

Testimony to the LCC Subcommittee on Water Policy

10-24-24

From Scott Sparlin, Executive Director, Coalition for a Clean Minnesota River, and
Coordinator/Facilitator for the Minnesota River Congress.

Co-Chairs Weber and Hemmingsen-Jaeger and Members, My name is Scott Sparlin, I am the Executive Director for the Coalition for a Clean Minnesota River and Coordinator/Facilitator for the Minnesota River Congress. I live in the heart of Minnesota River Valley in New Ulm, Brown County. The organizations I work for have been advocating on behalf of clean water and our state's namesake river for the past 36 years.

In 1988 an extensive study of the Minnesota River began at the direction of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) called the Minnesota River Assessment Project. After 2 years of comprehensive scientific study it revealed what firsthand observers had already intuitively anticipated, a severely polluted river system.

Subsequently in 1990 Minnesota Governor Arne Carlson directed the MPCA to begin a two-year planning process called the Minnesota River Implementation Project. This process was designed to create and develop actions which would result in the improvement of water quality conditions in the main stem and thirteen tributary watersheds. Those assembled by the MPCA represented a diverse cross section of stakeholders and citizens called the Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC). After 2 years of scientific presentations and extensive debate the committee produced a set of 10 recommendations for action.

One of the ten recommendations was to establish a Minnesota River Commission whose charge would be to ensure government accountability and citizen participation in meeting Minnesota River cleanup goals. The first charge of the new commission would be establishing goals for the cleanup effort. (It is hoped that this report and the work of the Minnesota River Assessment Project will guide and expedite the planning efforts of the Commission.) The board would also provide a broad oversight of major agency activities related to the Minnesota River and facilitate inter-agency cooperation. Further the board would evaluate the effectiveness of expenditures. They would also advocate for and educate people about the river and the restoration effort. Another responsibility would be to hold an annual event on the state of the river. The Commission would not be involved in the day-to-day operations of agencies but would have access to information and the decision-makers within those agencies. In addition to being accountable to the citizens of Minnesota the Commission would also report to the Governor and the Legislature.

In 1994 Senator Dennis Frederickson introduced a bill in the Minnesota Legislature of which I testified on behalf of to establish the Minnesota River Commission. The components of that bill are reflected in the Citizens Advisory Committee recommendation which are attached with this document. Although it has been 30 years since that time, many of the elements and personnel included need to be options considered today.

During that same session of the Legislature of which that bill was introduced, another bill had been introduced to create a different entity which membership consisted exclusively of one County Commissioner from each of the 36 counties of the Minnesota River Basin.

The state was quite willing at the time to turn the responsibility over to counties to see what they would do about the pollution challenges the river had at the time. Subsequently the county entity structure idea passed and the Minnesota River Commission bill failed. The Minnesota River Basin Joint Powers Board then was created and signed into law.

Fast forward to 2014, after 20 years of existence, 2 years of planning and even providing a way forward with funding options, the counties decided to call it quits and turn the responsibility of reducing pollution and damages caused in the Minnesota River Watershed over to the State of Minnesota.

After that there was no collective response from the State of Minnesota to address the continuing decline of water quality and quantity conditions which remains today.

That brings us to now. We have reached a water management crisis in the Minnesota River Watershed. Due to land use practices both urban and rural we continue to experience increased losses to infrastructure, business, recreation and a host of other societal costs which are at an unacceptable rate putting many Minnesotans at various degrees of risk. Exacerbating this condition is the climatic trend and future prediction of increased rainfalls in short periods of time. Flood rates from Summer rainfall now contribute more to flooding than normal spring snowmelt. The combination of all these factors leads first to small and medium sized tributary streambank erosion. Then the dislodged sediments combined with the increased rate flows enable even more sediments and nutrients to be delivered to our lakes, major tributaries, and main stems where they then flow downstream to the Mississippi River, Lake Pepin and ultimately the Gulf of Mexico. The time to get serious about this at a state level is long past due. That is why we feel it is time to create a Minnesota River Management Board that reflects a true cross-section of greater public representation than what was attempted prior. The makeup of the management board is certainly up for discussion/debate; however our network believes strongly that citizen membership should make up at least half of the voting membership. This was clearly reflected in feedback we received from our 16th Minnesota River Congress event held in June of this year.

I will close my testimony today by adding that the Water Quality and Storage Program which is administered by the Board of Water and Soil Resources is receiving high levels of interest from landowners in the Minnesota Basin and will be asking for 50 million dollars per biennium appropriations from the legislature. Our network urges the members of this committee to support the program and the request to the fullest extent possible.

Thank you for this opportunity and I will take any questions you may have at this time.