

**Farming & Water**  
**Voter Attitudes – Southern Minnesota**  
**October 2010**

Prepared by *ActionMedia* for  
Freshwater Society  
MN Environmental Partnership

## INTRODUCTION

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*“It’s a chemical world of farming now. When I was a kid, you used to hoe beans or, you know where you were riding in a weed rider and spraying that one weed. I know when I was a kid, there was butterflies all over the place. You don’t see any Swallowtail butterflies anymore. When you spray, that is getting sprayed over the whole works, you’re killing a lot of stuff.”*  
Jed, Fairmont

*Fairmont group exchange:  
“Chemicals. The whole chemical thing is...” - Dawn*

*“We have a very high rate of cancer around here. Per the Mayo Clinic. It’s bad.” Amber  
“It’s not only that, it’s other conditions too that we have that are higher than other areas.”  
Lindsey*

*“We have one of the richest farming areas in the United States and we’re paying for it health-wise, I think.” Nikki*

*“So many farms have got to be factory farms and ones where you have 2,000 cattle and, you know, the chickens where they have millions of them. I’m afraid that will continue. I’d rather not see it but I’m afraid that’s the way it’s going.” Pat D, Dakota County*

Four focus groups were conducted with 18 respondents from Dakota County (Lakeville, Burnsville, Eagan, Apple Valley) and 12 from the city of Fairmont and surrounding areas. The 16 women and 14 men are voters who follow the news, with a mix of ages and political orientations (10 Democratic, 12 Republican, 8 Independent). The research focused on attitudes toward agricultural practices as they affect water quality, and public solutions to water pollution problems. Four respondents were currently or previously employed in agriculture, fourteen came from farm families or had relatives who were farmers, and some of the others count farmers among their personal acquaintances.

The two sets of groups reflected similar views and attitudes toward farmers. Past research around the US has repeatedly shown that advocates for change in environmental and agricultural practices should not “blame the farmer” because citizens largely think of farmers as natural stewards of the land who are doing all they can.

Although the women in the suburban group reflected much of this in their comments, especially regarding the costs to farmers of changing practices in relation to water quality, the other three groups, particularly so in Fairmont, expressed a high degree of skepticism about farmers’ motivations and true economic needs. Respondents also expressed some resentment of large farm operators. This finding, surprising to the researchers, is supported by the reported experiences of advocates working on these issues in rural parts of the state.

These respondents believe that changes in agriculture have had negative effects on health and safety, on the local economy, and on soil and water. They do not agree with the proposition that American farming should seek the highest yields at the lowest cost. They distinguish between types of farmers and farm operations, and are concerned about large and corporate operations. Particularly in Dakota County, and in Fairmont as well, they see opportunity for agriculture to be more diversified, including growing more food for local consumption.

These findings suggest important opportunity to influence public discourse, and to structure communications targeted to elected officials from rural districts. ActionMedia recommends that communications resources be allocated to delineating and differentiating specific types of agricultural operations, and their local impacts on water quality. Local constituents in rural districts must be given the confidence they need to express beliefs they already have. This importantly includes strategies that will increase their perception that area farmers are being given all the information and opportunity they need to make changes that are practical and effective.

*ActionMedia*

720 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. NE, Minneapolis, MN 554134

(612) 331-6466

[actionmedia@actionmedia.org](mailto:actionmedia@actionmedia.org)

## FARMING

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*“As farming becomes more corporatized, what does ADM care if they - or whoever the farm entity is - what do they care if the stream and Canon Falls is getting polluted? They can go anywhere and get land where they want.” Steve, Burnsville*

*“I hate to say it but the farmers you know, they want the more land. So if there is a house there it is going to be gone. You know, they just want more. Everybody wants more and in a way, it is going to be good. It is better for everybody around here. Jobs, HighGate, everybody says it is a great place to work for those people.” Dennis, Fairmont*

*“I would disagree. I am a teacher and the smaller communities have really suffered because of the farms. The kids aren't out there in the country anymore, so the schools are dwindling. The people are moving to the bigger cities” Roger, Fairmont*

*“The person renting the land wants to get the best yield. If corn prices are the best, they're going to keep planting corn year after year after year. My mother-in-law rents out land, and she used to farm the land, and now she sees that people aren't rotating, they aren't taking care of the land the way that she used to.” Jerry, Dakota County*

Respondents discuss changes in farming, within their lifetimes, in terms of the size and consolidation of operations, increased mechanization, and increased use of chemicals and fertilizers.

