



HARKIN ON WELLNESS REPORT 2025

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Acknowledgments:

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Agenda

9:00 a.m.– 9:10 a.m.
9:10 a.m.– 10:00 a.m.
10:10 a.m.– 11:30 a.m.
11:30 a.m.– 12:20 p.m.
12:20 p.m.– 1:10 p.m.
1:20 p.m.– 2:30 p.m.
2:40 p.m.– 4:00 p.m.
4:00 p.m.– 4:25 p.m.
4:25 p.m.– 4:30 p.m.

Wednesday, April 16, 2025

Parents Hall, Olmsted Center at Drake University, Des Moines, IA

Opening Remarks

Morning Keynote “The Right to Clean Water”

Jim Larew, Attorney at Law, Legal Counsel for Driftless Water Defenders

Panel 1: Agriculture, Water, and Public Health Across the United States

Rick Hansen, Minnesota State Representative
Mary Ward, NIH (retired)
Larry Baldwin, Waterkeepers
Lara Yraceburu, Attorney at Law

Lunch Break

Afternoon Keynote

Danielle Nierenberg, President, Food Tank

Designee Awards and Presentations

Panel 2: Agriculture, Water and Public Health in Iowa

Elizabeth Garst, Whiterock Conservancy
Lu Liu, Iowa State University
Katie Garvey, Environmental Law and Policy Center
Clare Hruby, Drake University
Wally Taylor, Iowa Sierra Club

Announcing the Understanding Cancer in Iowa Project

in collaboration with Iowa Environmental Council

Closing Remarks

**HARKIN ON
WELLNESS
SYMPOSIUM** 2025



Foreward

Senator Tom Harkin

Access to clean and safe drinking water should be a right of all Americans. But unfortunately, waterways around the country are polluted with dangerous chemicals that can cause serious health concerns. Here in Iowa, hundreds of waterways are considered impaired by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency due to the amount of nitrates. Our state currently has the second-highest cancer rate in the country, and the fastest-growing rate of new cancers. Most experts believe this is directly impacted by elevated levels of nitrates in our water.

With the ongoing threat of climate change, the rapid concentration of factory farming, and increased agricultural activity, things are only going to get worse. It's time we reexamine local and national water quality strategies and make changes that prioritize public health.

Introduction

Clean water is fundamental to public health and environmental sustainability and is increasingly under threat from climate change and other human-caused risks. Community-based initiatives that protect and improve water quality have been shown to have lasting, positive impacts on both human and environmental health. Furthermore, programs that engage communities in hands-on water quality improvement and conservation can foster environmental stewardship that benefits current and future generations.

For this reason, the 2025 Harkin On Wellness Symposium is focused on The Future of Clean Water. This year's theme was chosen to highlight and synthesize the progress being made around the country in protecting and improving water quality through community engagement, environmental education, watershed protection, water conservation initiatives, and innovative water quality monitoring programs.

The theme of this year's Harkin On Wellness Symposium is "The Future of Clean Water" and will showcase the creative work being done across the country by nonprofit organizations, environmental groups, and community organizations to protect this vital resource. We hope the organizations highlighted in this report will provide inspiration to implement initiatives to preserve and improve water quality in your own communities.

Senator Tom Harkin (retired)



It is the goal of the Harkin on Wellness Report to highlight the top wellness and nutrition organizations and initiatives in the country that have been able to make a large impact through effective policy, system, and environmental change. We encourage others to use this as a tool to build partnerships and create sustainable, cross-sector coalitions within their own community and beyond.



Photo above courtesy of the Environmental Law & Policy Center.

Methodology

In the Fall of 2024, we began the search for top wellness and nutrition initiatives from across the United States. The call for submissions was distributed nationwide through professional organizations, public agencies, and more. We asked that all submissions highlight how their initiative or program is working to preserve clean water.

We received numerous submissions which were reviewed by a committee to narrow down the applicant field. The review process included an analysis of each program that helped identify a series of elements necessary to enhance the quality, acceptability, and impact of health programming.

Submissions were rated on relevancy, adaptability, acceptance, implementation, reach, and cost (modified RE-AIM framework). For this report, we took special care to consider the following questions when selecting the top initiatives:

1. How has your organization worked to preserve clean water?
2. What is the reach of your program (how many people has it, or can it impact?).
3. How is your program or initiative funded?
4. What outcomes (health, economic, environmental, and/or social) has your program or initiative had?

Based on the responses from the external committee, we decided to highlight groups that were directly impacting the impact of agricultural practices on the Mississippi Watershed. A total of 6 programs were selected as innovative examples that highlight a range of approaches for making a difference.



Photo above courtesy of Driftless Water Defenders.



Photo above courtesy of Grassroots Organizing Western Wisconsin.

