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From:
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Subject: Beyond Buffers: Investing in Clean Water for Resilient Communities

Communities around Lake Pepin have been anxiously awaiting implementation of a plan that will reduce the calamitous impacts of accelerated siltation at the head of the lake. The enforcement of Minnesota's only regulatory solution for non-point source pollution – a strip of vegetation, commonly known as a buffer – is a victory for those that care about and depend on Lake Pepin. Yet, the question remains, is it enough?

The water quality impairments in Lake Pepin are nearly a direct result of the impairments in the Minnesota River Basin – a primarily agricultural area covering more than 30 counties across the lower third of the state. In any given year, up to 90% of the total sediment load to Lake Pepin originates in the Minnesota River and its tributaries. Sediment flowing from the Minnesota River to Lake Pepin is not just a problem for the communities experiencing social and economic hardship adjacent the lake, but it also has major impacts upstream where the soil erodes.

Don and Becky Waskosky own a home on the Le Sueur River (a tributary of the Minnesota River) and shared their story with the Minnesota Humanities Center as part of the We Are Water MN initiative. "In 2010, a train of thunderstorms went across the southern part of the [Le Sueur] watershed and we lost 20-25 feet in our back yard within a day and a half," Don recalled.

Despite the vast amount of water quality research and data collected over the past ten years, the Minnesota River has only seen a 1% reduction in sediment loading, and Lake Pepin remains vulnerable to ecological collapse.

In 2015, Governor Mark Dayton set in motion legislation aimed at improving water quality through strips of vegetation known as buffers, which are now required along all public waterways and ditches. While buffers help to stabilize streambanks and have some ability to filter nutrients and loose soil, they tend to be less effective in areas with steep slopes or in places where tile drainage flushes water directly into a river system, bypassing the filtration that buffers can provide.

As government and non-government organizations alike work towards technical and market-based strategies to improve water quality, Minnesota can provide leadership to protect Lake Pepin and prevent further loss of farmland to unnecessary erosion by:

- Prioritizing upland practices in conjunction with the current buffer law.
- Emphasizing and investing in water storage.
- Reducing barriers that impact the willingness of landowners to change their production system.

We hope that you will be part of the solution.

Sincerely,