They predict that the trend, toward fewer and larger farm operations, will continue, but express dismay or unhappiness at this prospect. They believe that larger operations are more dependent on chemicals, and some express the view that larger operations may not pay as much attention to food safety. As previously found in qualitative research elsewhere, respondents are concerned about the health effects of food produced at an industrial scale, mentioning recent and past food recalls, and a range of diseases and conditions that they believe may be caused or aggravated by exposure to chemicals in food.

Fairmont men describe the increased size of operations as “good and bad”, and “just the way it is”. But they agree that driving smaller farms out of business has some negative impacts the local economy and community. In both Dakota County and Fairmont groups, several respondents express resentment of the large operators “driving their Cadillac’s”. Several respondents raise the issue of opportunity for the smaller operator – these individuals can’t compete, and respondents regret that young people are not likely to be able to get into farming unless they inherit a large operation.

These large, successful operators are variously referred to as “corporate”, “contract” or “industrial” operations. They are viewed as less concerned about the stewardship of water and soil resources than about their bottom line. While respondents reason that this is human nature, or a natural aspect of being in business, and therefore do not want to make judgments about the characters of the farmers involved, still they reveal that they do not think this attitude is in their own or the public interest. Some also state that operators working land that they lease are less inclined to protect soil and water resources than farmers working their own land.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Provide specific information about farms within a given region: how much land is leased, who the largest operators are and percentage or total they control, how much land goes to what purposes and under what corporate agreements. Use this kind of information to distinguish among farms, and to support arguments that different solutions may be needed for specific circumstances.

While they believe current trends will continue, several respondents, especially in Dakota County but to some extent in Fairmont, also see a smaller counter trend, toward diversified or niche farming, and marketing directly to consumers. Dakota County respondents refer to the increase in Hmong truck farming, and indicate that they themselves buy fresh vegetables from these sources.

*ActionMedia*

720 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. NE, Minneapolis, MN 554134

(612) 331-6466

[actionmedia@actionmedia.org](mailto:actionmedia@actionmedia.org)

**MODERATOR:** *“American agriculture feeds the world; high yields at the lowest possible cost is the priority for our farming and our farm policy.”*

*“Yeah, but then they’re the ones that are making the millions. None of us - I’m not a millionaire. I don’t make a million dollars a year and work 400 hours a year.” Amber, Fairmont*

*“We can manufacture things cheaper too but we don’t have the black smoke. We have to put the pollution control end of it in and the companies have to pay for that in order so we don’t wreck the ozone layer and all that. It is the same thing with the farmer. It is business and it is part of pollution. And just like the factory that can’t blow black smoke up in the air, even though it costs them a little bit more to change all that, they had to do it And so does the farmer, you know.”  
Jed, Fairmont*

**RECOMMENDATION:** Talk about diversifying the local agricultural economy, in terms of increasing opportunity for young people and families to farm, increasing value added to local economy (including food for local consumption). Explicitly state that increases in new farm opportunities will not replace commodity farming, but that the current farm economy leaves no room for more diversified and smaller operations.

All respondents were read the Moderator statement at the left. No respondents showed a positive reaction to the proposition. They are more interested in (safely) feeding America than the world, and ask about the price of “low cost” in terms of soil and water quality, food safety and the local economy.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Repeat this statement, quoting spokespersons for the status quo, and refute it directly. Talk about the uncounted costs of “cheap food” in health, environmental damage, and growth of the local economy.

