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How much is clean water worth?

By Scott Wallace and Gene Parkin

How much is clean water worth? That question is on the minds of many Iowans these days as the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) holds a series of public meetings around the state through Oct. 14.

At issue is a series of changes in how DNR classifies lakes, streams and rivers for their intended use. Under pressure from environmental groups and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the DNR's proposed changes would dramatically expand the listing of waters to be protected as "fishable" (able to protect aquatic life) and "swimmable" (safe for human contact). Currently only 17 percent of Iowa's waters are designated with the goal of protecting aquatic life, and only 3 percent are designated for swimming uses; by far the lowest of any state in the Midwest.

The Clean Water Act, when originally passed in 1972, was based on the simple premise that all citizens of this country had the right to a clean, safe environment. This includes healthy and productive lakes, streams and rivers. We believe every Iowan shares these goals.

Changes in the water quality standards will require upgrading of about 334 existing treatment facilities in Iowa. Another major challenge is the over 700 communities that are "unsewered" and discharge sewage directly into waters of the state. The DNR projects big dollars – between \$790 million and \$956 million to upgrade existing facilities, and between \$214 million and \$322 million to address unsewered communities.

Despite these eye-popping dollar amounts, considerable evidence suggests that the costs for cleaning up Iowa's waters could be substantially less. The DNR's own analysis of the fiscal impact of the new rule has identified a number of alternative approaches – including reusing treated water for irrigation, flow-based permit standards, enhanced pond systems, and engineered wetlands that could substantially reduce costs, especially for small communities. These innovative approaches, and the regulatory changes needed to support them, are addressed in detail in a report being released by the Iowa Policy Project <<http://www.iowapolicyproject.org>>.

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Another factor to consider is the age of our current sewage treatment plants. Many of these facilities are old, crumbling and in need of repair (in a recent assessment, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave U.S. wastewater infrastructure a grade of D-minus). The wastewater treatment field has advanced considerably in the last 30 years. Installing new, more efficient treatment technology into our old sewage plants is much more cost-effective than repeating the old, outmoded systems and can result in cleaner water.

Finally, there is the question of quality of life. As a society, there will always be a cost to treat sewage, but there are also benefits as well. Can you put a price tag on the memories of hunting with your children, or fishing with your grandchildren? All creatures on this planet, including humans, need clean water to survive. Leaving a legacy of assuring clean water is one of the most important gifts we can bestow upon our children.

Changes for water quality standards are among Iowa's biggest environmental challenges – and opportunities – of the last 30 years.

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