Cleaning up our 10,000 lakes

Four in ten unsafe for swimming, fishing

It’s more than a slogan on a license plate. Minnesota’s 10,000 lakes are a big part of what makes our state special. Each of us seems to have our own favorite memory of a Minnesota lake, whether it’s a lake in a Twin Cities neighborhood or a lake up North, at that cabin you can’t wait to get to for summer vacation.

Naturally enough, we expect our lakes to be places where we can swim or fish without worry. But unfortunately, 40 percent of lakes tested in Minnesota don’t meet basic health standards. There’s plenty of work to be done to clean up Minnesota’s big, beautiful lakes, but we can start by making sure that our smallest streams and rivers are clean first.

Clean Water Act protections in question

Our lakes can only be as clean as the streams and wetlands that feed and filter them. Controversial Supreme Court decisions have called into question 30 years of protections provided by the Clean Water Act, leaving more than half of Minnesota’s streams vulnerable to polluters who could dump toxic chemicals into streams and pave over wetlands.

Along with our sister groups, we called on Congress last year to restore these protections—but polluters bottled up the legislation, and Congress failed to act. Now, we’re calling on the Environmental Protection Agency to step in. The EPA is reviewing guidelines that would clarify which waters are protected under the Clean Water Act, and tell polluters what Minnesotans already know: Our waters are nobody’s dumping ground.

Steps toward restoration

While the EPA is listening to us, the biggest polluters and their allies in Congress are threatening to prevent the EPA from doing its job.

That’s why this summer we’re knocking on thousands of doors to educate and engage people all across the state. Minnesotans understand better than almost anyone the importance of protecting our lakes and streams. This summer, we’re working to show our support for one of our state’s most valuable resources: our water.

Take action to protect our 10,000 lakes or sign up for the online version of this newsletter:

www.EnvironmentMinnesota.org
Recent action

Boundary Waters update
A year ago, we launched our Save the Boundary Waters campaign, and we’ve already educated and engaged tens of thousands of Minnesotans in the effort to prevent toxic sulfide mines from being built in one of our most pristine natural areas.

In early 2011, we helped spearhead an effort to collect Valentines for the environment, with personal messages from Minnesotans about their love of clean air, clean water and open space. And with our partners we delivered thousands of Valentines to decision-makers in Washington, D.C., on Feb. 14, the same week the U.S. House of Representatives moved to gut the Environmental Protection Agency and its ability to do its job. Your messages were a reminder that Americans demand strong environmental protections like the Clean Air and Clean Water acts.

Drive Electric Minnesota
In January, Environment Minnesota and our partners in the Drive Electric Minnesota coalition participated in the unveiling of the Ford Transit Connect purchased by the city of St. Paul.

St. Paul is one of the first cities in the nation to put an electric car into use, and the city is scheduled to get two more later this year. Gov. Mark Dayton, U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman and Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak appeared at the unveiling at RiverCentre in downtown St. Paul.

City officials say they’re using $286,000 in stimulus funds for the electric vehicles and charging stations. Xcel Energy is also helping cities, government agencies and businesses buy electric vehicles.

Drive Electric Minnesota—a partnership of local and state governments, Xcel Energy, private businesses and nonprofit groups—plans to install 30 charging stations throughout the metro area in ramps, flat lots and on-street locations.
Minnesota is well known for having high quality water, but our pollution problems are growing. (See Page 1.) Pollution from agribusiness is a major contributor to water quality problems, especially in Minnesota and the upper Midwest.

According to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, 40 percent of tested waterways in Minnesota do not meet basic health standards. And unfortunately, as more lakes and other waterways are tested, we expect the number of waterways classified as impaired to continue to climb. Additionally, pollution that flows into the Mississippi River up here in Minnesota—in particular, the large amount of nitrogen-laden water—contributes to the huge dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico.