*ActionMedia*

720 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. NE, Minneapolis, MN 554134  
(612) 331-6466  
[actionmedia@actionmedia.org](mailto:actionmedia@actionmedia.org)

## CLEAN WATER

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*“There’s five lakes right in town. Each of them has become more, let’s say polluted is putting it as plain, for all the algae and weeds, in the last couple years. I fish and boat. Sometimes I don’t want to go on it anymore.” Quinton, Fairmont*

*“I don’t even cook with our water. I’ve done the little test with Macaroni and Cheese - boiling it in Fairmont water and serving it. And then I get the water where my dad lives and I use his water. And I’ve tried this and there’s a big difference. My son’s friends will come over and, “Well, we want the other water” because I have a jug of that. I’m not kidding. It’s weird. Fairmont water’s no good.” Amber*

Attitudes toward local waters and their quality are largely the same as in past research by ActionMedia (“Upstream – Downstream Voter Attitudes”) and others, conducted around the US including Minnesota and the Midwest.

Voters do not know they live in a watershed. This is not merely an indication of lack of knowledge of the word “watershed”: it reflects a world view that does not directly correlate water quality with land practices, except in episodic terms.

As in other groups, there is a difference of opinion, and a degree of uncertainty expressed, about whether conditions in local surface waters are the same or worse than in the past, but no respondents consider them to be improved, and all agree they are impaired to one degree or another. Most cite green algae and slime in lakes and they have heard fish and e coli warnings. This raises concerns of personal safety, and of loss of habitat and recreational opportunity. They speak from a perspective of future generations, and of personal loss when describing the current state of affairs.

Respondents are particularly concerned about the quality and safety of their drinking water. In Dakota County, this appears to be geography-specific, even within the City of Burnsville. In Fairmont, respondents are thoroughly dissatisfied with the quality of their drinking water.

**RECOMMENDATION:** It is important to talk about rain falling on the land, and then running over and through the land and into streams. Consistently provide mental pictures of water being used on the land and returned to the river, and of land uses that protect or degrade the water. Do not expect the term watershed to be understood.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Find ways to localize information about water quality in sections of rivers and streams, and provide updated information about degradations and improvements.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Make human health and safety the *fundamental* value associated with surface water restoration and pollution control. Talk about drinking water and drinking water sources, downstream as well as locally.

*ActionMedia*

720 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. NE, Minneapolis, MN 554134

(612) 331-6466

[actionmedia@actionmedia.org](mailto:actionmedia@actionmedia.org)

## AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES

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*“It’s just shocking. I mean if we were going 55 miles an hour down a 30-mile an hour street, that type of a law would be enforced for our safety. And if this in fact protects our personal safety and our eating habits then I think it would be something that should be enforced.” Courtney, Dakota County*

*“The problem is that you can put a law on the books, but they don’t give any money to the government to enforce it and it just seems like - then don’t make the law if you’re not going to provide - I mean half the farmers probably don’t even know it’s a law.” Sarah*

*“I think people would like to do the right thing, and probably there’s an economic reason why not. I’m excluding, perhaps, some larger corporations, perhaps, who just find loopholes, but, generally, it’s probably not a bad idea to say we’re going to help make sure it gets done this time because we need to help improve the water quality.” Matt, Dakota County*

*“I think we should note here education. You know, some money should be spent in making sure people are notified and educated of what their responsibilities are.” Jerry, Dakota County*

As in past research, respondents are unfamiliar with the term “buffer”, but readily recognize and are positive about the concept, which they think of and describe in terms of a filter. No respondents were aware of existing law regarding agricultural buffers, and all readily believe the law is not followed, based on their own observation, especially as regards ditches.

Respondents strongly agree that existing laws should be enforced and obeyed, and believe there is a direct link between lack of enforcement and willfully ignoring the law. However, respondents assume that most farmers are unaware of the law, and therefore reason that some direct education, and time for making changes, will be more fair than immediately fining violators.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Information about requirements to establish natural buffers around streams and lakes should be the focus of a very public campaign. While it would appear to be targeted to the farmers themselves (like existing educational campaigns) its actual purpose would be to raise awareness that farmers are obviously not complying and enforcement is required.

Respondents believe that, in addition to educating farmers about practices that will reduce polluted run-off, a case for the proven effectiveness, and for the practicality of implementing the changes, must be strongly made. They reason that farmers will be disinclined to change current practices unless they can be convinced that the changes are necessary, effective, and in the farmer’s and the community’s interest.

