

Don't blame farmers for bad water (Detroit News 3/31)

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A recent study by the University of Michigan seems more focused on drawing notoriety for its authors and the fringe groups promoting it than contributing to a productive water quality discussion.

The study ignores the progress made by farmers and technology used in the industry to use fertilizer in the best ways possible, while protecting the environment.

The newest data the study looked at is more than 15 years old; it was compiled between 1987 and 2001. That alone is troubling to those of us in agriculture who have reduced phosphorus fertilizer applications across the board, including by more than 40 percent in critical areas, over the past decade — but this study didn't even look at that data released by the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Because it uses such old data, the study ignores nearly every technological advancement used today on Michigan farms. From advanced soil testing to variable rate fertilizer application and beyond, this study doesn't consider advances that help farmers put fertilizer only where it is needed to grow a crop.

The study ignores the fact that permits are now required for large livestock operations, which wasn't the case 15 years ago, as well as voluntary practices such as the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program that provides growers with incentives to use best industry practices.

It wrongly assumes that all fertilizer is applied in the fall, which couldn't be further from the truth. Michigan farmers embrace best practices such as the 4R program, pinpointing nutrient application and timing to optimize results and protect water quality.

While the report authors state an aim to create "policy relevant land management scenarios," the scenarios they've created in this instance are unrealistic to farm families and rural communities. The study suggests that tens of thousands of acres of productive agricultural land be taken out of production completely, or planted to a crop for which there is no market. This does not contribute to a relevant policy discussion.

Finally, the study suggests that more than one million acres of farmland incorporate a variety of conservation practices. But Michigan farmers are already leading the way in the use of many of these advanced practices, such as no-till, filter strips and sod waterways. The study provides no data showing why the practices would further curb nutrient losses.

We've long acknowledged that agriculture, along with many other factors, play a role in water quality issues. Our organization has called for productive dialogue and real solutions on this issue — and it's disappointing to see a study from a respected institution promoting unrealistic ideas based on outdated information.

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