



SAVE OUR STREAMS

IZAACK WALTON LEAGUE OF AMERICA

LETTER TO THE EDITOR & OP-ED GUIDE



LETTER TO THE EDITOR & OP-ED GUIDE

Most newspapers include “Op-Ed” and “Letters to the Editor” sections, which give readers a platform to share their views and respond to current events in a public forum. These editorial placements are powerful educational and advocacy tools, and they are accessible to all of us!

Why Write an Op-Ed or Letter to the Editor?

Op-eds and letters to the editor provide an opportunity for individuals to educate and engage with other community members about the issues they find important. They allow us to elevate ideas and points of view in a public forum and reach a larger and more diverse audience than we might reach with other forms of communication (for instance, a social media post). Moreover, they represent an opportunity to engage with elected officials and local leaders, who tend to keep a close eye on the media for news and issues affecting their region. A letter to the editor or op-ed can serve as written proof of what their constituents care about.



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LTE vs. Op-Ed

Letters to the editor (LTEs) are often written in response to an article, op-ed, or other piece previously published by the target publication. They may also be written in response to current events. Letters to the editor are short (usually 200-300 words maximum) and tend to have a quicker turnaround time between submission and publication.



Letter to the Editor

An LTE may be the best choice for your content if:

- you are responding to a recent article, op-ed, etc. published by the target publication
- you can succinctly make your point within the required word count
- you are able to write and submit your LTE within a few days of the event or article at the focus of your comments



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LTE vs. Op-Ed - *continued*

The name “**op-ed**” is a shortening of “opposite editorial,” describing their typical placement in a newspaper. Op-eds are articles submitted to a publication that express the opinion of the author; they are also sometimes called “guest columns.”

Op-eds are generally longer (usually 600-800 words) and must be approved by an editor. Editors tend to plan their editorial calendars in advance, so anticipate lead time between when you submit your op-ed and when it may be published. Because of the additional scrutiny, fewer placements, and longer turnaround time, it may be more difficult to get an Op-Ed published than an LTE. When submitting an Op-Ed, you’ll be expected to provide links to sources for any claims or statistics shared in your writing.



An op-ed may be the best choice for your content if:

- your argument is better suited for a longer format
- your topic will resonate with a broad audience
- your piece will be relevant after several weeks, if it is subject to a longer turnaround time
- you’re interested in writing a piece in partnership with others (op-eds can have multiple authors)



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Choosing Your Publication

There are a lot of options to consider when deciding where to submit your LTE or op-ed. Major publications like The New York Times or the Washington Post reach a massive audience but are understandably very selective about which pieces they publish. On the other hand, a local paper may have a smaller readership, but they are also more likely to publish the submissions they receive, especially if they have local relevance. The audience reached by a local paper is also more likely to resonate with your writing and/or be in a position to take action relating to the issues you raise.

It is a good idea to send your LTE or op-ed to just one publication at a time. In other words, don't send the same letter to numerous papers simultaneously in hopes that one of them picks it up. Once you have submitted your piece, follow up with the paper within 24 hours if you do not hear back from them first. Some publications will explicitly indicate "If you don't hear back from us after X days, consider it a no." If your piece doesn't end up being picked up by your first publication, it is ok to move on to a different paper. Stick with it!



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Write For Your Audience

As you write your op-ed or letter to the editor, it is important to have an awareness of your audience. Do not write as if you're communicating with content experts or peers who share your opinions. Instead, write for a generalized audience representing a wider spectrum of backgrounds and perspectives.

Here are some tips to help your writing appeal to a wider audience:

- Identify messages that will resonate with the general public. Depending on your perspective of the issue, this may mean dialing back your language to appeal to a broader cross-section of readers.
- Do not assume prior knowledge of issue-specific facts. Provide background information as needed.
- Write in plain language and avoid using jargon.

If you are submitting your LTE or op-ed to a local or regional paper, it is also important to include a local tie-in. This can mean sharing local data, a local story, or even just calling out your identity or experience as it relates to the region. This makes your writing more relevant to the audience and also increases your chances of getting published.



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Getting Published

The first step in getting your op-ed or letter to the editor published is to research the guidelines for submission. Newspapers and magazines will share requirements for editorial placements, including word count, how to submit, and other specifications. You can find these requirements on the publication's website (usually on the editorial page) or by typing the name of your publication + "LTE/Op-ed submission requirements" into a search engine.

