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WATER, ART & ECOLOGY



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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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University of Minnesota

Contact Us

Open Rivers
Institute for Advanced Study
University of Minnesota
Northrop
84 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054
Fax: (612) 625-8583
E-mail: openrvrs@umn.edu
Web Site: <http://openrivers.umn.edu>

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PERSPECTIVES

MAKING THE MOST OF THE GOVERNOR'S WATER SUMMIT

By Alicia Uzarek

When over 800 Minnesotans gather in a windowless basement on the first beautiful spring-like day, there must be a compelling reason. In this case the reason was water.

In spring 2015, the Pollution Control Agency released a report stating that half or fewer of the lakes in Minnesota watersheds dominated by agricultural and urban land fully support the standard for safe swimming, among other things. Residents of the Land of 10,000 [Beloved] Lakes were alarmed and asked for change.

Gov. Mark Dayton and his administration heard that call and one year later hosted the first-ever Governor's Water Summit in downtown St. Paul on Saturday, February 27, 2016. The goal was to bring public attention to the serious challenges facing Minnesota's water and bring together citizens, water-quality experts, legislators, regulators and other stakeholders to propose meaningful solutions to address these challenges.



Gov. Mark Dayton delivers the opening remarks of Minnesota's first-ever Governor's Water Summit. Photo by Alicia Uzarek, courtesy of Friends of the Mississippi River.

FMR & Partners Strategize

When the Governor makes an environmental issue a priority, environmental groups rally and respond.

Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) is one of those environmental groups. FMR works to engage community members to protect, restore, and enhance the Mississippi River and its watershed in the Twin Cities region. When we heard of the summit, we collaborated with our friends in the Minnesota Environmental Partnership (MEP)—a statewide coalition of environmental and conservation nonprofits working for clean energy, clean water, and investments in Minnesota’s Great Outdoors through policy initiatives, public education, and community events—to formulate a strategy for the summit.

Knowing a diverse group of attendees representing many interests would be present, FMR and our partners worked together to make sure our

ideas to improve Minnesota’s waters were heard loud and clear. The first step was ensuring that FMR’s advocates and environmental advocates throughout the MEP had a chance to sign up for the summit. As soon as the date was announced, the invitations were out—which was a very good thing, as the summit reached capacity in just a couple of days!

Next, we worked with our MEP collaborators to host a Water Summit Briefing. Over snacks and homebrew, 30 volunteer advocates discussed our top priorities and talking points and enjoyed great conversation with local water quality policy experts. In addition to these in-person efforts, FMR and our partners used social media, with the hashtag #ActOnMNwater, to spread our talking points and share that any Minnesotan with online access could weigh-in via a portal set up by the governor’s administration, both to offer and rank proposed clean water solutions.

Results and Next Steps

The day of the summit, staff from FMR, our partner groups, and environmental advocates put on buttons and stickers with our messages. We then split up and successfully carried our core messages into many of the summit’s breakout sessions. All suggested ideas were recorded and then shared via the online portal, where many of our top clean water priorities also received top votes, including:

- Fully funding the Forever Green Initiative at the University of Minnesota to develop innovative, economically viable cropping systems that also protect our land, air, and water.
- Advancing biofuels from perennial crops by establishing a state perennial cellulosic biofuel standard requiring at least 50 percent of the ethanol blended into Minnesota gasoline be derived from perennial or cover crops by 2026.
- Establishing mandatory drain-tile permits for agricultural operations. Drainage authorities deserve to know when and where drain tile lines are patched into their systems, and downstream communities and drinking water suppliers deserve accountability from upstream polluters.

Without a doubt, the Water Summit also generated a significant media buzz, helping to highlight the need to address today's biggest source of water pollution: agriculture (see "media" below). The summit also achieved its goal of drawing a variety of water interests to the table. However, voices of Minnesota's minority populations appeared to be underrepresented. This was made especially clear through a short protest by an American Indian group during Governor Dayton's keynote speech opening the day. The Governor did want to hear from all groups and

agreed to meet with the group immediately after his opening remarks.

Moving forward, FMR and our partners look forward to seeing how we can turn the summit's many innovative ideas into real, measurable changes. We'll continue to work with the governor's office to ensure that the best ideas move up from these basement conversations into noticeable improvements for Minnesotans' waters, communities, and wildlife.

Media Coverage

FMR staff were featured prominently in the media before and after the Water Summit.

- Gov. Mark Dayton struggles to reconcile desire for clean water and a strong farm economy, by J. Patrick Coolican and Josephine Marcotty, Star Tribune.
- Can we save Minnesota's water? These 800 are going to try, by Christopher Magan and Dave Orrick, Pioneer Press.

- Gov. Dayton rallies support for clean water at summit after facing a protest, by J. Patrick Coolican, Star Tribune.

- Related: FMR's press statement.

To learn more about FMR, including how to take part in their work, go to fmr.org.

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About the Author

Alicia Uzarek is the Policy Advocate for Friends of the Mississippi River, a group that engages people to protect, restore, and enhance the river in the Twin Cities region. She works closely with partners to build community support for the public values of the river. Alicia's background includes environmental planning, program development, community organizing and coalition building. She holds a master's degree in urban and regional planning from the University of Minnesota Humphrey School and a bachelor's degree in psychology, global studies, and art from Pacific Lutheran University.