Defending our 10,000 lakes from polluters

Thousands of Minnesotans speak out for clean water

While some of us splashed around in lakes close to home over the summer, and others slid canoes into the water up north, it would have been nice to assume that our leaders in Congress were making sure those waters stayed clean and safe. In fact, they were doing exactly the opposite—working to dismantle the law that has protected our lakes, rivers and streams for 39 years: the Clean Water Act.

Environment Minnesota has been working with our national federation, Environment America, to restore the Clean Water Act’s ability to protect all of our waters. This year, the EPA acted. In April, EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson announced a plan to close the legal loopholes that are allowing polluters to pave and dump into the small waters that feed our lakes.

Legal warfare
Polluting industries have already sprung into action. Corporate agribusiness and mining companies have urged their friends in Congress to stop the EPA from closing the clean water loophole—ExxonMobil threatened “legal warfare,” and Minnesota’s own Rep. Michele Bachmann has pledged to shut the EPA down if elected president.

Over the summer, Congress launched an unprecedented attack on the Clean Water Act. By mid-July, the U.S. House had passed three separate measures attacking the EPA’s authority to protect our water.

We saw this coming and had already begun building a campaign to defend the EPA’s clean water initiatives. All over the state, our field organizers talked face to face with more than 27,000 Minnesotans about the attacks on clean water and the ways these moves could threaten our famous 10,000 lakes. Citizens wrote to their local newspapers, sent thousands of comments to Washington, and called our lawmakers on the phone, urging them to maintain the EPA’s authority to do its job protecting our water.

As we work to protect our waters, we’ll be sure to remind officials in Washington that Minnesotans care deeply about our lakes and want to see them protected.

Precious lakes and waterways in Minnesota and across the country are under threat as Congress considers rolling back historic protections.
Over the past several months, we have seen unprecedented attacks on clean water and air in St. Paul and in Washington, D.C. In Minnesota, the utilities won the ability to buy more energy from a polluting coal plant. And while the Legislature has paused plans to overturn the nuclear power moratorium, it will only be a matter of time before the industry’s allies in the Legislature try again.

In Washington, D.C., efforts by our national federation and its active members succeeded in blocking efforts to weaken the Clean Water and Clean Air acts. However, polluters and their allies in Congress have declared war on the Environmental Protection Agency, and the attacks will keep coming.

It’s your support that makes sure we can hold the line in times like these, and allows us to continue protecting our lakes, air and open spaces for future generations.

Sincerely,

Ken Bradley
Director

The fight against toxic mining continues
While we’ve turned our citizen outreach efforts toward protecting all of Minnesota’s lakes by defending the Clean Water Act, the fight to block sulfide mining near the Boundary Waters is still going strong. The dangerous new type of mining, which could pollute the pristine waters with sulfuric acid, hasn’t been given the green light—but the multinational mining companies looking for a way in have been busy this year, pushing their proposals through the state Legislature, the courts, and even Congress.

The industry won rollbacks to Minnesota’s environmental review and wetlands protection laws, and gained exemptions for pet projects. Polluters gained a victory by including in the budget deal a law that weakens water quality protections for wild rice growing in Minnesota. We worked with our coalition to stay on top of these developments throughout the year, and block the most egregious actions. And thanks in large part to our outreach, public awareness of the threat is growing.

Mercury protections delayed again
This spring, the Environmental Protection Agency took major steps to cut toxic air pollution from power plants, despite intense opposition from industrial polluters and their allies in Congress. The EPA proposed the first-ever nationwide limits on mercury pollution from power plants—limits that would cut mercury pollution by 91 percent, a huge victory given mercury’s effects on how kids think, learn and behave.

Unfortunately, polluters and their allies in the U.S. Senate fought back, even introducing a bill in August that would delay the EPA’s ability to impose such limits for at least three and a half years. The bill would allow more toxic mercury into Minnesota’s air and water, put tens of thousands of lives nationwide at risk, and set the stage for continued delays of protections that are already years overdue. We joined our national federation in calling on the Senate to oppose the dangerous proposal, instead of giving polluters a free pass to spew toxic air pollution.

How do you want to be remembered?
You can be remembered as someone who cared enough to keep up the fight for a cleaner, greener, healthier future by making a bequest to Environment Minnesota.

For information, call: 1-800-841-7299, or email PlannedGiving@EnvironmentMinnesota.org.

