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WATER QUALITY IN YOUR BACKYARD—DO YOU KNOW WHAT IT IS?

Economic challenges continue to loom large for crop advisers and farmers involved in nutrient management of agronomic, horticultural, and forest crops. Water quality challenges have also increased as we better understand the interactions among our land and water resources and the effects of specific management activities where we live.

Many agriculturalists, horticulturalists, and forest resource managers have scaled the learning curves associated with soil testing and plant tissue and manure analyses to become more proficient in providing optimum plant nutrition for crops that clothe, shelter, and nourish our society. Fewer of us have invested the time...or found the information in an understandable or “user-friendly” format...to enable us to expand our vocabularies and to become more conversant about practical and desirable water quality. Desirable water quality criteria will vary depending on the designated public use of surface water resources. For example: Is the surface water resource designated for public water supply, for protection of fish, shellfish, and wildlife, for recreational, agricultural, industrial, or navigational purposes?

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is usually considered the lead agency, but other federal, state and some local agencies are also engaged in monitoring and regulating water quality. To protect and improve water resources these agencies are also charged with the burden to identify certain criteria as guidance in adopting water quality standards. We all would like to see these criteria based on rigorous biological evaluations, assessing cause and effect relationships. However, in the absence of adequate monitoring and evaluation, water quality criteria are frequently decided using quality data from both reference and monitored waterbodies (streams and rivers, lakes and reservoirs, and estuaries), using statistical ranking methods.

A logical question to ask is: “Do I have any say in the process of developing water quality criteria and standards?” The answer is yes, you can have a voice.

All too frequently, farmers and crop advisers spurn participation in public meetings with local, state, or federal water quality authorities because they feel uncomfortable with their grasp of the technical jargon or the scientific process. The terminology can be confusing, and we might feel cautious. To have a voice in the processes which shape the fate of many involved in the management of our natural resources, each of us can commit to learning more about water quality in the future. We might start by asking the most important question – do we know the water quality in our own backyards, or our own watersheds? That is the starting point in being able to represent your interests. If you do not represent your interests, who will when the regulations are being forged?

Contact your conservation district, Natural Resources Conservation Service, or local Extension office to improve your water quality I.Q. , and plan to make a positive difference in your future.

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