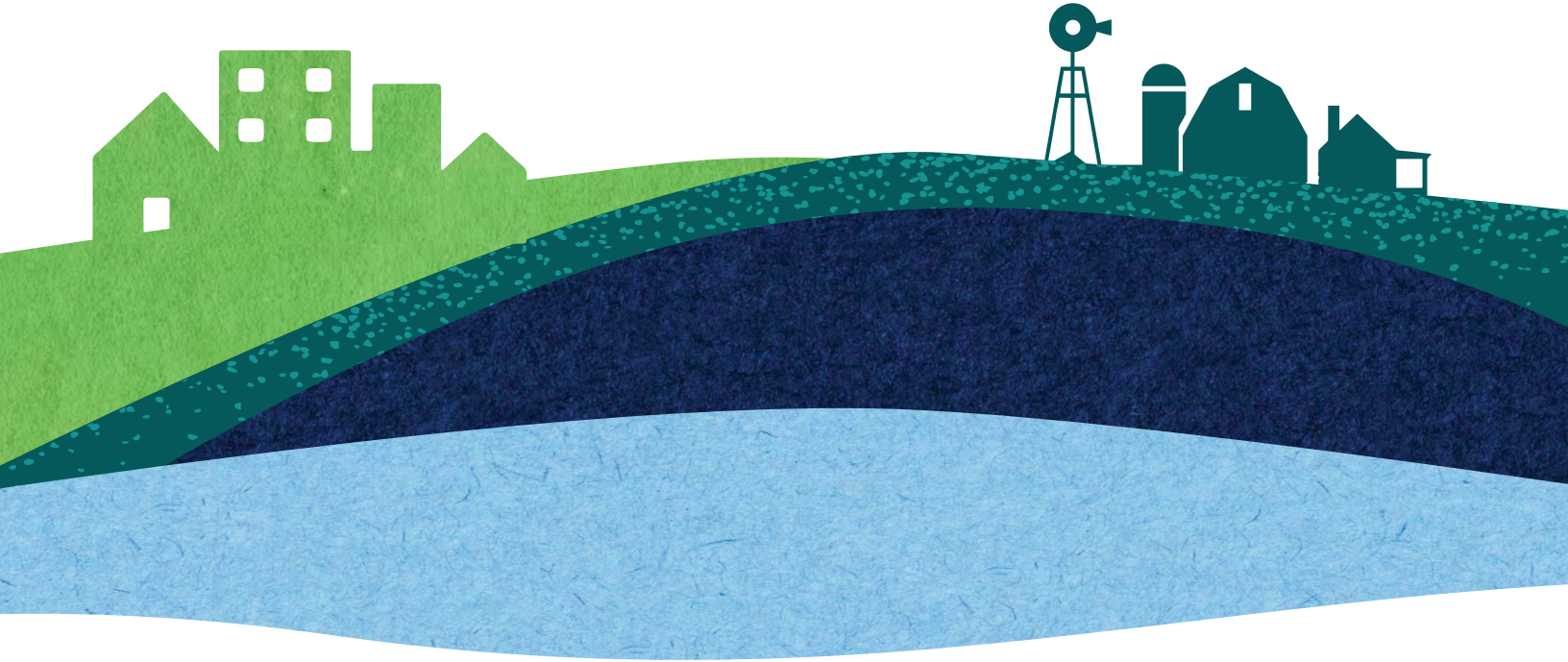


Water Issues in Iowa:

Why Do Improvement Efforts Stagnate?

Iowa has been called the land between two rivers. Yet between the Mississippi and the Missouri Rivers are more than 4,700 additional miles of river, and hundreds of thousands of streams, creeks, lakes, and ponds.



To what extent do Iowans care about the quality of this water?

A broad spectrum of Iowans—college students, farmers, nonfarmers, rural and urban residents—participated in opportunistic surveys, interviews, and a series of listening sessions in 2022-23 to share their perspectives about water quality in the state. The goal was to take a snapshot of current attitudes and compare them to those from similar studies 10 and 15 years ago.