In general, publications will be **more likely to share** pieces that:

- address timely, local issues
- are well-written
- articulate a specific point of view
- provide thoughtful, fair analysis

Publications are **not likely to publish**:

- rants
- personal attacks
- speech that could be considered libelous (libel is the publication of false statements that damage another person's reputation)
- pieces that don't adhere to submission requirements

Heads up!

When you submit your LTE or Op-Ed, you will be asked to provide your name and possibly your address and phone number for the publication to use to contact you. Your address and phone number will not be published, but your name and city/state might be.



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Writing Tips

When crafting your letter to the editor or op-ed, try to keep these pointers in mind:

Follow the paper's directions.

- Find the publication's guidelines for submission and stick to them. Papers are not likely to publish pieces that don't adhere to the word count or the instructions for submission laid out in these guidelines.

Share your expertise.

- If applicable, share your relevant experience as it relates to the topic of your LTE/op-ed. If you have an organizational affiliation, a professional role, or another type of lived experience that relates to the issue at hand, make this clear in your writing. This can strengthen your credibility and add weight to your commentary.

Personalize.

- Make your writing your own. Even if you are starting from a template letter, it is important to inject your own perspective and personal experience.
- Personalizing your commentary by including details about yourself and your locality can help to establish your credibility as someone who is personally acquainted with the issue and/or affected by it. Moreover, it makes your writing more unique and engaging, both of which will help your chances in getting published.

Assume nothing.

- Don't assume that your readers are informed about your topic. Word counts are limiting, but it is a good idea to provide a brief background of the issue to get your audience up to speed.
- Also, don't assume that readers will be familiar with acronyms, jargon, or industry terms. Use plain language and spell out acronyms to avoid alienating your audience.



LETTER TO THE EDITOR & OP-ED GUIDE

Writing Tips - *continued*

Cite your sources.

- Any facts presented in your writing should come from reputable sources. Be prepared to provide links to sources that back up any stats or claims you present. Reputable publications want to make sure they are printing factually accurate materials, so including citations along with your submission may help it get published.

Call to action.

- It is a good idea to include a call to action in your letter to the editor or op-ed. A 'call to action' is an appeal to the reader to take a desired action, whether that's contacting their elected representatives, casting a vote, attending a meeting, changing their behavior, or something else. Is there something you want the reader to do? Tell them!
- Make sure that you provide any necessary information that readers need in order to take action, typically at the conclusion of your piece.

Proofread.

- Double-check your piece for factual errors and typos. If you're able, have another person proofread the piece and check for readability. You are welcome to share your piece with [Izaak Walton League staff](#) if you need another set of eyes.

Be persistent.

- Editors can't publish every LTE and op-ed they receive. Even if an editor doesn't choose to publish your submission, you may still have alerted them to an issue for future coverage.
- If your submission isn't published, don't give up. Do your best to find out why your submission wasn't published, make any necessary edits, and consider submitting to a different publication.



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Resources from the Izaak Walton League

Are you considering writing a letter to the editor or op-ed about issues like water quality, community science, soil health, or conservation? The Izaak Walton League of America team wants to support you!

The following resources are available to you as you navigate submitting your commentary to publications:

Izaak Walton League staff:

- Looking for guidance on how to write and submit your letter to the editor/op-ed? Contact sos@iwla.org with questions, ideas, or to start a conversation about lending your voice to the conservation movement.

Letter to the Editor templates:

- To support volunteers participating in the [Salt Watch](#) and [Nitrate Watch](#) programs, we've created template letters to the editor regarding chloride pollution and nitrate pollution. Volunteers are encouraged to make these letters their own, adding data or observations from their water quality monitoring and connecting the issue to their state/city/region.
- Click to download the Salt Watch and Nitrate Watch Letter to the Editor templates:
 - [Salt Watch LTE template](#)
 - [Nitrate Watch LTE template](#)

