On schools, potential for 750 megawatts of power

Solar power is the fastest-growing energy resource in America, and panels are being installed on public buildings across our nation. But in Minnesota, state policies don’t allow for large-scale solar development that could save taxpayers money, reduce our dependence on imported energy, and create jobs.

In California, for example, more than 90 public schools are installing solar panels, because the state government put in place policies that allow solar to thrive. It is estimated that California schools will be saving up to $1.5 billion over 30 years with the installation of solar power systems, according to a recent article published by Reuters. Further, California’s financing mechanisms have created the opportunity for schools to add solar and reduce their operating expenses immediately.

Minnesota could lead, but red tape blocks the way

Minnesota doesn’t have quite as much sunshine as California, but we have twice as strong a solar energy resource as Germany, the world leader in solar installations. Unfortunately, our state policies have not been friendly to the solar market, and have instead favored the large, entrenched, dirty energy industry that has a stranglehold on our government and our economy.

The Solar Works for Minnesota Coalition has analyzed the available roof space for solar panels on K-12 public schools and concluded that there is enough space for 750 megawatts of power, or approximately enough to power 750,000 homes. That’s a pretty good place to start.

Make your voice heard

We need your help to overcome the deep-rooted polluting interests at the state Capitol. Installing solar panels on public buildings will improve our lives by providing more clean energy, creating jobs in our communities, and reducing taxpayers’ expenses.

We need your help to ensure solar energy can shine for our state. Please contact your state legislators and ask them to support solutions that will result in solar installations on public buildings this session.

For House information please call: (651) 296-2146 or (800) 657-3550
For Senate information please call: (651) 296-0504 or (888) 234-1112

Solar film contest

Environment Minnesota’s Ken Bradley (right) with The Solar Hotdish team, winners of Environment Minnesota’s solar film contest for “The Man with the Golden Sun.”

View their video online at: www.EnvironmentMinnesota.org
As the legislative session begins in Minnesota, I’m hopeful that various interests can come together to address the interests and concerns of people across our state.

Poll after poll indicates that the public is strongly in favor of increasing solar energy. That’s why we worked to build the Solar Works for Minnesota Coalition, and this session we aim to bring solar to more public buildings.

In response to your enthusiasm, we’ve prioritized protecting our water and open spaces. When the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment passed in 2008, it had significant support in every legislative district.

I’m hopeful progress can be made, but will be counting on you to send emails, postcards and make phone calls to your leaders to ensure they continue to follow your priorities.

Sincerely,
Ken Bradley
Director

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.

Polluted waterways, devastated land
Sulfide mining threatens to devastate some of Minnesota’s most beloved areas—including the Boundary Waters and Lake Superior basin—with acid mine runoff and mercury. More people are taking notice and raising another important concern: It’s not a viable economic future for the region.

If new mines are developed, most of the wealth will leave the state to line the pockets of out-of-state companies and their investors. Once the metals are mined, northern Minnesota will be left with polluted waterways and devastated land. There is a real risk that one of the bright spot in today’s economy—sustainable tourism—could be seriously impacted. Sensing this risk, two northern Minnesota townships right in the heart of the potential mining district passed resolutions opposing sulfide mining.
From its headwaters in Itasca State Park in northern Minnesota, the Mississippi River grows mightier as it flows through the state, right through the heart of our major metropolis and through southern Minnesota, then on a 2,552 mile journey through 10 states and into the Gulf of Mexico.

Unfortunately, as it flows south, it also grows dirtier. It’s time to reverse the declining water quality in Minnesota’s mighty river.

The right direction
We’ve been working for years to close loopholes in the Clean Water Act that leave wetlands and streams—the vital filtering and feeding waterways to rivers like the Mississippi—vulnerable to pollution and development. Recent action from the Environmental Protection Agency is moving in the right direction to restore those protections.

