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Continuing The Tradition Of Wearing The White Hat Of Environmental Stewardship

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Mention the words "pollution" and the "Environmental Protection Agency" (EPA) in the same sentence and you will have the attention of most US farmers. But the issue of the role of farming practices in environmental pollution predates the creation of the EPA in 1970 by Richard Nixon.

In the years before the Great Depression and the images of the Dust Bowl, future Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace used the pages of Wallaces' Farmer in Iowa to rail against farmers he characterized as soil miners. He was concerned about soil erosion, the creation of gullies in once productive fields, and the loss of fertile soil to the waterways of the Midwest.

Between Wallace's time and our years as undergraduates in the early 60s, farmers had made great progress in reducing the loss of soil by wind and water. It seemed like every time we crossed a county line we were greeted by a welcome sign sponsored by the county Soil and Water Conservation District.

These districts worked with farmers encouraging them to adopt farming practices like crop rotation, contour tillage, and strip tillage to reduce the loss of soil – these were the days before no-till and reduced tillage practices had garnered widespread attention and adoption. After his ordination, Harwood depended upon material from these districts when he prepared his sermon for soil stewardship week. As a result of activities like these, farmers were generally viewed by the general public as good stewards of the land.

In the years since, the role of agriculture in environmental stewardship has gotten considerably more complicated. Where once we were dealing with the loss of soil to wind and water, we are now dealing with the leaching of nitrogen and phosphorus from farmlands into the waterways of the US. Most Americans are aware of the dead zone at the mouth of the Mississippi River and in the Chesapeake Bay and the role that nitrogen and phosphorus plays in the algae bloom.

Where once attention was paid to pollution that could be traced to sewer pipes and industrial discharges, we are now faced with the problem of non-point-source pollution, the type that comes from urban lawns and rural farm fields alike. Non-point-sources account for a significant amount of the nitrogen and phosphorus that enters US waterways.

Where once the meat that people ate was produced in small numbers on millions of farms, today a large portion of the meat that we eat is raised and/or finished in a concentrated feeding operation where waste management is a significant issue.

Where once most US residents were either farmers or one generation removed from the farm, today farmers account for less than 2 percent of the country's population. As a result, the level of understanding that earlier generations of farmers could depend upon is no longer there.

While we understand the frustration of farmers with environmental rules and regulations, we are also concerned that today's farmers not squander the positive image of farmers as good stewards of the land that was created by earlier generations.

When urban residents are facing higher wastewater treatment bills necessary to finance improved treatment plants designed to reduce point source pollution, they are not likely to be positively influenced by agribusiness entities and farm organizations that argue against the application of environmental regulations to their operations.

People who make these arguments give a black eye to all farmers, even those who deal responsibly with their animal waste and those who have adopted practices that enable them to keep their yields up while reducing their application of nitrogen and phosphorus on their fields.

If farmers are to regain the high ground with these issues they are going to have to become proactive in identifying and adopting practices that significantly reduce their contribution to the dead zones that attract the public's attention. In the long-run, actions that improve their public standing on environmental issues may also end up improving their bottom line. Δ

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