



Environmental groups petition EPA to use emergency authority to address imminent threat to drinking water from nitrate pollution in SE Minnesota

Industrial farming practices are leading cause of pollution in the state's sensitive karst region

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St. Paul, Minnesota – A group of 11 local, state, and national environmental groups alarmed by nitrate-contaminated drinking water in Southeastern Minnesota petitioned federal authorities to intervene in the growing public health crisis this week.

The Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy (MCEA) filed the emergency petition with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under the federal Safe Drinking Water Act Monday. In addition to MCEA, petitioners include the Environmental Working Group (EWG), the Minnesota Well Owners Organization (MNWOO), the Center for Food Safety, Clean Up the River Environment (CURE), Food & Water Watch, Friends of the Mississippi River, Land Stewardship Project, Minnesota Division Izaak Walton League of America, Minnesota Trout Unlimited, and the Public Health Law Center.

The petitioners allege that state and local agencies have failed to “do what is needed to correct the pervasive threat to human health” and ask the EPA to use its emergency authority to mandate a moratorium on new concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) in Minnesota’s karst region until nitrate levels decline. The petition also makes several other requests of the EPA detailed at the bottom of this release.

“The persistent contamination of drinking water by nitrate in the karst region shows that Minnesota is not living up to its responsibility to protect public health,” **said Carly Griffith, MCEA’s water program director.** “No resident of our state should have to worry about what’s in their water. We need a more robust and equitable approach to regulating industrial agriculture that protects the health of all our residents, and that approach has to include private well owners.”

“We need help. Despite a clear understanding of our groundwater sensitivity and the risk factors that have led to widespread nitrate contamination in the Karst our drinking water quality keeps getting worse,” said **Jeff Broberg, a professional geologist, Director of MNWOO and owner of a nitrate contaminated well in Winona County.** “We need help to thoroughly assess and effectively communicate the risks and we need to jointly develop a public resolve to solve the problem. We think the US EPA can help.”

“From EWG’s many years of analyzing water pollution in Minnesota, we know that nitrate contamination of drinking water systems and private wells is already bad and getting worse,” **said Ethan Bahe, senior GIS analyst with the Environmental Working Group.** “Harmful farming practices overload sensitive lands in the southeast part of the state with animal manure and fertilizer. The EPA must intervene where state and local responses have fallen short.”

“Nationwide and in Minnesota, safe drinking water is under assault. While Big Ag pollutes with impunity, it is rural communities that pay the price. The widespread well contamination threatening public health in Minnesota’s karst region is part of a broader pattern across the country – EPA must take action,” said **Tarah Heinzen, Food & Water Watch Legal Director.**

Industrial farming practices - CAFOs and row crops - have led to rising nitrate levels in drinking water across the state, but the concentrations are particularly high in the karst region, where the unique geology of the land allows nitrogen spread on agricultural fields through manure and commercial fertilizer to rapidly infiltrate groundwater.

The problem is especially concerning for private well owners who have no recourse to protect their water supply from nearby pollution sources. Some townships in the karst region have reported that more than 40 percent of private wells in their jurisdictions have nitrate well levels above the public health limit. Private well owners are predominantly rural and those with contaminated wells are also more likely to have lower incomes.

Public water supplies are not immune. Petitioners’ review of relevant data indicates both public and private drinking water supplies in the karst region “routinely exceed federal and state drinking water standards, putting the health of (all) area residents at serious risk.”

Nitrate contamination is tied to a host of health conditions, including birth defects, blue baby syndrome, various cancers, heart, thyroid and lung disease and anemia.

Fish kills in the area have also increased in frequency and intensity in recent years, illustrating the threat rising nitrate levels also pose to aquatic life in the region.

This is the first time the EPA has been petitioned under the federal Safe Drinking Water Act to intervene to protect Minnesotan’s drinking water from nitrate pollution.

In addition to a moratorium on expanding or opening new CAFOs, the petition asks the EPA to:

- Require parties responsible for nitrate contamination to supply free, clean drinking water to private wells in the area.
- Require CAFOS and other farms using nitrogen fertilizers to change their practices
- Investigate Minnesota’s CAFO requirements to better understand why they are failing to prevent nitrate pollution
- Determine what enforcement measures should be implemented to reduce nitrate pollution from CAFOs and other industrial agricultural practices

- Conduct additional investigation in the karst region to pinpoint the leading sources of nitrate pollution in the area and provide a timetable for curbing their contamination
- Notify the public of nitrate contamination levels

To request an Interview regarding the petition, or to receive a copy of the document, please contact Sarah Horner at the contact information listed at the top of this release.

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