



## Iowa View: State has turned into a 'toilet' for industrial ag

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It's time for an Iowa reality check.

Led by the factory-farm lobby, we have all but swept the landscape clean of the Iowa your parents knew, sacrificing the heritage that once truly set Iowa apart. The result stinks — figuratively and literally.

“Family farm” once meant a fruitful homestead built on an ethic of hard work, a love of the land, a spirit of neighborliness and a reverence for nature. Today, “family farm” is a hallowed but hollow buzzword of the political spin doctors and is used to give legitimacy to a lie. It's the benign image masking land-use practices that, as Iowa environmental writer Bob Watson put it, “have made Iowa a toilet for industrial agriculture.”

It didn't have to happen. But proper conservation is inconvenient to the short-sighted objectives of industrial farming. Gov. Terry Branstad says we must not put teeth in conservation policies lest we hurt the farm family. A subservient Legislature appropriates another few million of your money for another of the endless studies that take the place of action.

At the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation's 2013 summer policy conference recently, President Craig Hill said that farmers, “as stewards of the land, [should] take a long, hard look at how we care for two of our most precious resources: soil and water.”

Yes, take a look — and wave it goodbye.

**Conservation is every bit as important** as Hill makes it sound. But “sound” is all it amounts to, unless we establish and enforce rules that the Farm Bureau solidly blocks.

We've had years of voluntary conservation — years of seeing our topsoil disappear, our rivers become poisoned. Our legislators continue to preach and pretend reverence for the family farm while bowing and scraping before the industrial-farm lobby — a small, but very rich, minority of Iowans. When politics is for sale, rich means rule.

Growth, usually synonymous with progress, changed the farm landscape (with the help, some contend, of the agricultural scientists who sought ways to increase profits through economies of size while ignoring ways to improve small-farm efficiency). The idea of 160-acres-and-independence disappeared, replaced by the 2,000-acre spread that swallowed up its neighbors. But conservation is as practical and as important on a 2,000-acre farm as on a quarter-section.

There are, of course, big farm operators who are also dedicated conservationists, doing their best to see that the farm they will pass to the next generation carries the same or more potential than it had when they took over. All of Iowa's dedicated conservationists should be acknowledged and rewarded.

But the painful reality is that too often, when size becomes paramount, conservation becomes a joke.

How come?

**Today, 62 percent of Iowa farmland** is farmed by renters. Realistically, they are far less likely to have either the financial or the personal investment in the land and its preservation that the true family farmer had. The land's owner, likely an urbanite, may be three or four generations removed from the ethic — or even the knowledge — of conservation.

Meanwhile, the same taxpayers whose water is polluted, whose air is fouled, whose health may be endangered by misuse of antibiotics in livestock, by ag chemicals and manure, pays billions to perpetuate the system. And the biggest payoffs go to the richest few. Nationwide, the largest 10 percent of subsidy recipients get 72 percent of the money.

Besides crop subsidies, there's the crop-insurance giveaway, which the Cato Institute, a bastion of conservatism, calls a "long-standing ripoff of American taxpayers."

That's because the insurance premiums paid by landowners cover just 30 percent of what they collect. You pay 70 percent.

Iowa is second only to Texas in farming the federal treasury. From 1995 to 2012, taxpayers gave Iowa farm owners \$24.9 billion, including \$16.4 billion in subsidies, \$4 billion in crop insurance, \$3.9 billion in conservation subsidies and \$646 million in disaster relief.

Ten percent of Iowa farms collected 59 percent of the money. Their average payment was 22 times as much as the average given those in the bottom 80 percent. Within that 80 percent are the 19 percent — the little guys — who got nothing.

But hey, we're a farm state, that's our livelihood and that's what Iowa is all about, right? Consider:

Farm work is the principal job of fewer than 5 percent of Iowa's work force.

**In 2010, less than 6 percent** of the total of all goods and services produced by Iowans came from farming. Add the billions brought in by ag-related industries, and the share is still less than one-fourth of the total.

But the politicians run the state as if farming was the end-all and be-all of our existence and as if that almighty 10 percent must be accommodated at all cost. Why?

Ask your legislator, particularly if your legislator supports voluntary conservation. Ask if your legislator was part of the huge majority that brought passage of the incredible, unconscionable ag-gag law, making it a crime to blow the whistle on mistreatment of factory-farm animals.

We're losing our topsoil, our clean water, our respect for our land, our heritage, our reputation. And maybe our common sense.

There's a way out of the toilet. It means governing to serve the best interests of all, not the handful whom your taxes have made rich.