

# **To the Source: Moving Minnesota's Water Governance Upstream**



*Common ground. Common good.*

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Minnesota's 12,000 lakes and 92,000 miles of streams and rivers are central to the identity and the economy of the state and are a source of pride for Minnesota citizens. Thousands of Minnesotans are committed to protecting the state's waters, through their individual actions, volunteer and civic groups, and professional endeavors.

Minnesota's waters, however, face serious threats that our current water governance system is not prepared to confront.

Of Minnesota lakes and rivers that have been evaluated by the Pollution Control Agency, 40 percent have been found to be polluted to the extent that they do not meet the state's water quality standards. The principal causes of these impairments are widespread "nonpoint sources" of pollution, coming from behaviors on the land across the state. In recent decades, Minnesota has been successful in reducing pollution from defined "point sources," like industrial discharges and wastewater treatment plants, by regulating the relatively few sources of large amounts of pollution, but a different approach is needed to protect and restore waters from today's greatest threats.

In Minnesota's current water governance system, government entities bear the lion's share of the responsibility to assure the public has access to clean water. This system is not effectively protecting and improving the state's waters. Addressing today's diffuse water policy challenges will require more than changes to government.

It will require a much more central role for the millions of actors who are responsible for water problems and are capable of creating solutions – businesses, farmers, homeowners, civic groups, cities, watershed organizations, and all citizens.

**To effectively address today's challenges, the people and organizations that contribute to water problems must play a central role in the actions and decision making to address these problems.**

Minnesota needs a model of water governance that takes advantage of the imagination and capacity of the public to confront these challenges.

The timing is crucial. In 2008, Minnesota voters approved a sales tax increase that will dedicate funding to clean water, an estimated \$158 in 2010-11. We have not only the need but also the obligation to Minnesota

taxpayers to ensure that this money is spent effectively to improve the waters of our state. Doing so will demand significant changes in the way that water is governed.

## **FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS**

- 1. The strong public commitment to water resources in Minnesota is a great asset in addressing water challenges.** Our system of water governance should take advantage of the great base of individuals and organizations devoted and working to protect the state's waters.
- 2. Minnesota's waters face serious challenges, which are significantly different from the challenges of the past.** Today's greatest water policy challenges are diffuse, and equally widespread strategies are needed to address these challenges.

In the great majority of impaired waters, pollution is due to nonpoint source pollution from millions of actions and practices on the land that eventually finds its way into the water, as opposed to the point source challenges that dominated the past. Our governance system has not been set up to confront today's challenges.

- 3. We have insufficient data to demonstrate water quality trends, and the data is not made available in a manner that sufficiently supports public understanding and local decision making.**

Part of the problem lies in a lack of data: less than 20 percent of Minnesota's waters have been tested for impairments, and those that have been tested are distributed unevenly across the state. Data alone, however, is not sufficient; it must be communicated in a way that is meaningful to those who will use it.

- 4. Minnesota's system of water governance is fragmented, incoherent, and poorly coordinated to the extent that it is failing Minnesota on all five principles by which the Citizens League evaluated the system:**

- **Transparency:** The lines of responsibility and accountability are difficult to understand, even for professionals and the legislators responsible for funding and overseeing water governance.

- **Effectiveness:** There is a lack of evidence of overall effectiveness or cost efficiency.
- **Equity:** Responsibility, resources, and authority for addressing water issues are not equitably distributed by geography or by impact on pollution.
- **Accountability** is often unclear and frequently not enforced.
- **Appropriate scale:** The system is driven by individual program and agency goals. Particular tasks have been delegated from the federal government to the state and from state agencies to special districts, cities, and counties without comprehensive goals or a coherent picture of the whole system.

Achieving this collaborative model of governance will require a period of exploration and creation to discover what types of programs and processes are effective. To advance this recommendation, we should experiment with various processes for collaboration, some focused on changing behaviors around water resources and others on public engagement with government, to discover – and demonstrate – what works.

*The traditional model of government simply consulting with the public has not and will not result in the kind of broad-scale changes needed to address difficult problems like nonpoint source pollution.*

## 5. The people and organizations who are responsible for and affected by water problems must play a stronger role in the actions and decision making that make up our water governance system.

As the Citizens League wrote in 1993: “State lawmakers should embrace the view that the purpose of government is to design environments where individual citizens and institutions are systematically oriented to accomplish public purposes, and where they meet their own interests in the course of doing so. The traditional view has been that government solves problems by regulating, taxing and spending money on programs. That view has been discredited.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Build a collaborative model of governance that promotes the roles of those who contribute to water problems to likewise contribute to solutions.

The public must be deeply and authentically involved in the many aspects of water management: framing the issues, devising solutions, and working collaboratively with all stakeholders to address the challenges. Minnesota’s water resources should be seen as the responsibility of all citizens.

This will require changing both the actions and decisions that affect water resources and the processes for public collaboration with government. It will require that the public be better informed about water issues, that the public’s sense of ownership and responsibility for our water resources be strengthened, and that structures be developed to facilitate collaboration not only between the public and government but also among peers. We must also create mechanisms that will incent certain behaviors and inhibit others.

### 2. Redesign government roles and responsibilities to promote this collaborative model with the public and among government entities.

At the state level, government should:

- Lead an effort that engages the public and local governments to determine long-term priorities for water policy in Minnesota.
- Develop measurable benchmarks to track progress towards these priorities, ensuring that accountability for progress on each priority area is clear.
- Strengthen coordination among state agencies and between state and local units of government.
- Support local governments by providing data and tools that can be used by those implementing policies at the local level and by highlighting local government successes.

At the local level, government should:

- Work on the ground to implement policies set at the state level, including by building the capacity of local residents, businesses, and organizations to address water issues.

To advance this recommendation, we must next bring together those people who will be responsible for accomplishing these ends – lawmakers and professionals in state and local government – to determine the most effective means.

### 3. Create a single online water resource information hub to provide data and analysis on the status and trends of Minnesota’s waters in a manner that is useful to the public, professionals, and water policy decision makers.

To advance this recommendation, we should bring together people from government organizations, research institutions, and the public to determine more specifically how to best design this resource.