickly flushes hot water and pollutants directly into rivers.

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regulations have governed handling of storm water in Des Moines and Cedar Rapids for 17 years. Since 2003, the rules have governed an additional 41 communities and the three state universities. The toughest rules mandate elimination of illegal discharges into storm sewers and control of construction-site runoff. The EPA also requires public education and prevention programs designed to move communities toward development that holds more water on site through better site planning and landscaping.

Iowa cities shouldn't wait for EPA mandates, though. They can take action on pollution from specific sources and erosion from new development, build storm-water systems that prevent rapid runoff and give incentives for development that creates less runoff. Consumers can have an impact, too, by demanding that developers use "green" designs that handle storm-water runoff in ways that do not further degrade Iowa's waterways.

The Iowa Policy Project deserves credit for bringing this issue to the surface. Iowa's landscape is nearly 90 percent farmed, but as the state becomes increasingly urbanized, city and county residents and public officials must become more aware of the problem and be part of the solutions.

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