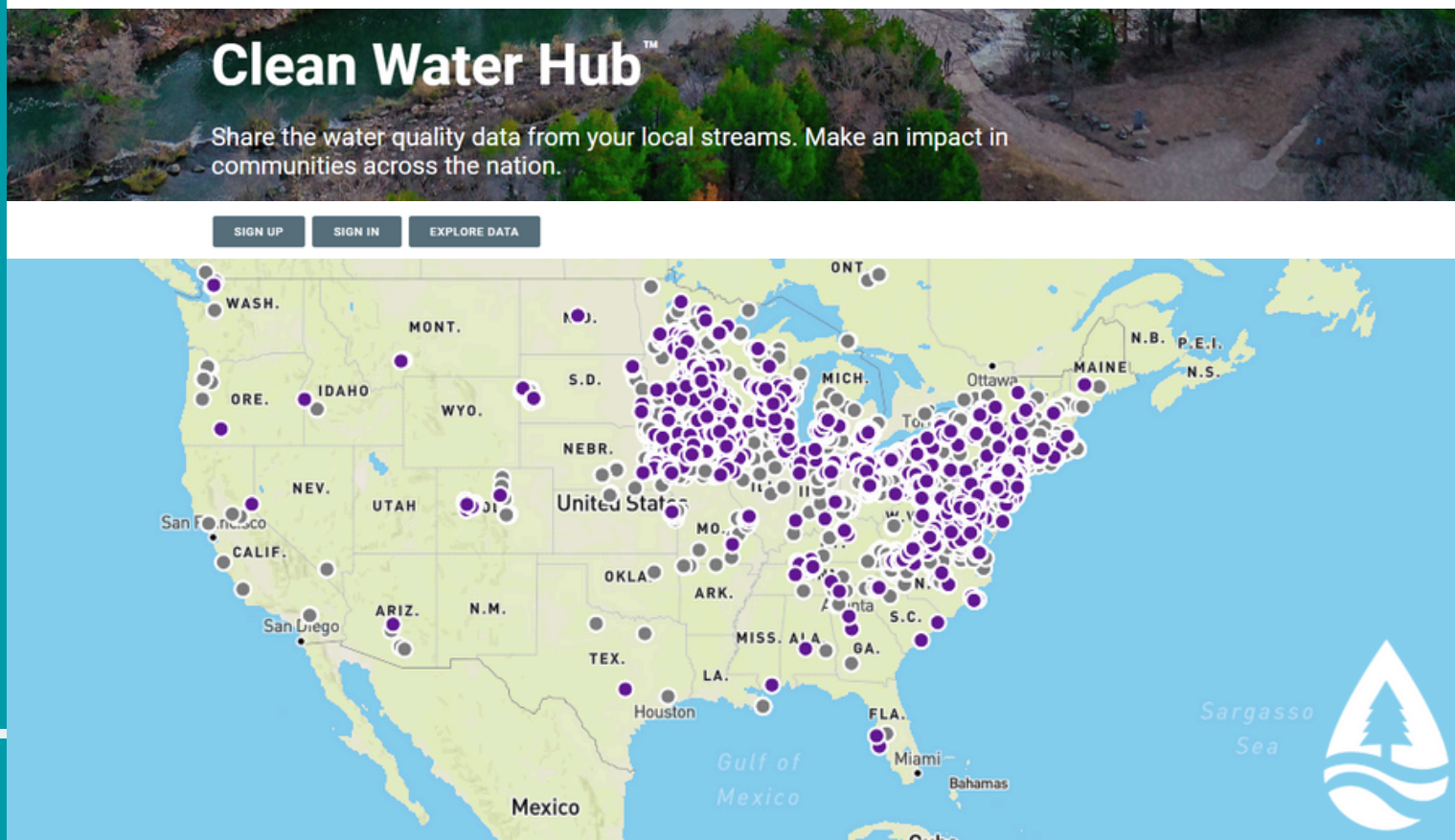


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Resources from the Izaak Walton League - *continued*

The Clean Water Hub:

- The Clean Water Hub is the water quality database used to store and visualize data reported by Izaak Walton League water quality monitoring volunteers. The Hub is designed to make water quality data easy to access, visualize, and understand, even if you are not a water quality expert. At cleanwaterhub.org, you can view water quality data collected by volunteers nationwide.
- If you are writing an LTE or op-ed about water quality issues, consider using data from the Clean Water Hub to bolster your argument. Contact sos@iwla.org with any questions relating to the Clean Water Hub.



EXAMPLE OP-EDS & LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

View real examples of published LTEs and Op-Eds written by Izaak Walton League of America staff, members, and volunteers.