Water Issues in Iowa Survey
5,538 Respondents



Interviews at Regent Universities
60 Students Interviewed



6 Listening Sessions
(3 Rural/3 Urban) with 47 Participants

- The last decade has seen significant increases in—



Media coverage of water issues.



Outreach and education on water quality.

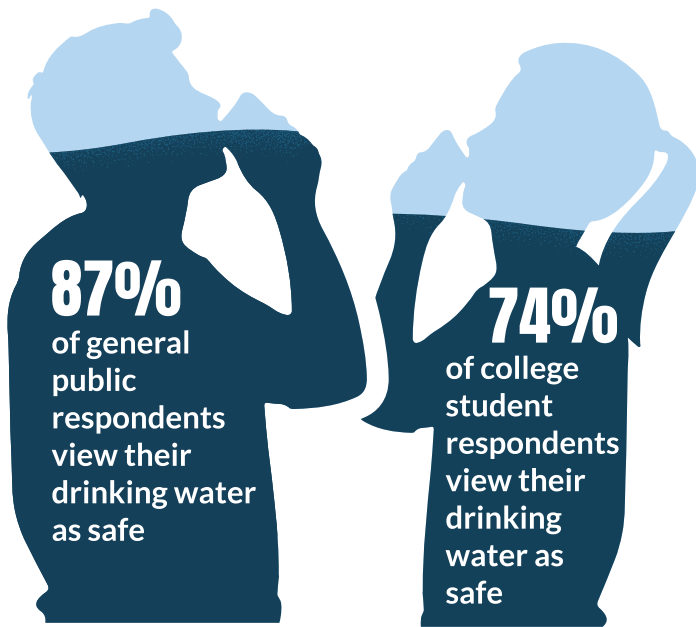


Funding to encourage reduced agricultural nutrient loads.

- All age and social groups are only **slightly more aware** of water quality issues and causes than in previous surveys.
- Awareness of the problem **has not released an outpouring of action**—there is little progress in improving water quality in the state.

How's the Water?

Drinking Water



Grain of salt: Nearly half of general public respondents rely on wells for their drinking water. *The Iowa Rural Drinking Water Survey* (Lade, Comito, Benning, Kaiser, and Kling, 2022) found that private well water users generally believe their wells are safe, but <10% test their wells yearly.

Groundwater

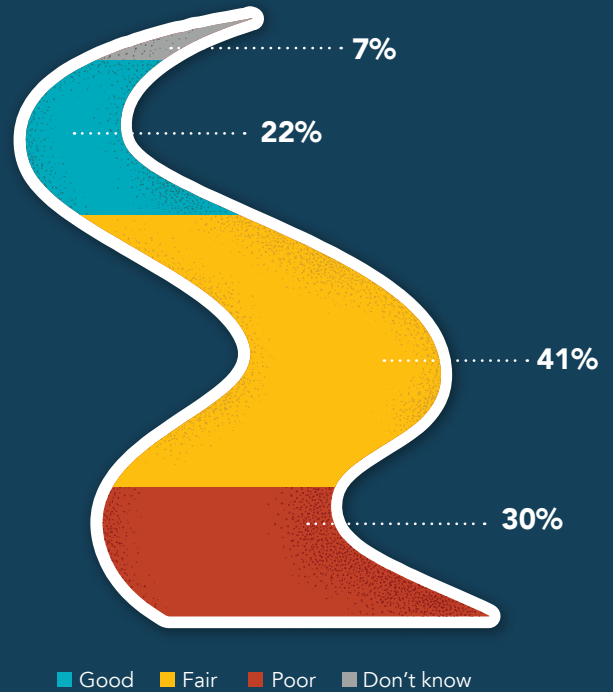
Confidence in groundwater quality varies, depending on whether respondents are engaged in farming or not. Both general public and students who farm have more confidence in groundwater today than a decade ago. Those who aren't engaged in farming have less confidence in groundwater than they did a decade ago.



