Over the next 12 years, Iowa will commit an additional $282 million to water quality, the result of legislation passed early in 2018 after years of unsuccessful legislative initiatives in past sessions. Even with SF 512 now law, Rep. John Wills says, it still is only “the beginning of the conversation [on water quality], not the end” in Iowa.

The measure was passed along a party-line vote, with opponents expressing concern that the bill does not do enough to hold accountable those who receive dollars from the state — either through benchmark goals or the ongoing testing of waterways.

Sen. Kevin Kinney, too, originally opposed the bill and had sought changes by backing several amendments. But in the end, he voted in favor of SF 512 because “Iowans want resources to continue and expand water quality initiatives, and this is a first step that we can build on.”

No new tax dollars will be raised under SF 512. Instead, a mix of existing revenue sources will be used — for example, money from a tax on metered drinking water will gradually be diverted from the general fund, and, starting in 2021, some state gambling revenue will be used.

“It’s a good, long-term, sustainable funding source for water quality,” says Wills, who helped get the measure through the Legislature and has been involved in water quality and conservation work for more than 20 years.

With this law in place, a water quality fund will be established within the Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship to support infrastructure improvements (wetlands, buffer zones, terraces, etc.) that keep nutrients from agricultural land from reaching waterways. SF 512 also creates a revolving fund for cities’ and utilities’ water quality initiatives.

The impact of agriculture on water quality has been debated in every Midwestern state legislature over the last few years, but maybe nowhere more so than Iowa, where the state’s largest city had filed a lawsuit against three counties, claiming their agricultural drainage districts were sending nitrates into the rivers that the water utility uses for drinking water. Even though Des Moines Water Works’ lawsuit has since been dismissed, the issue remains front and center across the state.

For several years now, too, Iowa has been part of a multi-state initiative (coordinated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency) across the Mississippi River Basin to adopt and implement state-specific Nutrition Reduction Strategies. Iowa’s NRS calls for the amount of nitrogen and phosphorus in the state’s waterways to be reduced by 45 percent by 2035.

According to a recent Iowa State University study, the state’s farmers have spent more than $2 billion of their own money on conservation practices over the last 20 years. This year, a total of $420 million in public and private dollars went to curtailing nitrogen and phosphorus runoff. (Most of this funding isn’t a result of the NRS, but rather programs that existed before this strategy was established.)

John Lawrence, director of Iowa State’s Nutrient Reduction Center, says 88 percent of the state’s land drainage is now measured with nutrient sensors.

Weather variability can influence measures of water quality, but over the long term, he says, “in order to change the
results in the water, there must be changes made to the land.” That, in turn, requires intervention and investments by the government and farmers themselves, he says.

The hope among state legislators is that SF 512 leads to some of those changes, on the ground and in the water.

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