2025 Harkin On Wellness Designees

Center for Rural Affairs, Iowa Watershed Management Authorities— Nevada, Iowa

Driftless Water Defenders— Iowa City, Iowa

Environmental Law & Policy Center— Des Moines, Iowa

Grassroots Organizing Western Wisconsin (GROWW)— Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

Iowa Environmental Council, Iowa Water Watch— Des Moines, Iowa

Iowa Wildlife Federation— Des Moines, Iowa

Center for Rural Affairs, Iowa Watershed Management Authorities

At the Center for Rural Affairs, we work to support Iowa's Watershed Management Authorities (WMAs) at all stages of their development and project implementation. WMAs are cooperative agreements between local leaders within a watershed, specifically cities, counties, and soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs). The unique WMA model organizes efforts along watershed boundaries, not political boundaries, and puts local leaders in the driver's seat to advance priorities related to water quality and flood resiliency. We work alongside WMAs to champion their successes—from cover crops to wetland protection and restoration to urban stormwater projects—and their positive impacts on rural Iowa and our natural resources.

Since 1973, Center for Rural Affairs has been a leading force engaging people to build a better rural future. Its policy work spans the nation and is focused in Nebraska, Iowa, South Dakota, and Minnesota and its on-the-ground work with communities and farmers takes place in Iowa and Nebraska. Center for Rural Affairs is a nonprofit, mission-driven leader focusing on underserved communities, primarily to rural, Latino, Native, and other communities that mainstream finance doesn't traditionally reach, and is a Community Development Financial Institute, certified by the U.S. Treasury.



Photo above courtesy of Center for Rural Affairs.

Photo below courtesy of Center for Rural Affairs.



Driftless Water Defenders

Driftless Water Defenders (DWD) is a non-profit Iowa environmental law and advocacy organization focused on reducing farm-related water pollution and mitigating threats to public health caused by such pollution in the Driftless Area of northeast Iowa and statewide. In pursuit of its mission, Driftless Water Defenders is intent on changing public policy, engaging citizens, and, when necessary, litigating matters to protect and enhance Iowans' access to clean water for personal, business, and recreational purposes.

Driftless Water Defenders has established a comprehensive program of litigation, public engagement, and communications. DWD has successfully appealed an administrative decision made by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources under which a water use permit renewal had been issued to Supreme Beef, a large cattle feeding operation located at the head of Bloody Run Creek, one of Iowa's most pristine water sources. DWD followed the decision—which invalidated the water use permit's issuance-- with a citizen complaint to compel the DNR to follow the state water use law and evaluate Supreme Beef's water use permit application for its effect on water quality, downstream users, and the environment.

Driftless Water Defenders organized citizen opposition and filed two lawsuits to challenge the construction of manure digesters in rural Winneshiek County. In December 2024, Driftless Water Defenders issued to Agri Star Meat & Poultry, LLC, and Agri Star General, Inc., (Agri Star) a Notice of Violations and Intent to Sue under the Clean Water Act (CWA). Most recently, DWD has proposed language for a

new amendment to Iowa's constitution which, if adopted by Iowans in future years, will protect Iowans' fundamental right to access clean air and clean water and will also impose an affirmative duty on Iowa government to protect the state's natural resources under the public trust doctrine.



Photos above courtesy of Driftless Water Defenders.

The Environmental Law & Policy Center

The Environmental Law & Policy Center is the Midwest's leading environmental legal advocacy organization, driving transformational policy changes with national impacts. ELPC's near term clean water efforts focus on two critical clean water issues:

- ELPC will develop a report on the environmental impacts of Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) in the state. There has not been a recent Iowa CAFO report connecting the impacts of CAFOs to the policy and legal landscape. This report will be based on the framework ELPC used for a similar report in Michigan. A report on CAFOs' environmental impacts in Iowa would support the existing work being done on the issue as well as identify new strategies to pursue with the reasons to support those strategies.

- ELPC attorneys are also representing the Iowa Farmers Union in the "Swampbuster" lawsuit (CTM Holdings, LLC v. U.S. Department of Agriculture) in Iowa District Court. ELPC, along with its partners, will defend longstanding "Swampbuster" Farm Bill provisions from the plaintiff's effort to deem the program unconstitutional. Swampbuster has protected wetlands, safeguarded clean water, and supported farmers in Iowa and nationwide for nearly four decades. This program is one of the few remaining wetland protection mechanisms in states like Iowa.



Photo above courtesy of the Environmental Law & Policy Center.

Grassroots Organizing Western Wisconsin (GROWW)

GROWW is a grassroots organization that has been working in Western Wisconsin since 2019 to create the change we need so everyone in our communities can make ends meet, live with dignity, and have a voice in shaping the decisions that impact us. We accomplish this by connecting with and listening to the community. We have been able to create a grassroots network of volunteer leaders working alongside

our paid staff to make our rural communities better by working on a variety of issue campaigns throughout our organization's history.

In late 2022, community members in and around the Town of Salem in Pierce County, WI heard of news of a 1,700 cow factory farm being sold to Breeze Dairy Group. That factory, Ridge Breeze Dairy, soon made clear their intentions to expand to 6,500 cows. This factory is situated in a part of the state that is highly susceptible to groundwater contamination, with about 15% of private wells having high nitrates, which can lead to sickness or even cancer in the long-term.