Our Green Ideas and Ham monthly breakfast forums bring Minnesotans together for discussions with experts on topics like transportation, solar power, clean water and farming. We hope you’ll join us soon.
Our campaign to put the sun to work for Minnesota continued gaining steam throughout the summer. Most notably, we worked with lawmakers to introduce a bill that would see Minnesota getting 10 percent of its energy from the sun by 2030. While the bill did not become law this session, our efforts helped lay important groundwork with lawmakers, the public, and Gov. Mark Dayton’s staff for a victory in the near future.

State Sen. Scott Dibble and State Rep. Kate Knuth introduced the Minnesota Solar Energy Act, which in addition to moving Minnesota to a 10 percent standard for solar energy by 2030, would establish a market for renewable energy credits and make it easier to install solar systems on public buildings. This was a big first step for the Solar Works for Minnesota Coalition on a path to significant solar energy use in our state.

The coalition gets stronger
The Solar Works for Minnesota coalition first took shape in the early summer of 2010, when a diverse group of non-profits, businesses and unions joined in pursuit of a future where we take advantage of the sun in Minnesota. Today our coalition includes more than 125 groups, making it the largest clean energy coalition ever formed in Minnesota. It includes partners such as the Minnesota Solar Energy Industries Association and BlueGreen Alliance, and Environment Minnesota is a key player. The coalition’s 10 percent by 2030 campaign was voted a Minnesota Environmental Partnership (MEP) priority in late 2010.

Businesses in our coalition, including Honeywell, tenKsolar and 3M, lobbied key members of the Legislature and met with leaders in the Dayton administration, forming relationships on which we will continue to build in 2012.

We hope that Sen. Dibble and Rep. Knuth will find support within their caucus as well as across the aisle during the 2012 session, and the statistics are heartening. An independent poll conducted by MEP in 2010 found strong support for a solar energy standard among all Minnesotans, across party lines: 88 percent of Democrats, 78 percent of Independents and 68 percent of Republicans supported a 10 percent standard.

Homegrown energy
It makes sense that Minnesotans would support a move to take advantage of a homegrown energy source that doesn’t run out—our state still spends $20 billion every year to import fossil fuels. It makes sense for business, too—representatives from more than 90 businesses attended a June meeting of solar manufacturers, evidence of the growing number of businesses getting into solar power.

In 2012, we will continue to work with Gov. Dayton, his commissioners and our bill’s authors to move the solar standard forward and will update our members on the progress we make in St. Paul throughout the year.

Tips to save energy
Efficiency is the cheapest and cleanest way to cut our fossil fuel use and pollution. It seems intuitive enough: Use less energy. Save fuel, and save money.

But with the numerous federal, state and local organizations and agencies ready to help you retrofit your home or business, offering rebates, discounts, financing and other kinds of incentives, it can be tough to figure out where to start.

Environment Minnesota Research & Policy Center designed our “Plug Into Clean Energy” guide to help you cut through the clutter and pick what works for you, so you can get on the path toward a more efficient home or business, one step at a time.

Here are five low- to no-cost things you can do right now to cut your energy use:

1. Replace incandescent light bulbs with CFLs to cut your lighting costs by up to 75 percent.
2. Wash your laundry using cold water only.
3. Plug appliances into power strips, and turn them off when not in use.
4. Put aluminum foil behind radiators to reflect heat back into the room.
5. Scrape—rather than rinse—dishes, and only run the dishwasher when you have a full load.

For the full list, visit EnvironmentMinnesota.org/center/plug-into-clean-energy
Environment Minnesota

Get off oil update

In July, Environment Minnesota released a report that outlined a comprehensive strategy to get off oil—in particular, a roadmap to reducing our state's oil dependence by 1.13 billion gallons. We were joined at the release by State Rep. Frank Hornstein, D.F.L. Party Lead for the Transportation and Finance committee. “Minnesota imports more than $20 billion of dirty energy each year, which harms our economy and our environment,” Hornstein said.

Policies that would get us off oil include increasing standards for fuel efficiency in cars—specifically, cementing the nationwide average of 54.5 miles per gallon; a clean fuels standard that will stimulate investment in electric vehicles and advanced fuel technologies; doubling access to public transportation; and additional policies to encourage telecommuting, smart growth, biking and walking. Getting off oil will “take time and the sustained commitment of policymakers and advocates, which is why we need to start now,” said Program Director Ken Bradley. We won a big victory when President Obama announced a 54.5 miles per gallon fleetwide standard, and we’ll be working in the coming months to see it through.

Our research showed that if a 60-mpg standard had been in place, the average Minnesota household would have saved $538 on gas this summer.

Read the full report, “Beating the heat with clean cars,” at: www.EnvironmentMinnesota.org/reports