

# Clean water champion

## 'Optimist' Heathcote retires from environmental council

BY PERRY BEEMAN, Managing Editor

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Susan Heathcote calls herself an optimist.

That would be an understatement.

She has spent more than 22 years as the nonprofit Iowa Environmental Council's chief water policy staffer, arguing in a heavily agricultural state that something needs to be done to rein in fertilizer runoff from crop fields, including hog manure from a growing collection of confinements in a state that is the nation's top producer of hogs and corn.

She often has been the policy wonk at a table of people who tended to have more political interests, trying to work with but sometimes opposing one of the state's most powerful lobbies — farm groups. The council is an organization of groups and individuals committed to working on environmental issues.

But as Heathcote shifted into retirement March 23, she still held hope that there would be some breakthrough on water quality work beyond this year's legislative bill that shifted money from other programs to feed conservation projects for a while.

She vowed to work as a volunteer to push the state's goal of cleaning water so that a person standing in waist-deep water could see their toes a few feet under water. (In the Caribbean Sea, by comparison, divers can see a fish that is 200 feet away.)

We interviewed Heathcote, a onetime Mobil Oil geologist, about her thoughts on the environmental movement in Iowa, future challenges and a possible run for office.

**Q: You said you still hope a sales tax increase to pay for outdoor recreation and conservation projects could slip into a broader deal on tax reform this session. Why has it been so hard to fill the Natural Resources and Outdoor Trust Fund, overwhelmingly approved by voters in 2010? [The idea was to raise the sales tax to provide \$150 million a year to the fund, but lawmakers have declined to approve the increase.]**

A: There is a disconnect, I think, between the political leadership and the public. I think as soon as there is a change in government leadership, a lot will happen very quickly.

I am looking for political change. I think we need a political environment that is more supportive of the priorities that I think Iowans hold. I think water quality and outdoor recreation and our natural resources are valued by Iowans.

Every time they poll on the [Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund], it keeps going up. There is a disconnect right now between the leadership and the public. As soon as there is a change in government and leadership, I think a lot will happen very quickly.

I do think there is a chance for the sales tax this year as part of the property tax relief discussion.

**Q: You have considered many issues thoroughly. Would you run for office?**

A: I haven't made those decisions, but I am interested. I think that when I see the barriers and the politics, I really do feel like we need more people willing to step up and be leaders. So, yes, that is something I'm thinking about. I haven't held elective office, and I wouldn't move to do it, but I might consider the soil and water commission or the county conservation board. If there were an opportunity in my district, I would have to seriously consider that. I would want to be prepared.

Not right away. Two years, four years down the road, I might be interested. There is more and more diversity needed at every level of government. We are already seeing that happen. I think we will make better decisions when we have more of the public represented at the policy table.



**Q: How did your work at the council get started?**

A: The ag drainage well [closure] bill passed in 1996, my first year with the council. Your story [Beeman worked for the Des Moines Register at that time] said it was the only environmental success that year and it only passed because Susan Heathcote was working in the basement of a suburban [Brenton] bank. It sounded like we were a subversive organization [laughs]. [The council now is in a nice office building near the Capitol.] It was a remarkable thing to have happen — a new organization. The council had been formed a year before.

My husband and I were among the first members of the council [which was formed by community leader Buz Brenton and others to add research and policy work to the environmental movement, and to encourage collaboration].

We had moved back to Iowa in 1990. We had been in Colorado and California and Texas since we graduated from college. There wasn't a lot going on [in the environmental movement in Iowa] at that time. I saw an ad in the paper [for the Environmental Council job]. I decided to apply. I really wanted to do it. [Her husband, Rich, laughed and warned her that her nonprofit pay might not rival what oil companies had paid her for geology work.]

**Q: What would change Iowa's path on water quality?**

A: If farmers want the federal subsidies, they should have to be in compliance on conservation measures. If you want to forgo your subsidy payments, you wouldn't have to do it. I really believe you need some flexibility in the conservation plans. It's not one size fits all.

**Q: What was the biggest improvement in water quality in your time at the council?**

A: When we got the Clean Water Act fully implemented and protected aquatic life and recreational uses [of waterways]. We had to threaten a petition [to have the federal government intervene].

**Q: Will you remain active on environmental issues?**

A: I plan to continue working with the Iowa Environmental Council as a volunteer. I am on the board of Iowa Rivers Revival. Rivers were kind of my first love. I am very active with the Raccoon River Association. It's my drinking water. It's right here. I need to be engaged. The Iowa Environmental Council is such an important part because we work on policy.

We don't have the expectation of conservation responsibilities in Iowa. The state has an interest in protecting our fertile farmland in Iowa. We are an agricultural state. We have to think about, do we get to use this up and mine it away? Or do we want to leave fertile soil for our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren?

**Q: What was your reaction to the bill on water quality funding this year?**

A: It wasn't the trust fund. It isn't forever. It is not constitutionally protected. The Legislature could take that money back next year. We need to have the trust fund. It is meant to ensure there is a steady stream of resources.

**Q: Was the Des Moines Water Works' federal lawsuit against drainage districts in northwest Iowa, now dismissed, a positive or negative in the long run as far as getting improvements in water quality?**

A: That's a good question. In the long run, I would say it's a positive because it educated people locally and nationally. It showed people that with this big watershed, what happened a long way away affected our drinking water in Des Moines. In the short term, it was negative.

**Q: What is next?**

A: I think we need to do what Minnesota is doing and look at what is in the best interests of the public. What can we do to raise the bar on conservation across the state on all the farms? We can do a lot without really having a major economic impact. We may have to invest on the front end on planning of conservation practices, but long term, I think it will benefit our farmers. We'll have healthier, better-managed farms. We are going to protect our soil. We are probably going to reduce our risk from variable weather, which we are seeing more of extreme events. Soil conservation helps with that. It will be in the best interests of everybody. Then we could take our public resources to invest in targeted areas. We need to [reduce runoff] to help Iowa water quality first. It would benefit our lakes and our streams in Iowa for aquatic life and for recreation. Then we will see more people rallying around conservation projects.

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**'97 water plan still relevant**

In 1997, Susan Heathcote and her colleagues met with leaders from conservation, agriculture and environmental groups and

business to develop the Iowa Water Quality Action Plan, published in 1998. These key themes frame issues that still are prominent today:

- Develop better data on existing water quality.
- Include citizens, communities and businesses in strategies at a watershed level.
- Develop better leadership and a clear message that pollution won't be tolerated.
- Provide more information to the public about water quality problems.
- Find long-term sustainable funding for conservation and other efforts that will reduce pollution.