

A conversation with Jerry DeWitt: A firsthand look at the Iowa floods

In mid-June at the request of a northeast Iowa farmer, Jerry DeWitt toured some of the agricultural areas hit hardest by heavy rains and flooding. Here are his initial impressions, and what we can learn from listening to the land.

Yesterday I cried for the land. Today I must speak for the land.

What I experienced in eastern Iowa will stay with me for a long time. I saw fields shredded by water racing to the Mississippi. I walked along new, deep and unfamiliar slashes across the landscape. And I smelled the rankness of dying green as I held soil in my hands.

Water that so nourishes and sustains life in April and May had turned on the land in June, like a wildcat leaving grave claw marks across the face of soft flesh. Drops upon drops of water striking bare ground gained force, from meanders to rivulets to gaping corridors that gave way to great carvings across the land's surface, marking it with eternal scars.

In one field where I walked, small weathered corn plants had yellowed and were tilted askew, a testament to relentless rains, wind and rivers of water gouging the landscape. An eerie peacefulness lay upon the field and my thoughts of possible recovery and healing.

Last year's residue of corn stalks, cobs and soybean stubble held back the torrent in some fields, slowing its course. I could see where the water paused, settled and began to seep deep into the land rather than tearing away its surface. But more often than not, too little residue was left to counter the water's intent. Early-spring tillage left the fields beautiful and uniform before the storms, but vulnerable to unplanned challenges of rains and gravity.

I saw fields left almost bare of residue in the spring now forever altered by the rains. Soils that once held a high productive position upon a knoll were now lying deep upon horizontal corn plants at the base of a fence, like a drift of winter snow. The whiteness of the soil signaled a loss of organic matter, and its final trail led to the ditch and debris hanging on weeds and fenceposts.

I looked around at the uniformity of corn and soybean fields. The landscape in front and behind me held no diverse patterns in color or texture, and I pondered many questions.

Where were the fields of alfalfa and clover? Where were the buffer strips around crop fields to slow the water and ask for its load to settle at their feet? Where were the grassed waterways, planned roads of green meandering down slopes to guide rushing water? How could wetlands not be a part of this farmscape? Why was the land asked to support more row crops when a pocket of lowness could capture water, nutrients and sediment? Why did these resources morph into unwelcome gifts to Cedar Falls and Cedar Rapids?

My last walk across the remnants of a corn field led me to an unimaginable scene where I witnessed the force of water versus human intentions. Corn that was eight inches tall struggled to grow upright. Water on its surge broke across the field and for nearly a mile tore through plants and soil. With a path more than 300 feet wide, the water scoured the field and dug up rocks and soil, plants and residue, and now its hope for a harvest. I saw a battlefield, savaged and unrecognizable with nearly two feet of soil missing, gone or displaced and pools of water with dead rotting worms. Broken tile littered the landscape.

Life, not just corn, was gone from this field. And the farmer asks, "What can I do...what can I do?"

I now see farmers disking across the scars and gouges in the soil in an attempt to replant crops. These actions may help a farmer's soul more than they soothe the soil. At this time, something more is needed in Iowa than words of comfort or shallow concern.

Every Iowa farmer—even every Iowa citizen—can walk the land. I say walk, not ride. Feel the soil under your feet. Allow the landscape to fill your eyes and set your future direction.

Kneel down and touch the soil. What can be done to protect this fragile resource? Take the time to mentally mark where water has left scars and gouges. What areas can become grassed waterways? Where could perennials be planted to safeguard against another one of Mother Nature's surges? Would a wetland make sense? Where did residue and shallow roots lose the battle against rain?

These are things we all need to consider.

Lessons learned this summer will allow us to build new permanent lines on a land of green with deep and diverse roots to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

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