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Sierra Club Releases Soil Report

Today, the Iowa Chapter of the Sierra Club released its report of restoring Iowa’s soils - “Soil: Grounding Us in Transformative Systemic Change”

Patti Naylor, Agriculture Committee Chair, pointed out, “To address the multiple crises that our biosphere faces, we need to advocate for comprehensive policies that will take us in the direction of restored ecosystems, farms with livestock and ecologically-sound crop rotations, economically secure farmers, and vibrant rural and urban communities. Soil is the foundation to work for systemic change.”

This report illustrates how all of the major environmental problems are connected and can be resolved by working on a major piece – soil health. Wally Taylor, Conservation Chair, stated, “Once you restore soil health, you begin solving other problems, including improving water quality, sequestering carbon, mitigating airborne greenhouse gases, reducing nutrient requirements, restoring stream buffers and wetlands, rejuvenating soil, reducing flooding, protecting crops during droughts, increasing soil fertility, reducing use of pesticides and fertilizers, restoring soil microbes, preventing soil erosion, and restoring wildlife habitat.”

Patti Naylor added, “Soil can ground us as we seek to transform our agriculture system to one in which ecology and nature are at the forefront, and the people who produce our farm products, now and in the future, are valued and respected.”

Carolyn Raffensperger, Vice Chair, commented, “A part of this discussion is the important concept of a Just Transition. This Just Transition is a vision of agriculture that focuses on ecologically-sound methods, diversified farms, cooperatives and food hubs, thriving rural communities, respect for the Commons, and a re-established social contract between farmers and non-farmers. This transition must not leave today’s farmers out of the picture. It must be as much about farmers as about farms. We need their skills and knowledge and leadership as we move toward this vision.”

Pam Mackey Taylor, Director, states, “With the loss of Iowa’s topsoil on farms across the state, Iowa farmers are reaching a point where they must restore soil health if they expect to continue to produce crops. All things are pointing to major changes in the crops that are raised and how they are raised. Now is the perfect time to begin the transition. Much of Iowa’s farmland will be
transferred to younger owners over the next 10 to 20 years. That also opens the door to transitioning to new farm policies and farming techniques.”

Among the recommendations in the report are:

1. Increasing funding for the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, at Iowa State University, so it can carry out its responsibilities in researching sustainable agriculture practices, soil health, improved water quality, and allowing farmers who engage in sustainable agriculture to make a profit.
2. Establishing a healthy soils advisor at the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship. The advisor and his or her staff would make policy decisions on improving Iowa’s soils. Additionally the advisor would educate farmers and landowners on techniques that would improve and maintain Iowa’s soils.
3. Developing an Agriculture Climate Adaptation Plan. The plan would serve as a guide to dealing with the adverse effects of climate change, avoiding and mitigating climate change, and benefiting from strategies such as carbon sinking.
4. Incenting farmers to develop water quality plans that will help Iowa make real progress on reducing the nitrogen and phosphorus in Iowa’s rivers, streams, and lakes.
5. Initiating anti-trust actions against the largest companies and other actions to make the markets more competitive. Iowa’s attorney general can initiate the anti-trust actions.
6. Establishing a moratorium on new CAFOs and expansion of existing CAFOs.
7. Developing maps of each farm which indicate areas that should be idled plus tools to educate the landowners.
8. Requiring buffers along every stream.
9. Providing adequate funding for projects to improve water quality in Iowa. Iowa has begun investing in practices that improve the levels of nutrients entering our water bodies, but the levels of investment are not nearly large enough to solve the problem. The projects that would be funded include installing stream buffers, bioreactors, and saturated buffers; planting cover crops; and installing grassed waterways and prairie strips.
10. Establishing numerical standards for nutrients for Iowa’s rivers, streams, and lakes, including a reasonable date for each water body to meet the standards.
11. Supporting programs that assist in building small, community-scale processing plants for fruits and vegetables.
12. Providing access to slaughterhouses for small-scale farmers who sustainably raise animals.
13. Creating local farmer-seller cooperatives so groups of farmers can collectively move their products to market, including storage, processing, transportation, and marketing services.
14. Creating local farmers markets where locally grown, sustainable products can be sold and purchased.
15. Providing preferences for local, sustainable foods when government institutions, such as schools and hospitals, purchase foods.
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