Letter to the Editor | Cut the salt this winter

Abby Hileman

November 13, 2023

The Washington Post

The Nov. 2 news article “Our world is getting saltier, and we’re to blame” covered the health dangers and economic impact of the growing salinization of our waterways and soil. One of the chief causes of excess chloride in our environment is road salt, which in too many cases is too much of a good thing. Many of the 20 million tons of salt we apply annually to roads, sidewalks and parking lots wash into our waterways, which harms humans and aquatic life. Salt is also corrosive to cars and infrastructure, including lead pipes that carry drinking water into homes.

The Izaak Walton League launched Salt Watch in 2018 to encourage volunteers to monitor chloride levels in local streams and reduce the application of salt to paved surfaces. The league works with local governments, state legislatures, business owners and homeowners to reduce the amount of de-icers used without sacrificing safety. We host training for business owners, and, in recent weeks, dozens of students and other volunteers in Maryland helped us paint snowplows with messages about smart salting.

Yes, people are responsible for excess salt in the water, and we’re responsible for fixing the problem. Some of the steps to solve the problem are simple. But imagine the scope of effort it will take to curb or reverse the impact of 20 million tons applied to pavement each year.

Abby Hileman, Abingdon, Md.

The writer is Salt Watch coordinator for the Izaak Walton League of America.



EXAMPLE OP-EDS & LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letter to the Editor | Water Monitoring Must Continue in Iowa

Dale Braun

May 10, 2023

The Gazette (Cedar Rapids, IA)

The article on water monitoring ("Iowa House approves budget that could cut Iowa's water sensors," May 2) underscores the importance of measuring water quality in sources of our drinking water, including streams, lakes and groundwater. Agencies, experts and private citizens should work together to gather and assess information about Iowa's water.

Runoff from farmlands and CAFOs contribute to high levels of nitrate and other pollutants. That poses dangers to human health and to the environment—in Iowa and as far downstream as the Gulf of Mexico. Prolonged consumption of water with high levels of nitrate has been associated with cancers and birth defects.

So the public has a right to know what's in their water. Sadly, as state funding seems to be going down, the amount of nitrate in our waterways is going up. Last year, nitrate levels in the Cedar River exceeded the EPA limit on 47 days, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. We have decades of water quality data, including from the defunded IOWATER program and the newly defunct system of water quality sensors, but this is no time to stop collecting data.

If the state restricts its data gathering, then crowd-sourced, volunteer water monitoring efforts become even more important. Iowans engaged in Nitrate Watch and other Izaak Walton League water monitoring programs will have to work harder to fill the unfortunate gaps.

Thankfully, many trained volunteers already monitor local waterways, and the results are readily available to everyone through the League's Clean Water Hub website (cleanwaterhub.org).

Meanwhile, policymakers need to address the underlying problems. Congress must pass a Farm Bill in 2023 that provides more incentives to farmers to adopt practices that reduce nutrient runoff and better protect water quality in Iowa and across the U.S.

Dale Braun is president of the Iowa Division of the Izaak Walton League of America and serves on the League's national executive board



EXAMPLE OP-EDS & LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Opinion | The true cost of salt on the D.C. area's roads

Karl Van Neste

January 19, 2022

The Washington Post

Karl Van Neste is a vice president of the Muddy Branch Alliance. He lives with his family in Gaithersburg.

Winter is fully upon us, and we are bracing for ice and snow Thursday and possibly this weekend. We should become aware of the problems associated with salt use on our roads and sidewalks.

Salt is a convenient substance to use on slippery roads and sidewalks because it is cheap and somewhat effective in melting ice. It turns out that “cheap” is a big problem. Because salt is so cheap, we tend to throw it everywhere: on our streets, driveways, storefronts and sidewalks.

But the true cost is much greater than the salt itself; it is a hidden cost. Salt corrodes our bridges, our pipes and our roads. It corrodes our car mufflers and wheel wells. Corroded pipes led to the problems with lead in the water in Flint, Mich.

The cost also is hidden in our region's waterways — and in our health. The salt on our roadways runs off, killing vegetation and wildlife. Once the salt runs off into our streams, it becomes the water we drink. We end up drinking salty water, which is bad for people with high blood pressure or kidney disease. The Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) does not remove salt from our water, as it is much too expensive for the public to afford.

The Muddy Branch Alliance and the Izaak Walton League in Gaithersburg have been monitoring the Muddy Branch, a stream tributary of the Potomac River, for several years. We noticed that for more than a quarter of 2021, chloride levels in the stream were poor: exceeding 250 milligrams per liter; normal levels are between 20 to 40 mg/l). The same was true in other tributaries of the Potomac, which are other sources of our drinking water. The average chloride level at some locations along this one stream exceeded 200 mg/l in 2021. In 2020, it exceeded 100 mg/l. Why the difference? Mostly, because there was just one ice event in the area in 2020. At the WSSC intake at the Potomac, chloride levels are up 230 percent over the last 30 years.

