

CURRENTS OF CHANGE

An outreach toolkit for the Central Iowa Source Water Resource Assessment (CISWRA) report

Toolkit prepared by the The Harkin Institute and the Iowa Environmental Council



THE WHY

Iowans are concerned about their water and eager for more information and for opportunities to get involved. The team of scientists behind the CISWRA report did an incredible job presenting the results of their work before a crowd of 600 at Drake University in August 2025. Sharing the video of that discussion is a great way to educate more people about the nuts and bolts of Iowa's water crisis. This toolkit provides wrap-around discussions, reflections, and actions to help build connections around this issue, to help people understand their own "why" when it comes to their concerns about water, and to provide an entry point into action for people who may be newer to speaking out on issues. It is also an opportunity, for those who are willing, to begin a wave of communication to policymakers and the press about the specific and personal ways the water crisis is affecting people all over the state.

THE SPACE

This format can work for a group and space of almost any size, from a crew of friends in your own living room, a meeting of your student organization, book club, church group, or your local business networking group. We encourage you to make sure people have a surface to write on and that the space allows for conversations. We recommend avoiding theater-type spaces and instead looking for a location with a few tables or couches where folks can gather around and talk.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- Technology for showing the CISWRA Currents of Change report video (TV or laptop)
- Several copies of the action steps outlined in the Currents of Change report (you may also want to encourage participants to read and/or bring copies of these action steps with them. They are on pages 223-227 of the report.)
- 1 pen or pencil for each participant
- 2 pieces of paper for each participant
- 1-2 envelopes for each participant
- 1-2 postage stamps for each participant

LINKS and RESOURCES (click each link to access)

- [Full Report: Currents of Change: Central Iowa Source Water Resource Assessment](#)
- [Executive Summary: Currents of Change: Central Iowa Source Water Resource Assessment](#)
- [Link to shortened video from CISWRA presentation at Drake University](#)

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Agenda, Script, and Discussion Questions



Welcome and Introductions (10-15 minutes)

Start with an invitation to share and open up about people's personal connections to Iowa's waterways. Consider asking each person to introduce themselves and answer a question such as:

- What is your earliest or most distinct memory around water?
- What is your favorite Iowa water body and why?



Introduction to the Video (5-10 minutes)

We suggest laying the following foundational points with the group:

- This report was created by 16 scientists who spent more than 4,000 hours analyzing the land that drains into the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers as they flow through Iowa (the "watersheds").¹
- These watersheds are the source of drinking water for the more than 600,000 Iowans served by Des Moines Water Works² — nearly 20% of the total population of Iowa, in addition to people served by other utilities and drinking from private wells in both watersheds.
- Although the two watersheds studied in the CISWRA project are upstream of the Des Moines metro, the landscape, pollutants, and policies likely do not differ too much from other watersheds across Iowa. In fact, these issues might be even more urgent in other parts of Iowa if they lack the monitoring systems of Central Iowa. People who rely on private wells for their drinking water may also be more impacted and at higher risk, because there are no well-testing requirements in Iowa.
- A key finding of the Currents of Change report is that runoff from agricultural operations is responsible for the large majority of pollution in the rivers. High nitrate pollution levels in particular are linked to fertilizer and manure running into the rivers.³
- This summer, nitrate pollution was so high in the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers, coupled with peak demand, that drinking water utilities in central Iowa could not supply enough clean water to the region. Lawn watering was banned in central Iowa and splash pads and other water recreation was restricted.^{4,5}
- The watering ban applied to the Cities of Ankeny, Clive, Des Moines, Grimes, Johnston, Norwalk, Polk City, Urbandale, Waukee, Alleman, Berwick, Bondurant, Cumming, Pleasant Hill, Runnells, Windsor Heights and West Des Moines along with customers of Xenia Rural Water and Warren Rural Water.⁶
- This is especially frustrating because Des Moines Water Works already has one of the largest and most advanced nitrate removal systems in the world, and has been proactively investing for decades in technology to combat nitrate pollution.⁷
- Drinking water utilities must adhere to regulatory standards for nitrate in finished drinking water. Water with high nitrate levels is not safe to drink. It is linked to low blood oxygen in infants (blue baby syndrome), and emerging research ties these chemicals to birth defects, thyroid disease, and cancer.⁸
- Iowa has the second-highest incidence of new cancers in the United States and the fastest-rising rate. We are one of only two states in the U.S. where cancer rates are rising instead of falling.⁹
- In 2023, the Iowa Legislature eliminated funding for the statewide water quality monitoring network at the University of Iowa. 80% of the monitors will be removed in 2026 if the funding is not restored. Without this monitoring, we will simply not even know how much pollution is in our water.¹⁰

