

The Problem with Corporate Industrial Agriculture and Minnesota's Water

Some of the greatest threats to the quality and health of Minnesota's water are excess chemicals, fertilizers, animal waste, and sediment from irresponsible agricultural practices. There are many ways these pollutants enter our water, but runoff from single crop farmland and animal factory farms are two of the largest contributors because of lack of Clean Water Act authority or enforcement.

According to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), in the areas of the state where agriculture dominates the landscape, more than 60 percent — and in many places more than 80 percent — of streams and rivers are polluted where we cannot safely swim or recreate.

Unaccountable industrial corporate farming practices are bad for our water. Here are some reasons why:

Lack of buffers or living cover on the land

Cultivating farmland next to bodies of water without a buffer between the water and the plowed earth can allow pollutants like nitrogen and phosphorus to enter our water as agricultural runoff. Exposed soil is more likely to erode and leach sediments and pollutants.

Drain tile or subsurface tile

These artificial drainage systems can keep moisture levels consistent in the soil and increase productivity on the land. However, they also increase water flows into our ditches, streams, and rivers, which can lead to increased flooding and erosion.

Industrial factory farming

These “farms” confine tens of thousands of animals in very close quarters. These facilities produce huge amounts of animal waste, too much to be sustainably applied to the land as fertilizer.

Overuse of antibiotics

Approximately 80 percent of the antibiotics sold in the U.S. are used in meat and poultry production. The vast majority is used on healthy animals to promote growth, or prevent disease in crowded or unsanitary conditions. However, antibiotic use in animals can promote the development of hard-to-treat antibiotic-resistant superbugs that make people sick.

Overuse of pesticides, fertilizers, and other chemicals

In many watersheds where single crop agriculture or factory farming dominate the landscape, up to 80% of lakes and rivers don't fully support swimming because of excess phosphorus and nitrogen. Many communities are facing drinking water contamination as a result of using these chemical inputs.

All of these problems have one thing in common — they negatively impact our drinking water sources. This puts our health at risk and costs Minnesotans millions of dollars to clean up our water to ensure it's safe before we drink it. If we are going to achieve safe and affordable drinking water for everyone — especially in rural areas of Minnesota — we need to advocate for solutions that will clean up our lakes, rivers, and drinking water sources.



Some solutions for industrial corporate agriculture and making change in our communities:



Plant buffer strips, cover crops, and perennials

Vegetative buffer strips planted along the edges of fields are a simple, cost-effective measure for preventing polluted agricultural runoff from reaching our waters. Cover crops are grasses, legumes and perennial wildflowers planted on cropland when the fields would otherwise be bare causing more soil erosion. The plants and their roots help protect the soil and reduce erosion into rivers, lakes, and streams.



Reduce row crop used for ethanol

Advanced cellulosic ethanol from perennial vegetative feedstock is a healthy alternative to corn ethanol. More research and market development can help us achieve ethanol mandates in federal law and can be good for our water, land, air, and rural economies.

Reduce consumer demand for factory-farmed products

Consumers have been led to believe that factory farms and row crops are the most efficient ways to produce the food we need. But this doesn't have to be the case. We can take control and change the system by changing the kind and reducing the amount of factory-farmed meat we eat.

How you can get involved and create solutions in your community:

Runoff pollution from industrial agricultural sources is one of the biggest challenges facing us now and into the future. Clean Water Action needs your help to make sure clean water solutions become a reality. Below are ways that you can get involved in your community to help address pollution from industrial corporate agriculture:

Email, write, call, or meet with a decision-maker.

When you hear from us or see something in the news about pollution impacting water in your community, contact your elected officials. They are always interested to hear from constituents and often eager to help.

Write a Letter to the Editor. Letters to the Editor are a great way to educate other people in your community about clean water. Elected officials often read these letters to help them determine how they will vote.

VOTE! We need national, state, and local representatives who will stand up for safe drinking water, clean air, and a strong green economy. Every vote matters, especially in small local races that get fewer votes than statewide elections.

Volunteer at events for Clean Water Action.

At Clean Water Action we have opportunities to help elect environmental champions. Check out our sponsored events or join us for Water Action Day at the State Capitol and lobby your elected officials.

Connect with your community. When important issues come up in the news, at the State Capitol or in Washington D.C., reach out to your friends, family, and neighbors. Ask them to get involved in these activities with you.

Choose sustainable options when shopping. When heading to the grocery store preparing for the week or a BBQ with friends and family look for meat or veggies that were raised sustainably or organically.

Clean Water Action needs your help to make sure clean water solutions become a reality.

Help us reach our clean water goals. Join Clean Water Action's team of advocates — whether you have never done any volunteering before or are a veteran who has been working for clean water for decades, we need you!

Contact our Water Program Coordinator, Steve Schultz at sschultz@cleanwater.org.