**Big changes in the industry**

This year we released two reports in a series covering the problems with agribusiness pollution. In November, we released “Corporate Agribusiness and America’s Waterways,” which outlined the ways in which agribusiness is polluting and highlighted case studies of the worst problems across the country. Some of today’s agribusiness practices, including concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), the intense planting of crops such as corn, and use of chemical fertilizers, increase the likelihood and scale of pollution.

Farming is not inherently polluting, of course, and in fact many farmers in our state are engaged in sustainable practices. But the past few decades have seen big changes in the agricultural industry, including the concentration of ownership into fewer hands, feedlot farming practices, and policies that direct the planting of chemically intensive corn for ethanol, corn syrup and animal feed. The four largest firms in each sector produce 72 percent of the nation’s beef, 63 percent of the nation’s pork, and 57 percent of the nation’s chicken—giving those companies vast control over the marketplace and the farming practices used to raise food.

In March, we released “Growing Influence: The Political Power of Agribusiness and the Fouling of America’s Waterways,” to point out the undue influence that the biggest polluters have over public policy. Big agribusiness employs a powerful lobby effort and contributes millions to candidates’ campaign coffers to cultivate influence in Washington, D.C. Over the past decade, 10 large agribusiness firms gave $35 million in campaign contributions to congressional candidates, and the 10 leading agribusiness interests spent $127 million lobbying Congress and federal agencies.

Big agribusiness has used its political power and influence recently to block Clean Water Act protections for key waterways and oppose pesticide regulations. It’s time to demand that our government stands up to corporate agribusiness, so we can protect and restore our waterways while working toward an agricultural system that delivers safe, healthy food.

**Interview with Rep. Betty McCollum**

**Q:** You have spent much of your time in Congress fighting for solutions to our energy problems, trying to stop global warming, and protecting our environment in many other ways. Why have you prioritized these issues?

**A:** Before environmental issues were matters of public policy for me, the environment was a personal priority. As a citizen I am committed to protecting and restoring the natural environment for future generations. As an elected official, I work for clean air, clean water, restored wildlife habitat and a real strategy to combat the worst effects of global climate change.

**Q:** Recently you spoke in defense of the Environmental Protection Agency and the role it plays in the United States. What do you think is the role the EPA will play in the future, and why is that role so important to maintain?

**A:** I think the EPA’s middle word says it all: protection. The EPA is charged with protecting our families, our children, and our natural environment. Last year was the 40th anniversary of the EPA. The American public has relied on the EPA since its creation to ensure our water is safe to drink and our air is clean to breathe. Today, citizens look to the EPA for leadership on the next generation of environmental challenges, including global climate change. While we have made tremendous strides since the days of fires on the Cuyahoga River, progress can never be taken for granted. Some Republicans in Congress are determined to take us backward with their relentless and often spurious attacks on the EPA. I am committed to fighting these attacks and strengthening the EPA for the good of families across our country.
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Solar Works campaign update

It becomes clearer by the day that Minnesotans want to put solar to work for our state—so we can stop sending $20 billion away every year to buy energy to fuel our cars, homes and businesses. Over the past several years, we've watched coal and gas prices increase steadily, with little choice but to keep paying. By getting just 10 percent of our energy from the sun, we could power more than 700,000 homes with fuel that doesn't pollute and doesn't run out. We'd also create badly needed construction and manufacturing jobs right here at home.

Since we began our push in 2010 to build a solar future for Minnesota, we've already made impressive progress. Early in the campaign, we outlined our plan for producing 10 percent of our energy from the sun by 2030. Since then, we have built Solar Works for Minnesota into the largest clean energy coalition in our state's history, bringing together more than 125 businesses, non-profits and unions all working to move our state toward energy independence. With public support and member action, we'll put solar to work for Minnesota.

Environment Minnesota

Our mission
We all want clean air, clean water and open space. But it takes independent research and tough-minded advocacy to win concrete results for our environment, especially when powerful interests stand in the way of environmental progress.

That's the idea behind Environment Minnesota. We focus exclusively on protecting Minnesota's air, water and open space. We speak out and take action at the local, state and national levels to improve the quality of our environment and our lives.