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There are many potential solutions. First and foremost, there is a need to professionally manage the amount of salt we distribute. We need to know how much salt we purchase and how much we distribute at the city, county and state levels. We need a budget — a yearly maximum safe level for the amount of salt that we distribute in different localities, depending on the existing impairment of our watersheds. We also need to clean up excess salt two days after it has been spread.

In Maryland, most government organizations have many good distribution procedures, and they do a great job plowing the roadways. Going forward, strictly budgeting salt use and instituting cleanup routines should be the next step.

We need to limit our use of rock salt. Brine should be preferred over rock salt. Rock salt gets blown by trucks and cars to the side of the road. The trucks distributing salt, even when kept dry, still end up dumping piles of salt in our neighborhoods.

Our culture of curb-to-curb snow cleanup should be reviewed and ended. Clearly, highways, emergency routes and dangerous intersections must be safe, but a flat, dead-end street or cul-de-sac, after it is plowed, usually melts the next day. The need is for safety, not pollution.

Private salt distribution is estimated to be about 30 percent of the chloride problem. Stores want to be open for business, and apartments and condos don't want to be sued if someone slips. Because salt is so cheap, the tendency is to oversalt.

Increased training and legislative slip-and-fall shields for private organizations that distribute salt appropriately is a large part of the solution. Even when states have training plans, they need to be pushed more rigorously. Private organizations must clean up, too, and not let salt run off into storm drains. Private organizations that oversalt and don't clean up should be fined.

Changing our salt culture, budgeting our annual salt use, cleaning up after ourselves in a timely fashion and getting private organizations to limit salt use are the keys to cutting our hidden salt costs.



EXAMPLE OP-EDS & LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Opinion | For the Sake of Clean Drinking Water, Pass a Better Farm Bill

Luann Noll

June 7, 2024

Pantagraph (Bloomington, IL)

Our natural resources connect us all—the water we drink, the climate we live in, the outdoors we enjoy. In the face of water quality concerns, a changing climate and more, we find ourselves in a moment of urgency to protect them.

Some of the best tools to do so are programs found in the Farm Bill, which our elected leaders in Congress pass roughly every five years. Agriculture policy may feel removed for some people, even in a state like Illinois. But the Farm Bill affects all Americans by investing in our natural resources.

Seventy-five percent of Illinois is farmland. The way our farms are managed impacts all of us—and not just the food we eat, but also the water we drink. The quality of your water when it comes out of the tap is directly linked to how the land is used upstream. If fertilizer, manure and other nitrogen-rich compounds wash off fields, they become nitrate when mixed with water.

In many parts of the Midwest, nitrate levels in our ground and surface waters are too high and pose a serious threat to human health. Even at levels deemed acceptable by the Environmental Protection Agency, prolonged exposure to nitrate in drinking water is linked to higher rates of colon cancer, thyroid disease and some birth defects, including spina bifida.

In 2015, Illinois adopted a Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy to address the issue. A key goal was to reduce nitrate-nitrogen loads in waterways by 15 percent by 2025. Experts say we are not on track. In fact, between 2017 and 2021, there was actually a statewide increase by 4.8 percent.

One way that farmers and landowners can protect our water is by implementing beneficial conservation practices that reduce runoff, limit excess fertilizer use and keep nutrients where they belong in the field. For example, they might plant a cover crop in the off-season or install grass buffers along streambanks. For every acre of farmland with these types of practices, entire communities reap benefits downstream.

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EXAMPLE OP-EDS & LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Farm Bill includes multiple programs that encourage conservation practices. They are entirely voluntary, and farmers must apply for the specific practices they are interested in. If accepted, they receive financial and technical assistance for those practices.

The benefits of Farm Bill conservation programs are not limited to water quality. They also help fight climate change by sequestering carbon, and they protect critical wildlife habitat. Further, they improve the health of the soil, which has been linked to higher nutritional value in our food.

In a moment when we need to do everything we can to encourage these types of practices, we are turning people away. Demand for these voluntary, incentive-based programs outstrips available federal funding.