Now is the time to limit the effects polluted runoff from industrial agriculture has on the Mississippi River. The agribusiness industry has spent millions of dollars influencing farm policy that favors irresponsible practices, and the biggest polluters continue to drag their feet and deflect blame.

But change is underway.

Part of the change is because of growing consumer demand for sustainably produced local food.

Minnesotans are buying more of their food from local co-ops, farmers markets, and joining CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture farms). More people, especially young people, are interested in becoming sustainable farmers or are producing their own food through urban farming.

But the system still benefits large-scale industrial operations that farm mostly corn and soybeans, penalizing farmers who do the right thing, and letting the biggest polluters off the hook.

A crucial point
In 2008, citizens sent a clear message that we value our rivers, lakes, and streams—voters overwhelmingly approved the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, which dedicated new funding to clean water and conservation efforts in Minnesota. This year will be another crucial point for Minnesotans to make their voices heard in support of clean water.

With 500 more lakes and river sections added in January to the state’s list of impaired waters, it’s time to move forward with restoration efforts. Cleanup plans for some of our state’s waterways, including the Mississippi River, are getting underway. We need your help to make sure our leaders hold the biggest polluters accountable.

Under the direction of Gov. Mark Dayton, the state needs to make sure restoration efforts lead to cleaner water, and that Legacy money is targeted to have the biggest impact. The state also needs to set clear standards this year for river pollution based on the best scientific evidence. We’ll keep you updated on these issues this year and call upon you to act when your help is most urgently needed.

Q&A with State Rep. Kate Knuth, author of the Minnesota Solar Energy Act

You have been a strong leader for renewable energy. Why have you prioritized renewable energy as a solution over other energy options?

I generally approach the future optimistically and actively. That is, I think people have a huge role in making the future better. Renewable energy fits right into this philosophy. Increasing our use of renewable energy makes people healthier, strengthens our economy, and creates jobs, which are all things I promote as a person and policy-maker. Renewable energy is a great means to get there.

Being a legislator from Minnesota makes me even more supportive of renewable energy. Our state has no traditional energy sources. No coal. No natural gas. No uranium. What Minnesota does have is huge renewable potential in the form of wind, solar, and biomass. We also have the most important resource for increasing renewable energy: smart, hard-working people. What Minnesotan wouldn’t want to promote our homegrown sources of energy and ingenuity?

Last session you introduced the Minnesota Solar Energy Act. Why are you optimistic about solar energy as a solution for our energy problems?

Energy is essential to our way of life, but energy production has increasing negative impacts on people and the planet. I’ve spent a lot of time studying the impacts of different forms of energy production, and solar ranks near the top in terms of minimizing impacts. Plus, solar technology is getting better, and the price is dropping.

take action

Hog farms are a major source of runoff pollution in the Mississippi River.

To take action, visit our new website at www.EnvironmentMinnesota.org/issues.
New events for 2012

Here at Environment Minnesota, we have been extremely pleased with our Green Ideas & Ham Breakfast Forums, attended by more than a thousand people and counting. So we’ve decided to develop two more forums, Coffee with Congress and the Solar Power Happy Hour.

Coffee with Congress will be a quarterly event, featuring congressional members discussing environmental challenges and solutions. We’ll pick the location based on the member of Congress we’re featuring each quarter.

The Solar Power Happy Hour will also be a quarterly event, for activists, enthusiasts and industry folks. We’ll gather at a local watering hole, enjoy a beverage, possibly a snack, and have a short presentation by someone in the field.

Keep your eyes out for our emails alerting you to the next events. We hope to see you there!

Our inaugural Solar Power Happy Hour on Monday, Dec. 5 at Pat’s Tap in Minneapolis was a huge success. Eighty people turned out to mingle with other solar power enthusiasts, advocates and industry types while sipping their favorite beverages. Our next Solar Power Happy Hour will be in March. You’ll be able to find details on the Solar Works for Minnesota page of our website at www.EnvironmentMinnesota.org.