Residents in the area were put in touch with GROWW in 2023 and we immediately started organizing together to protect and preserve water quality in Pierce County, WI by calling for stronger regulations on Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs). We initially called for a moratorium on CAFO expansions in the county. While we were not successful in getting a moratorium, we have continued to organize hundreds of residents and volunteers across Western Wisconsin to work together to protect our water.



Photos above courtesy of Grassroots Organizing Western Wisconsin.

Iowa Environmental Council, Iowa Water Watch

For 30 years, the Iowa Environmental Council has been the largest environmental coalition in the state, leading the way in addressing urgent concerns impacting people and the planet. IEC is a nonpartisan alliance of diverse organizations and individuals working together to protect and preserve Iowa's environment.

At its founding, IEC's main focus was water quality and land stewardship. In 2005, it meant becoming a leader in moving Iowa toward a clean energy future. Both of those issue areas continue to fit within IEC's scope today. Additionally, those issue areas cannot be addressed without addressing the urgent issues of climate change and environmental justice. Both climate change and environmental justice are root causes of the challenges surrounding water quality and land stewardship and continue the push for a 100% clean energy future.

The fight for clean water was central to IEC's founding and it remains a focus today. Through education, outreach, advocacy, regulatory, legal, and policy change work, IEC aims to increase awareness and improve water quality in Iowa. Iowa Water Watch, a resource of Iowa Environmental Council, makes water monitoring data more accessible and easier to understand. Thousands of Iowans use this information to make more informed decisions about how to recreate in Iowa waterways and how to advocate for positive change."



Photo above courtesy of Iowa Environmental Council.

Photo below courtesy of Iowa Environmental Council.



Iowa Wildlife Federation

The Iowa Wildlife Federation (IWF) is dedicated to conserving Iowa's wildlife through a variety of impactful programs. Their efforts span across multiple initiatives aimed at educating the public, restoring habitats, and improving the quality of life for both wildlife and local communities. One such program is the Certified Wildlife Habitat®, which encourages individuals and organizations to transform their outdoor spaces into havens for local wildlife. By planting pollinator-friendly plants and creating spaces for creatures like hummingbirds and butterflies, participants contribute to habitat conservation while enhancing the beauty and functionality of their own properties. This program not only supports Iowa's biodiversity but also empowers the public with the tools and resources needed to make a difference. Additionally, the IWF supports the School of the Wild program, which partners with local schools to immerse students in nature, teaching them about wildlife, ecosystems, and environmental stewardship through hands-on experiences.

In addition to these educational programs, the IWF is involved in significant conservation efforts through the USDA Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). This initiative focuses on creating essential wildlife habitat corridors on Iowa's working lands, including prairies, pollinator habitats, and wetlands. These corridors help mitigate the impact of intensive agricultural practices, offering critical space for wildlife and pollinators while enhancing the productivity and resilience of Iowa's farmland. As part of this effort, IWF also provides the opportunity for farmers to earn a Farmland Habitat Certification, recognizing their contributions to conservation on agricultural lands. However, due to delays in

federal funding, the full implementation of these projects has been hindered.

Looking to the future, the Iowa Wildlife Federation is launching the Farmer-Led Iowa Wildlife Project, an ambitious initiative focused on improving soil health and water quality in the Gulf of Mexico Watershed. This project utilizes innovative conservation practices, including prairie strips and saturated buffer systems, to reduce nutrient runoff and enhance wildlife habitat. By engaging farmers through peer networks, demonstration projects, and training, the program aims to combine agricultural productivity with environmental sustainability. The project also explores creative solutions like transforming drainage ditches into vegetative swales, which manage water flow while also providing habitat for pollinators and wildlife. Through this initiative, IWF is working to build a more resilient agricultural landscape that integrates biodiversity with water management, benefiting both Iowa's ecosystems and farming communities.



Photos above courtesy of Iowa Wildlife Federation.

Notes

The 2025 Harkin on Wellness Symposium was made possible due to the support of our generous sponsors!

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Photo above courtesy of the Environmental Law & Policy Center.

About the Harkin on Wellness Symposium

The Harkin on Wellness (HOW) Symposium is an annual gathering to discuss timely topics associated with wellness and nutrition. Each year, the HOW Symposium gathers practitioners, policymakers, students, educators, and members of the public for an engaging and educational event.

The Harkin Institute and Drake University

The Harkin Institute for Public Policy & Citizen Engagement serves as a venue and catalyst for dynamic non-partisan research, learning, and outreach to promote understanding of the policy issues to which Senator Tom Harkin devoted his career.

The Harkin Institute is located at Drake University. Established in 1881, Drake is recognized as one of the finest institutions of higher learning in the Midwest. A mid-sized, private university in Des Moines, Iowa, Drake offers the benefits and resources of a larger institution along with the advantages of intimate class sizes and close personal relationships.

Drake's mission is to provide an exceptional learning environment that prepares students for meaningful personal lives, professional accomplishments, and responsible global citizenship. The Drake experience is distinguished by collaborative learning among students, faculty, and staff and by the integration of the liberal arts and sciences with professional preparation. Our inspiration is that together we transform lives and strengthen communities.