Respondents are reluctant, as a matter of general principle, and based on their judgment that it’s not likely to work, to call for mandates and new requirements. They were told the story of the failure, at Lake Independence, to secure the voluntary participation of farmers, with incentive money provided, in a water clean-up plan requiring changes in manure management. Most groups assumed there was a problem in the way the program was presented, that caused the farmers to opt out. Only one respondent, in Fairmont, concluded from the story that, where voluntary measures don’t work, there must be a requirement.

Interestingly, other members of the group, while expressing no disagreement, were extremely reluctant to commit themselves to this position – they sought instead to change the subject, or raise conditions.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Talk about the shared and individual responsibility to take care of the water. This stretches from yard work to farm work. Farming should not be criticized directly, but it should be clearly stated that farmers must be held to the same standard.

*ActionMedia*

720 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. NE, Minneapolis, MN 554134

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[actionmedia@actionmedia.org](mailto:actionmedia@actionmedia.org)

## LEGACY AMENDMENT AND ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

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*“There again, famers being selfish. You know, that’s just how I - I can probably say that because I don’t come from a farm family. But it just seems like what they’re doing to better themselves is hurting everybody else.” Lindsey, Fairmont*

*“I think for most farmers - sorry, most farmers, I guess I’m a little bit unsympathetic. And I think they should bear the cost, put it in the food and then we all pay a little bit more for our beef, because most of that corn goes to them, you know. And the products that corn and soybean get put into. I think that’s how it should work.” Mike, Dakota Co.*

*“I’m willing to pay a - whatever percent of my taxes to protect the soil and the water around me.” Patricia P*  
*“But I also think in time that if there is a cost to it, that the consumer is going to have to take on some of that cost. If it costs more to grow corn because we’re reducing runoff, then we’re going to have to pay more for the corn, which adds more to make the corn syrup and everything’s going to cost a little bit more.” Sarah, Dakota Cuntly*

In reasoning about the costs to the farmer of obeying the law on buffers and making other changes, respondents are mixed in their attitudes. There is an ideological divide, between those who believe that it is appropriate for government to provide incentives to promote behavior in the public interest, and those who view government in a more limited role. All agree that government has an obligation to enforce (or repeal) existing law.

The attitudes toward farming found in these groups differ from similar research done elsewhere, and that may suggest there is also a geographic divide between rural and urban populations. The women in Dakota County responded more consistently with other qualitative research, in wanting to assure that farmers who are not following these practices will not suffer financially from doing so. They reason that farming is a difficult business, and that farmers may be forced out of business if their costs go up.

Most respondents are doubtful to negative about cash payments. In the Fairmont and Dakota men’s group, the general sense was that farmers are responsible for the water they use, and for the water that runs off their farm. They believe that, where hardship can be demonstrated, there should be some support for farmers, and where changes are instituted, they may have to be phased in. But they believe the on-going cost of protecting soil and water is a cost of doing business, and that ultimately, it will increase food prices. They state that this is acceptable to them as consumers, and an appropriate consequence of protecting water quality. This view was also expressed in the Dakota women’s group.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Talk explicitly in terms of costs – of degraded water, of public investment in reclamation, of potential costs (and savings) to farmers of making needed changes. Talk about the hidden cost of cheap food, and, especially, about the profit margins of major food and farm corporations and processors.

The Farm Bill is poorly understood, but respondents view farm subsidies with considerable skepticism, even more so in the Fairmont groups. “Being paid to not farm” (as opposed to being paid for conservation practices) is the most common characterization of farm subsidies, but respondents with a wider knowledge of the programs also believe farmers are taking advantage of the system. One respondent suggested, to the agreement of others in the group, that better policy would be to provide farmers with no-interest loans, protected by a lien, to help with the costs of changes to protect water quality.