Illinois is no exception. In 2023, more than 3,000 farmer applicants in Illinois were turned away from just two key programs due to lack of funding. For the popular Environmental Quality Incentives Program, less than 20 percent of applicants were accepted.

We all pay the price when thousands of farms and likely hundreds of thousands of acres don't move forward with conservation. That's what happened in 2023 – and when those trends persist, as they have for years, the lost opportunity compounds. Right now, our members of Congress are writing the next Farm Bill. In the process, they must meet the moment and make conservation a top priority. This includes fully funding critical programs to meet demand from farmers and move the needle for conservation on the ground.

On May 24, a version of the Farm Bill cleared the first hurdle in the process. It has many more to go. The draft was a good first step, and it included League-developed priorities. But there is room for improvement, particularly relating to soil health and climate.

The Izaak Walton League of America was founded in Chicago in 1922 out of alarm about the quality of the water and health of land in the Midwest. Today, the need to safeguard our water and soil is no less urgent.

Luann Noll is a member of the Izaak Walton League of America and serves on the board of directors of the League's Illinois Division.



LETTER TO THE EDITOR & OP-ED GUIDE

Opinion | Iowa must act to prevent Nishnabotna disaster from ever happening again

Dale Braun

April 2, 2024

Des Moines Register

Imagine you live in Red Oak and work at NEW Cooperative. You go home after work on Friday wondering if there wasn't something you forgot to do. It nagged at you for a while but then, oh well, onto other things. You come back to work on Monday and discover an open valve that was directly responsible for emptying your a big nitrogen tank of an estimated 265,000 gallons of 32% liquid nitrogen into a drainage ditch that leads directly to the East Nishnabotna ("Nish") River which is only feet away.

Let me repeat that amount; 265,000 gallons! That is roughly equivalent to 30 full size semi-trailer tanker loads of nitrogen backed up and poured into the "Nish."

Who is responsible to ensure companies like New Cooperative in Red Oak and others have safeguards in place to prevent these types of disasters?

Indeed, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship has a number of requirements for the farmer or business that is handling liquid fertilizer. Below are just some of the requirements needed to get a license from IDALS to operate a business.

"Secondary Containment- Any dry or liquid fertilizer or soil conditioner must be stored properly to protect the waters of the State. Secondary containment is required for any storage location where non-mobile containers are used for fertilizer and soil conditioner storage in total quantities of 5,000 gallons or more."

"All liquid fertilizer and soil conditioner storage facilities, except anhydrous ammonia storage facilities, shall be located within a secondary containment structure. The secondary containment structure shall have a volume 20% greater than the volume of the largest storage tank within the area, plus the space occupied by the other tanks in the area."

"All loading, unloading, and mixing of liquid fertilizer or liquid soil conditioners, unless performed in the field of application, shall be done within a containment area. The containment area shall be large enough to prevent spillage onto unprotected areas and paved with asphalt, concrete, or other impervious material."

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR & OP-ED GUIDE

The above IDALS requirements spark the following questions:

1. Was a containment structure in place to handle the spillage of an entire liquid capacity of a tank (plus 20% more) or tanks, and was loading and unloading of product occurring in the containment structure?
2. Should all trailers, filled or empty, be parked on-site within the containment structure?
3. Should all valves should be required to have a fail-safe lock on them when closed?
4. Should all open valves require in-person visual monitoring and backed up by a camera system?
5. Should a fluid leak detection warning system be required, installed and functioning?
6. Are facilities required to provide documented safety procedures and periodic safety training for certified technicians/operators?
7. Are facilities, safety procedures and training reviewed, verified and approved by the appropriate Iowa agency on an annual basis at a minimum?

Will NEW Cooperative be held accountable for the environmental damage that occurred as a result of a breached containment structure (if one existed)? What impact will 265,000 gallons of 32% nitrogen have on the residents downstream? How impacted will private and public water wells become? What recourse does the public have? What if this happens on the Cedar, Wapsipinicon, Maquoketa, Yellow Rivers or other major Iowa rivers?

On behalf of its 7,000 Iowa Izaak Walton League members, who have pledged to respect and protect nature, we demand an immediate review of all regulations and to implement additional regulatory safeguards to prevent these types of disasters from recurring. There should be no grandfathering for facilities that do not meet regulated safeguards.

Dale Braun lives in Cedar Rapids and is president of the Iowa Division of the Izaak Walton League of America.





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www.iwla.org/water | sos@iwla.org