Dayton proposes new water quality goal without regulations

Gov. Mark Dayton
Jackson Forderer for MPR News 2015

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Gov. Mark Dayton on Friday proposed a new goal of 25 percent water quality improvement in the state by 2025, saying the pollution problems will get worse if they're ignored.

Unlike his buffer initiative that requires perennial vegetation along all rivers, streams and lakes, Dayton said the new goal won't contain such mandates.

"It will be a call to action," Dayton said during an appearance at the Minnesota Environmental Congress in St. Paul. "We have to create an ethic in Minnesota that everyone is responsible for clean water through their daily practices, through their business practices, through their farming practices.

"I hope people will get so enthused by this and so cognizant of the dangers we face now that they will say 25 percent is not enough."

Dayton said if the state remains on its current path, water quality will improve by only 6 to 8 percent by 2034.

Most of the improvements to Minnesota's water quality have come from better cleanup technology from so-called point sources, such as wastewater treatment plants. But farm and stormwater runoff remain significant sources of water pollution.

Minnesota's rural landscape is dominated by row crops, and nutrients — both naturally occurring and applied through fertilizers — make their way to streams, rivers and lakes. Algae blooms have been one of the more significant water quality concerns resulting from excess nutrients in the water.

Environmental groups applauded Dayton for making water quality a priority but said major changes are needed to reach the goal.

"Business as usual won't get us there," said Whitney Clark, executive director of Friends of the Mississippi River. Clark said the state needs more farmers to plant perennial crops, which hold more nutrients in the soil and provide cover year-round to prevent erosion.
Meanwhile, Republicans have criticized Dayton's buffer law, saying it threatens farmers' ability to make money from growing crops.

Rep. Jeff Backer, R-Browns Valley, has introduced legislation to delay the buffer law and give mapping authority to local soil and water conservation districts. Backer said more legislation is coming.

"We know there are problems with the buffer law. Let's get people together to fix it," he said, adding that Dayton has "drawn a line in the sand" on the issue.

Dayton has said he won't back down on the law but acknowledged Friday that a different approach is needed.

"One of the lessons I learned with the buffer law is it was criticized as a top-down, one-size-fits-all mandate. So this is really the opposite," he said. "This is a grassroots, build up the ideas from and recognize the differences between one part of the state and another."