*ActionMedia*

720 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. NE, Minneapolis, MN 554134  
 (612) 331-6466  
[actionmedia@actionmedia.org](mailto:actionmedia@actionmedia.org)

*“I think we need to see a project accomplish its goal so we can say - if we do choose then to distribute - we have a model. This happened here, and I would think that maybe the next time have it, you know, a few other areas and then have some positive. And then like you said, be able to spread it out, but actually have something. Accountability is huge.”* Cynthia, Dakota County

*“My initial thought was to just distribute it around the state but as Jed explained his thinking, I kind of changed my thinking that it would be better, to focus. Because that way you would have ways to prove and to educate the farmers and say this worked before, this is how it was done. If it was spread out, some people will do it. Others won’t, they will just take the money and who knows what they would do with it.”* Roger, Fairmont

However, at least a portion of these voters clearly remember their support for the Legacy Amendment, and express strong interest in its tangible results. They want to know how the money is being spent, and how that has resulted in cleaner water. They believe voters are not adequately informed of progress, and that state officials must be held accountable for how funds are used.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Concerted efforts to make a public accounting for the funds and their benefits should be useful in maintaining support. There should be some urgency here. The current election has already seen references to the Legacy fund as raising taxes and could be a point of attack if people remain uninformed about the use and benefits. Reinforcing the good work can inoculate against the squandered or misapplied tax messages.

Respondents have a strong preference for targeting Legacy dollars to water quality projects that will yield the highest return in terms of improving water quality, and especially for projects that can be viewed as demonstrations of what works, for replication elsewhere. Significantly, some respondents had an initial impulse to prefer distributing the funds, but most shifted their thinking after listening to the reasoning of others. Support for well targeted expenditures was often coupled with the observation that this is the beginning of the on-going Legacy projects, and that it’s important to start with careful targeting, and be open to broadening the distribution of funding as projects progress.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Emphasis should be on the initial years of the Legacy Fund, and the importance of providing return on investment, doing it correctly for lasting and replicable effect. Voters think of these funds as they do about virtually all issues of public expenditure – do it right, do what you say you are going to do, don’t waste, misdirect or play politics with the money.

*ActionMedia*

720 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. NE, Minneapolis, MN 554134  
(612) 331-6466  
[actionmedia@actionmedia.org](mailto:actionmedia@actionmedia.org)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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- The key recommendation from these findings is to distinguish between types of farms and farm interests, and frame the questions not as debate between agriculture and environment, but a debate within agriculture: how can farm practices better serve the needs of the community?
- Provide specific information about farms within a given region: how much land is leased, who the largest operators are and percentage or total they control, how much land goes to what purposes and under what corporate agreements. Use this kind of information to distinguish among farms, and to support arguments that different solutions may be needed for specific circumstances.
- Talk about diversifying the local agricultural economy, in terms of increasing opportunity for young people and families to farm, increasing value added to local economy (including food for local consumption). Explicitly state that increases in new farm opportunities will not replace commodity farming, but that the current farm economy is shutting out more diversified and smaller operations.
- Repeat the industry mantra – feed the world, highest yields at lowest cost – by quoting spokespersons for the status quo, followed by direct refutation. Talk about the uncounted costs of “cheap food” in health, environmental damage, and growth of the local economy. Talk explicitly about costs – of degraded water, of public investment in reclamation, and of potential costs (and savings) to farmers of making needed changes.
- It is important to talk about rain falling on the land, and then running over and through the land and into streams. Consistently provide mental pictures of water being used on the land and returned to the river, and of land uses that protect or degrade the water.
- Find ways to localize information about water quality in sections of rivers and streams, and provide updated information about degradations and improvements.
- Make human health and safety the fundamental value associated with surface water restoration and pollution control. Talk about drinking water and drinking water sources, downstream as well as locally.
- Talk about the shared and individual responsibility to take care of the water. This stretches from yard work to farm work. Farming should not be criticized directly, but it should be clearly stated that farmers must be held to the same standard.
- Information about requirements to establish natural buffers around streams and lakes should be the focus of a very public campaign. While it would appear to be targeted to the farmers themselves (like existing educational campaigns) its actual purpose would be to raise awareness that farmers are obviously not complying and enforcement is required.
- Concerted efforts to make a public accounting for the Legacy funds and their benefits should be useful in maintaining support. There should be some urgency here. The current election has already seen references to the Legacy fund as raising taxes and could be a point of attack if people remain uninformed about the use and benefits. Reinforcing the good work can inoculate against the squandered or misapplied tax messages.
- Frame Legacy funds in terms of return on investment and on results for lasting and replicable effect. Voters think of these funds as they do about virtually all issues of public expenditure – do it right, do what you say you are going to do, don’t waste, misdirect or play politics with the money.

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