# BluestemLH.jpg

# IL NUTRIENT LOSS REDUCTION STRATEGY SAMPLE OP-ED AND LETTER-TO-THE-EDITOR

**OP-ED**

According to USDA, 80% of nitrogen pollution in our rivers comes from nutrients that have been washed away from agricultural fields. All of these nutrients in our streams and rivers harm fish and threaten drinking water, damaging the water resources that are important parts of our communities and memories. Illinois is a leader of agriculture and has an obligation to families and farmers to protect our valuable soil and water. Therefore, our legislators and the governor should fully fund state conservation programs and work harder to leverage federal dollars to support Illinois conservation practices.

Illinois is a top contributor to the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico but nutrient pollution has impacts in our backyard too. Nitrates from fertilizer flow from our fields to our faucets, a serious public health risk in many rural communities. Nutrient pollution of our drinking water has been a costly and dangerous issue. Conservation farming practices, like using cover crops and installing buffer strips, can stop nutrient pollution before it enters our water sources and are more cost-effective than expensive water treatment plant upgrades.

Conservation farming offers farmers a voluntary system of practices that can simultaneously improve soil health and improve water quality by reducing the amount of nutrients coming off their fields. But farmers in Illinois don’t have access to the technical expertise or funding needed to implement these new strategies. Illinois is now significantly behind neighboring states in embracing modern, smart and strategic conservation practices. Even worse, because state programs that could be used to promote these practices have been unfunded since 2015, we have literally lost access to federal dollars, pushing us further behind.

County-based soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs) are the only entities in place that can help farmers address the nutrient loss problem. Funding for SWCDs has been cut by 70 percent since 2002 and despite the legislature voting to fully fund SWCDs in 2017, Gov. Bruce Rauner announced that he would only pay out a portion of the authorized budget. Additionally, Illinois has left federal funds on the table. The state has not participated in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program for a decade – a program that matches every dollar that Illinois dedicates to a local landowner with $4 in federal funds.

Illinois is an agricultural state. We are the number one producer of soybeans and number two producer of corn. Unfortunately, we are also one of the biggest contributors of nutrient pollution to our region’s rivers and streams. This is NOT the kind of reputation Illinois should have. It’s time for our government to take nutrient pollution seriously and push for conservation farming practices that improve water quality and soil health.

**LTE #1**

As a [town] resident [and father of two], I am especially concerned about the water quality issues in Illinois that [name] wrote about in the [date] issue. Children are especially susceptible to the health effects of nitrates so the thought of them in our drinking water is especially concerning for me and my family. Additionally, the cost of removing these nitrates at water treatment plants is much more expensive than stopping them at their source: our farms.

Conservation farming offers farmers a voluntary system of practices that can simultaneously improve soil health and improve water quality by reducing the amount of nutrients coming off their fields. As a major agricultural state, Illinois should be a leader in conservation farming. As [name] states, that begins with full funding for our soil and water conservation districts to provide important technical assistance to our farmers. Our legislators should stop dragging their feet and support soil and water conservation districts.

**LTE #2**

I am a farmer in [county/town] and I cannot agree more with [name]’s call for soil and water conservation district (SWCD) funding. SWCDs are Illinois’ best tool for helping farmers reduce nutrient loss from fields. By providing technical assistance, SWCDs can help farmers implement conservation farming practices on their fields.

One of the most important decisions landowners and operators can make to increase land productivity and improve yields is to strategically manage our soil health. Conservation farming is simply the process of applying smart sets of practices strategically on our fields to improve soil health. As a farmer, I consider myself a steward of the land. Therefore, it is my duty to keep my fields productive, my soil healthy, and our community’s water clean. But I cannot do it alone. SWCDs have helped numerous landowners implement useful conservation practices on their fields. Our state government should fully fund SWCDs so that they can help Illinois farmers be better stewards of the land.