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IOWA CHAPTER

A Buffer On Every Stream

Currently Iowa farmers can farm right up to the bank of a stream and currently no law can stop it. And there are some farmers who do farm right to the edge. For many reasons, that practice needs to stop. Requiring a 30-foot permanent buffer along every stream would move Iowa a long way toward improving the state's water quality.

In fact, there is precedent for requiring stream buffers in Minnesota. Minnesota law requires a 50-foot buffer strip along lakes, rivers and streams and a 16.5-foot buffer along ditches.

In 2019, members of the Conservation Districts of Iowa¹ approved a resolution for requiring a 30-foot permanent buffer along streams. Their resolution clarified that the stream buffer could be planted in hay, native and non-native grasses and forbs, trees, or shrubs. Ultimately, the governing board of the Conservation Districts² did not pursue this issue before the 2020 Iowa legislature.

Permanent stream buffers have many benefits:

- Stabilizing stream banks
- Keeping sediment from entering the stream
- Filtering pollutants from surface water so they don't enter the stream
- Reducing nutrients entering a stream, which helps meet the goals of the nutrient reduction strategy
- Creating habitat for wildlife
- Creating wildlife corridors so that animals can move safely along the stream
- Providing a place for native vegetation to thrive if the landowner chooses that option.

Sources

Todd Dorman, "Another clear message to lawmakers on water quality", Cedar Rapids Gazette, September 1, 2019

Erin Jordan, "Some Iowa farmers push for law prohibiting crops near rivers, streams", Cedar Rapids Gazette, November 22, 2019

Erin Murphy, "Iowa conservation committee rejects mandatory buffer strips measures", Cedar Rapids Gazette, December 5, 2019



Bear Creek in Story County, Iowa, buffered by grass and trees. Photo by Lynn Betts, USDA NRCS



Along the Turkey River, corn is planted close to the river's edge. Part of the bank has eroded into the river.

¹ Every Iowa County has a Soil and Water Conservation District which is overseen by a board of five commissioners, plus Pottawattamie County has two districts. Commissioners are elected to serve for four years. The Commissioners are not paid for their services, but are reimbursed for expenses. Soil and Water Conservation Districts are responsible for conducting research into soil erosion and the prevention and control of erosion. The District staff disseminate the information to the farmers and tenants within the district. They can conduct demonstration projects. They have funds to disseminate for projects that reduce soil erosion, protect watersheds, and prevent flooding.

² The board is the State Soil Conservation and Water Quality Committee, nine people appointed by the governor.