

It's Time To Take Your Environmental Castor Oil

Farming has never appealed to me due to the simple fact that I prefer not to have to really work for a living.

My hands never get dirty. It's a mystery to me where all that stuff comes from that ends up in the produce section of the grocery.

According to usually reliable Internet sources, 93% of all land in Iowa is growing something useful, no thanks to us. I'm including you in 'us' because according to the Press-Citizen's subscriber demographics, very few of you reading these words regularly encounter more soil than you would find under the average La-Z-Boy recliner.

That was true for me as well until November 2002, when I was accidentally elected to be a Johnson County Soil and Water Conservation District Commissioner (it's a long story).

One of the cool things about being a Commissioner is that I get weekly updates from the Iowa State Agronomy Extension office offering opportunities to attend things like Confinement Site Manure Applicator workshops and Beef Estrus Synchronization webcasts. Not to mention your occasional sensational e-newsletter headline like: "White Mold and Sudden Death Syndrome Widespread in Soybeans."

I also pick up a lot of useless but interesting information. For example, there are almost six times as many hogs (16 million) as there are people in Iowa. If the hogs ever figure that out, look out. Of course, it would just be a matter of time before they fell victim themselves to the 39 million chickens in Iowa that are no doubt sick and tired of being oppressed.

I seem to spend half of my time as Commissioner explaining that the Johnson County Soil and Water Conservation District (JCSWCD) actually has nothing to do with the similarly named Johnson County Conservation Board. We LIKE them well enough, but our duties are quite different.

The Johnson County Conservation Board's primary duty is to manage nine public areas ranging from the ¼ acre Sutliff Access to the 1082 acre F.W. Kent Park. This includes several native prairies and small community parks.

Almost all farmers are familiar with Soil and Water Conservation Districts – every county has one. Most of our time is spent helping farmers find matching funds to establish conservation practices on their land – terraces, windbreaks, ponds, buffer strips, etc. Anything to keep the soil and chemicals from blowing away or running off into rivers and streams.

We also deal with soil loss complaints, which invariably are made against neighbors upstream who are having difficulty keeping their dirt where it belongs. We're happy to go in and slap the property owner around a little before we offer to help remedy the situation.

When we're not abusing underattentive landowners, we're offering advice on a variety of topics including backyard rain gardens (for you urban dwellers). They are designed to slow down or eliminate rain runoff – a major source of water contamination.

It seems like all of us are happy to channel water off our properties in the quickest way possible, which (surprise!) encourages flash flooding. Water falling onto yards or parking lots tends to shoot into storm sewers and streams right now. People need to know this stuff.

If you want to learn more about local conservation issues and organizations, you should put March 8th's Prairie Preview XXII on your calendar. There are displays, information and volunteer opportunities provided by Project Green, Pheasants Forever, Environmental Advocates, Johnson County Songbird Project, Johnson County Conservation Board, Johnson County Heritage Trust, the DNR and many more.

It also features an expert from UNI speaking on "America's lost landscape: The Tallgrass Prairie." Prairie Preview XXII begins at 6:30 p.m. at Montgomery Hall, Johnson County Fairgrounds – you should go.

While you have your calendar out, Baxter Black (cowboy poet and humorist) will be performing a fundraiser for JCSWCD at the Englert Theatre on September 29. We are also in the midst of our annual tree (bareroot), native plant and prairie seed sale – check us out at www.jcswcd.org.

If conservation issues don't comprise at least a portion of your average week, this is your environmental castor oil. You may now return to your recliner.