

2009

Iowa's Water Planning History



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Following is a brief review of water planning efforts in Iowa. This is not an exhaustive list of all the planning efforts over the years that involved some aspect of water. Rather, it highlights some of the more significant events and efforts that were intended to address water issues on a comprehensive basis.

- **1936.** Water Resources Committee of the Iowa State Planning Board published series of reports on “water use and conservation” in six major drainage basins. Only known surviving copies are in the state library.
- **1949.** Iowa Natural Resources Council created upon recommendation of legislative study committee. Legislation charged INRC with the authority and duty to establish a comprehensive statewide program for the control, utilization and protection of the surface water and groundwater resources of the state. The legislation also recognized that the conservation of Iowa’s water resources by the “considered and proper use thereof” was of paramount importance to the welfare and prosperity of the people of the state.
- **1956 – 1959.** INRC published reports on the water resources and water problems in eight basins: Des Moines, Nishnabotna, Iowa-Cedar, Floyd-Big Sioux, Skunk, Southern Iowa, Northeastern Iowa, and Western Iowa. Reports looked at water supply, water use (waste disposal was considered under water use) and flood and sediment problems. Recommendations provided for data collection, development of surface and groundwater supplies, waste treatment (if not sufficient flow to avoid “pollution conditions”), and flood control.
- **1957.** Upon recommendation of a legislative study committee, INRC given authority to regulate water withdrawal and use and floodplain development based on a comprehensive plan. Statute required the INRC to make surveys and investigations of the water resources of the state and to formulate plans for the further development, protection and preservation of those water resources.
- **1965 – 1978.** Iowa Geological Survey published a series of Water Atlases that looked at groundwater and surface water resources (quantity as well as quality) in various geographical areas of Iowa (e.g., Central Iowa, East Central Iowa). Primary emphasis was on availability versus demand.
- **1970.** Six Conservancy Districts created by statute, district boundaries formed along major drainage basin divides (Northeast, Iowa-Cedar, Skunk, Des Moines, Western and Southern). The Conservancy Districts, later renamed Water Resources Districts, were given broad powers for comprehensive water resources planning and construction of facilities. Only one comprehensive plan was finalized and the authorizing legislation sunsetted in 1988. The lack of taxation powers for operating expenses and resistance from county-based Soil and Water Conservation Districts are often cited as the main two factors leading to the demise of these watershed-based districts.
- **1972 and 197(?)**. Publication of the Upper Mississippi (1972) and Missouri Comprehensive Basin Studies conducted under the auspices of the Upper Mississippi and Missouri River Basin Commissions that were authorized by the 1965 Water Resources Planning Act. Both basin studies were multi-volume reports that looked at various aspects of water in the respective basin states. Both recommended a continuing planning process to reassess and update the basin framework studies.

- **1975 – 1978.** Development of the “Water Plan ’78 Framework Study”. The study was supported in large part by federal funds available under Title III of the 1965 Water Resources Planning Act and involved approximately six dedicated INRC staff positions as well as involvement of various other state agencies such as the IGS, DEQ and Department of Soil Conservation. In addition to providing background information on Iowa’s water resources, the study looked at problems and needs and provided recommendations grouped by the following categories:
 - Water Quality
 - Water Supply and Use
 - Floodplain Management
 - Water-Oriented Outdoor Recreation, Fish and Wildlife
 - Water for Energy Production
 - Commercial and Recreational Navigation
 - Agriculture
 - Law and Government

The study was intended to provide a framework for further work (i.e., continuing planning) and specifically called for a 1980 update to look at the progress in implementing the ’78 plan. The called-for 1980 update was never prepared.

- **1983.** INRC was merged with DEQ to form a new Department of Water, Air and Waste Management. The 1982 legislation creating DWAWM eliminated the requirement for a comprehensive water plan and, instead, called for the following:
 - the assessment of water needs for all users at five intervals from 1985 through 2004 and the preparation of a general plan of water allocation considering the quantity and quality of water resources available to meet the needs of water users; and
 - the development and adoption of a floodplain mapping plan for the period 1986 through 2004 that considered flooding characteristics, existing and anticipated floodplain development, and the needs of local governments.
- **1985.** The 1985 State Water Plan was published. The ’85 water plan was not intended to be a comprehensive look at Iowa’s water resources. Instead, it focused on water availability and use as required by legislation passed in 1982. Specific recommendations for legislative changes including water conservation provisions, a priority system, and a program for well interference compensation were provided as well as proposed legislation that would implement such measures. Many of the recommendations were adopted by the 1985 General Assembly. The plan also called for a comprehensive groundwater protection strategy.
- **1985.** Legislation passed that called for the development of a groundwater protection strategy. Legislation also created a new Department of Natural Resources (effective July ’86) by combining the DWAWM, Iowa Geological Survey, Energy Policy Council and Conservation Commission.
- **1986.** Floodplain mapping plan developed to satisfy the requirements of the 1982 legislation that created DWAWM. The plan laid out a process for mapping floodplains in the state and the approximate costs thereof. No funds have ever been allocated for floodplain mapping.