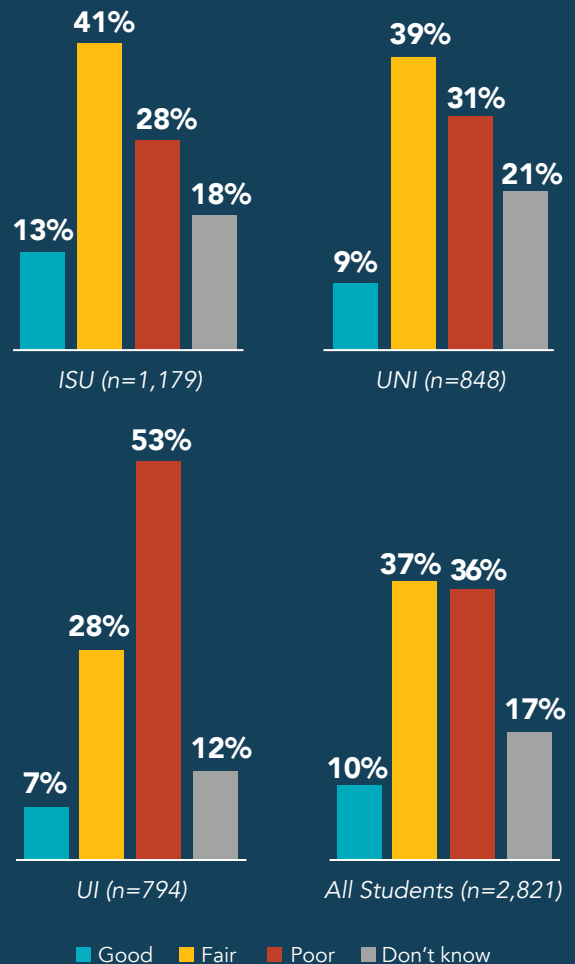
Surface Water

Nearly three-quarters of all respondents view **surface water quality as fair or poor.**