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View the CISWRA Presentation Video (50 minutes)



[Click here to access the video.](#)



Discussion (20 minutes)

Follow up the viewing with deeper discussion. Depending on the size of the gathering, consider breaking into smaller discussion groups of no more than eight people per group to allow for everyone to be heard. Make sure each person has a piece of paper and a writing utensil. Ask people to start by taking five minutes to reflect in writing upon these three questions:

1. What stood out to you from the presentation?
2. When you think about what part really stood out, why did that hit home for you personally? Is there a person, place, value, or other reason why that seems particularly important to you?
3. How do you think this report is relevant to people in your community? How does access to good information from water monitoring connect with these community issues and your own personal values?

After five minutes, bring folks back to the group or small groups and ask them to share their answers with one another. This discussion should take about 15 minutes.



Taking Action (15-20 minutes)

We offer two options for the next portion to address varying levels of comfort with taking action to influence policy versus considering community or personal-level actions.

OPTION 1: INFLUENCING POLICYMAKING

Come back together if you've broken into smaller groups for discussion. Distribute note cards or blank paper and a pen or pencil to each person. Ask people to write a letter to a state or local elected official or a letter to the editor about Iowa's water quality crisis that includes:

1. Who they are and where they live.
2. Why water quality matters to them — the more they can speak to the values and personal connections, the better.
3. A strong urging to act to restore safe and affordable water in our state by fully funding Iowa's water monitoring network as a first step in reducing pollution in Iowa water.

For letters to elected officials: It may be useful to have envelopes available and a computer to help people look up their state legislator by clicking [here](#) (or visiting legis.iowa.gov/legislators/find). If hosts can offer to stamp and send letters, that will likely improve the rate of submission, but that is not always an affordable option. Consider asking a co-host to help provide materials such as stamps or simply request people put letters in the mail when they get home.

For letters to the editor: Check your local newspaper's website for letter word-count limits and submission guidelines.

OPTION 2: DISCUSSING SOLUTIONS

Based upon the "Local/Individual Actions" section of the [CISWRA report](#) (pages 223-227) what are three things you could do to encourage individuals and local policy makers to address water quality problems in Iowa?

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Final Steps!

Make sure your guests stay in the loop with water quality updates! Invite them to sign up for emails from The Harkin Institute and the Iowa Environmental Council. Visit the links or scan the QR codes to be added to each list.

Sign up for CISWRA news and alerts from The Harkin Institute:
<https://signup.e2ma.net/signup/2016662/1757795/>



Sign up for emails from the Iowa Environmental Council: iaenvironment.org/email



Footnotes and Sources

1. CISWRA Currents of Change Report Executive Summary, page 1,
https://www.polkcountyiowa.gov/media/tywbfnjc/ciswra-currents-of-change_final-executive-summary_jun272025.pdf.
2. Central Iowa Waterworks Website. <https://www.ciww.gov/>.
3. CISWRA Currents of Change Report, page 25,
https://www.polkcountyiowa.gov/media/lixlchbz/ciswra-currents-of-change_final-scientific-assessment-of-source-water-research-report_jun272025.pdf.
4. <https://www.kcci.com/article/des-moines-reduces-hours-at-spraygrounds-to-help-conserve-water/65038397>
5. <https://www.ciww.gov/news-1/ciww-issues-lawn-watering-ban-effective-immediately>
6. <https://www.ciww.gov/news-1/ciww-issues-lawn-watering-ban-effective-immediately>
7. <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/2017/05/25/water-works-plans-15-million-expanded-nitrate-facility/336648001/>
8. Nitrate in Drinking Water: A Public Health Concern for All Iowans, Iowa Environmental Council, May 2024, https://www.iaenvironment.org/webres/File/IEC_Nitrate_in_Drinking_Water_2024FINAL.pdf.
9. "Cancer in Iowa 2025", Iowa Cancer Registry, <https://shri.public-health.uiowa.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/cancer-in-iowa-2025.pdf>
10. <https://www.thegazette.com/environment-nature/iowa-is-at-risk-of-losing-most-of-its-water-quality-sensors-heres-why-that-matters/>