- **1987.** Publication of the Iowa Groundwater Protection Strategy. The strategy recommended a policy of “non-degradation” and contained a number of specific recommendations regarding abandoned wells, agricultural drainage wells, uncontrolled sites, landfills, underground storage tanks, and pesticides. Many of these recommendations were incorporated into the 1987 Groundwater Protection Act.
- **1996.** Publication of the 1996 Iowa State Water Plan by Iowa State University's Office of Social and Economic Trend Analysis. The study was intended to identify options for addressing water quantity and quality problems in areas under 10,000 population. Federal funds were used and there was relatively little DNR staff involvement in the effort. The resulting recommendations were very general in nature and included such things as technical assistance, ongoing planning, etc.
- **1998.** Publication of the Iowa Water Quality Action Plan. The Action Plan was the result of a year-long process initiated by the Iowa Environmental Council. This effort involved a broad cross section of people from the public and private sectors in various working groups with recommendations being finalized in a November 1997 meeting. The recommendations, expressed as goals and implementation strategies were fairly broad and general (e.g., “Goal 4: Comprehensive surface water protections must be explicitly required and carried out.”)
- **2001.** Publication of the Iowa Watershed Task Force Report. As part of 1999 legislation creating a watershed protection program under the Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, a watershed task force was created with the intent of developing a framework for enhanced cooperation and coordination for multi-objective, watershed-based efforts. The 2001 report was their final report to the General Assembly. The goals and recommendations were general in nature and focused on promoting and strengthening voluntary watershed-based projects for water resources protection. The task force also recommended the formation of a coordinating council and conducting a statewide needs assessment. The general nature of the recommendations (e.g, strengthen, coordinate, etc.) make it hard to assess the success of these recommendations but relatively few, if any, specific actions were taken or changes made as a result of the recommendations.

2003. Water Quality Summit. In his 2003 Condition of the State Report, Governor Vilsack highlighted water quality as an area of interest and established a goal no impaired waters by 2010. He also called for a statewide summit to develop a plan for restoring our waters. Summit was held on November 24, 2003 and was the culmination of months of workgroup meetings and public input. The workgroups were organized by the following categories:

- Nutrients
- Current programs, resources and deployment
- Point source reduction
- Nonpoint source reduction
- Impaired waters restoration

Each workgroup produced a separate report with recommendations that ranged from the broad and general to fairly specific; over 100 recommendations in total. These separate reports and recommendations were never synthesized into a final report and no further action was taken by the Governor's office. Other than activities that were essentially underway at the time, few, if any, of the Summit recommendations have never been acted upon or revisited.

- **2007.** Watershed Quality Planning Task Force, Final Report. 2006 legislation established a watershed quality planning task force to provide recommendations for a “voluntary statewide water quality program” designed to accomplish goals as outlined in the legislation (e.g., “Improving water quality and optimizing the costs of voluntarily achieving and maintaining water quality standards.”) The Task Force’s report contained 5 broad recommendations, none of which directly addressed the legislative charges. Several of these recommendations have been incorporated into 2008 legislation (e.g, formation of a water resources coordinating council chaired by the Governor, watershed-based assessments).

Since 1978 when the Water Plan '78 was published, there have been no truly comprehensive water planning efforts initiated. The '85 Water Plan and the '87 Groundwater Protection Strategy were significant efforts that resulted in real advancements in water resource protection but were not truly comprehensive in nature. Other efforts, such as the Section 208 (CWA) plans, the 2000 Nonpoint Source Management Plan, and various conservation and recreation planning efforts that involve various aspects of water have been completed but, like the '85 Water Plan, were not comprehensive in nature.