General Public



Students

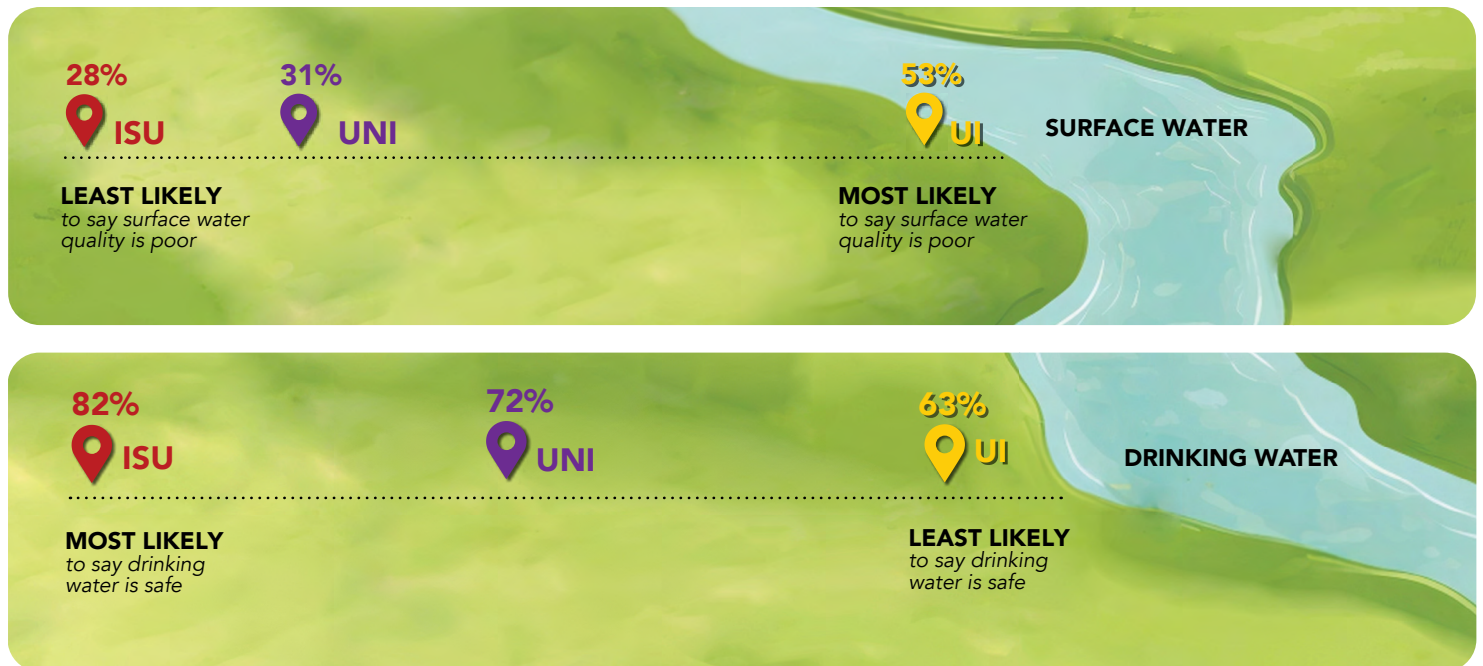


Student Responses: Hot, Cold, Just Right

College students at Iowa's three regent universities—Iowa State University, University of Northern Iowa, and University of Iowa—fall into a Goldilocks pattern in their perceptions of both drinking water safety and surface water quality. Each university's location within its watershed, and the proximity of a river to campus, seems to affect student views of water quality. ISU is near its watershed headwaters, but the river is almost invisible to students day to day. UI is at the bottom of its watershed, but nobody can miss the Iowa River as it bisects campus. UNI is in the middle of the watershed and has a river a couple of miles away.



The closer to the river and the further downstream the campus, the more bearish students are about both drinking water and surface water quality.



Students showed a **slight increase in awareness** but little confidence in their knowledge of water quality issues in Iowa and the Midwest. However, they had more urgent attitudes about one issue that during the last decade has inundated their classrooms and media, and affected their own lives—**climate change**.

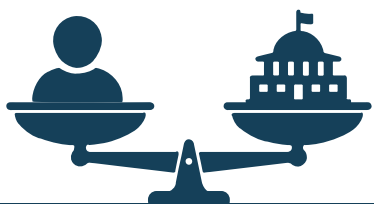


What Causes Water Quality Problems?

Survey respondents identified the conditions impacting water quality as:

- ✓ Hardness
- ✓ Fertilizer/nitrate
- ✓ Livestock waste
- ✓ Pesticides
- ✓ High bacteria counts

Most Iowans agree that agriculture is the primary cause of degraded water quality, with all but hardness closely linked to agriculture.



Who Should Fix It?

Who is responsible for restoring and protecting water quality in the state—and how do we achieve that? It depends on who you ask.

- General public respondents who farm tend to lean on individuals to protect water quality.
- Those who aren't engaged in farming—as well as students who are—put higher responsibility on government.

Are We Paddling Upstream?

Influencing people to change their minds and behavior around environmental issues such as clean water is one of the most difficult challenges facing our state. Perception gaps, differing priorities, and well-ingrained beliefs, as well as a continuing urban vs. rural divide, prevent any heightened awareness from translating into a sense of urgency about the state of water in Iowa.

Water Quality Matters to Us All

Iowans are well-known for coming together to help when tragedy strikes. The time is now for all Iowans to make **clean water** a priority:



Flood classrooms and media with persistent clean water education and messaging.



Pay attention to those messages—learn more about what affects water quality.



Get to know the watershed you live in and efforts to support the health of local water bodies.



Adopt practices—especially in production agriculture—that support clean water.

View the full *Water Issues in Iowa* report:

www.conservationlearninggroup.org