Minnesota's water worth protecting

By Jan Malcolm and John Linc Stine
Guest Columnists

Minnesota's clean and abundant water resources remain the envy of many states, but maintaining this treasure is a big responsibility requiring constant vigilance.

In recent decades, growth and development have presented new challenges. In response, Minnesota voters approved a Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment, making our state one of the few with a guaranteed, dedicated source of funding to protect water.

Under the Dayton Administration, Minnesota took critical steps to ensure that our children and grandchildren can enjoy the same abundant and safe drinking water many of us take for granted. The progress is especially impressive with regard to protecting the underground aquifers that provide drinking water for nearly 75 percent of Minnesotans. Recent accomplishments include:

- Ensuring proper well construction and sealing of unused wells: Poorly built or sealed wells present a big contamination risk to aquifers. The Minnesota Department of Health has worked with local governments and landowners to seal nearly 48,000 unused wells and improve well construction since 2011. More than 300,000 unused wells have been sealed in the last two decades, making Minnesota a national leader.

- Expanding source-water protection measures: What happens on land closest to where a community draws its drinking water can greatly impact the quality of that water. Public water suppliers work with landowners and others to identify and manage contamination risks. Since 2011, public water suppliers and partners developed or enhanced drinking water source protection plans for nearly 600 systems that serve 90 percent of Minnesotans who receive public drinking water.

- Encouraging strategic, economically viable conservation measures: Minnesota farmers are key partners in protecting drinking water. Over the last eight years, state and local partners worked with farmers to increase vegetative cover. This land acts as a natural water filter, helping improve water quality.

- Minnesota's Agricultural Water Quality Certainty program examines every field of participating farms to ensure conservation measures that protect water, including drinking water sources, are in place.

- Safeguarding local community water systems from nitrate contamination: Too much nitrate in groundwater is a health risk for people, especially infants, drinking that water. The Department of Health has partnered with nine systems to treat nitrate by filtration or blending and is working with about 40 more systems to modify land use to reduce nitrate in source water.

- Educating private well owners: Public water systems are highly regulated, but private well owners are responsible for ensuring the quality of their own drinking water. Under the Dayton Administration, we increased efforts to provide education and outreach to private well owners and to help them evaluate risks.

- Addressing East Metro groundwater contamination: The Department of Health strives to protect East Metro residents from 3M chemicals in their groundwater by updating guidance values and expanding water sampling and testing. When a private well tests above health limits, we notify owners or users. In the last eight years, we provided 839 advisories to East Metro residents. The department partners with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency to ensure alternative drinking water is available for these homes, and will continue to work with the MPCA and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources on long-term solutions for impacted communities.

These accomplishments reflect the work of many people, and Gov. Mark Dayton deserves special credit for encouraging dialogue among diverse stakeholders. Through town hall meetings, regional conferences and other efforts, he sparked conversations that continue to broaden how we look at our water resources and our responsibility to protect them. Certainly, protecting our water is cheaper than cleaning it up. It's important to identify areas of clean water to prevent them from being contaminated as well as targeting efforts to restore contaminated sources of drinking water.

As encouraging as our progress has been, plenty of work remains. Shifting land use patterns, climate change and other factors present ongoing threats. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates Minnesota will need $7.4 billion in infrastructure repairs, upgrades and improvements in the next 20 years just to comply with the Safe Drinking Water Act, and we believe it's time to increase protections beyond that now outdated federal law. Providing safe, reliable drinking water comes at a cost.

We have safe drinking water today because of past investments. We need to continue investing in safe drinking water to pass along this priceless asset to future Minnesotans.

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