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COMMENTARIES

Opinion | Minnesota River needs leadership, not more delay

As with so many issues in our country, even straightforward solutions with broad agreement can be difficult to implement.

By Patrick Belmont

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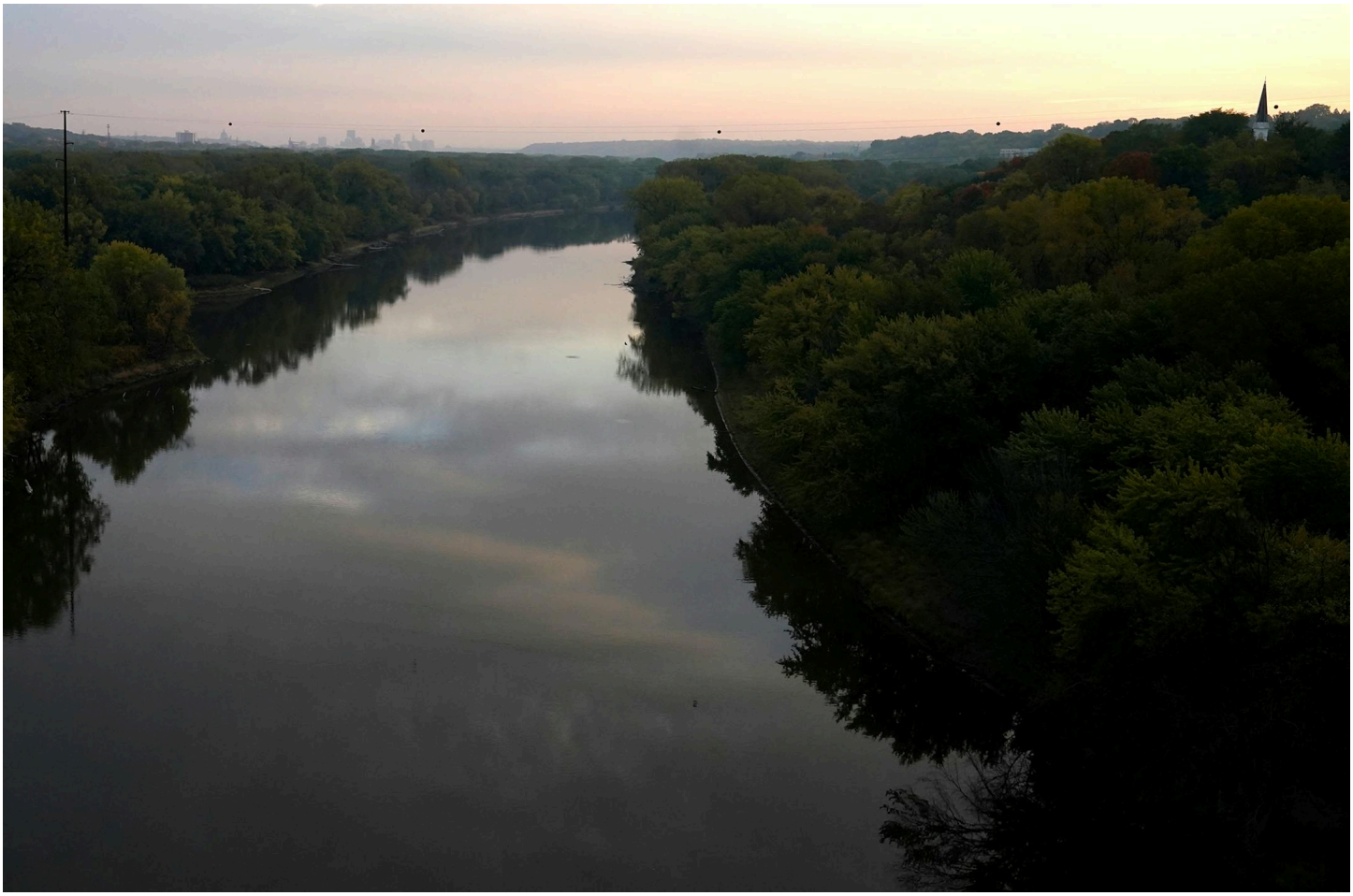

The Minnesota River, as seen from the Mendota Bridge at early morning: The river is receiving incoming water faster than the landscape can handle, writes researcher Patrick Belmont. (David Joles/Star Tribune/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

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When my team began researching the Minnesota River in 2007, I expected to confirm the familiar story told in many agricultural regions: that sediment pollution was coming mainly from eroding farm fields. What we found instead was surprising. Most of the sediment in the Minnesota River originates from the erosion of tall banks and bluffs, landforms shaped by the river's unusual geologic history. And in recent decades, erosion of those banks and bluffs has accelerated dramatically.

The reason for the accelerated bank and bluff erosion wasn't a mystery. Increased water flow, driven in large part by widespread agricultural drainage, has pushed far more water into the river, far faster than the landscape can handle. We published those findings in 2011 and convened a broad group of stakeholders – farmers, local and state agencies, nonprofit organizations, researchers and landowners – to determine the most practical way to improve the river's health. The consensus was remarkably clear and cost-effective: Slow the flow of water reaching the river. By reducing peak flows, we can significantly reduce the bank and bluff erosion that drives so much of the sediment problem.

But as with so many issues facing our country, even straightforward solutions with broad agreement seem increasingly difficult to implement. And the result is predictable: wasted time, wasted money and continued poor water quality.

That's why I was disheartened to see the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency – the agency responsible for protecting Minnesota's water – decline to act on a recent petition to regulate agricultural drainage. The petition proposed a general permit system for public drainage systems, large networks of ditches and subsurface drain tile that drain the vast majority of agricultural land throughout the state.

The MPCA offered three reasons for denying the petition: It hasn't required such permits before; the Legislature hasn't explicitly directed it to do so, and funding is tight. These explanations may be technically correct, but they fall short of what Minnesotans expect from an agency charged with safeguarding the public's waters. The Minnesota Water Pollution Control Act already gives the MPCA the authority and direction needed to initiate a pragmatic, preventive approach in one of Minnesota's most impaired river basins.

Drainage systems have fundamentally altered the state's hydrology. By bypassing wetlands and soils that once slowed and filtered water, drainage systems send runoff surging downstream. Those amplified flows scour stream banks and bluffs, choke river channels and Lake Pepin with sediment, and carry excess nitrogen and phosphorus into Minnesota's waterways. The impacts have been adding up for decades. Artificially high

flows contributed to the Rapidan Dam failure and threaten roads, bridges and communities across the basin.

Rural Minnesotans have as much at stake in clean, reliable water as anyone. I hear this repeatedly from farmers and landowners who are already feeling the effects – washed-out roads, eroding land, damaged infrastructure and rising local costs. Cities and suburbs have been required to manage their effects on water flow for decades. Asking agriculture to meet similar expectations isn't about blame; it's about fairness, shared responsibility and good stewardship of the resources all Minnesotans depend on.

The MPCA's refusal to regulate agricultural drainage postpones progress at a moment when action is both possible and necessary. When a state agency declines to use its existing authority to protect the public good, the consequences don't disappear, they simply shift onto downstream communities, local governments and future generations.

Minnesota has a long tradition of solving tough problems with practical, science-based solutions and a shared commitment to the land and water that make Minnesota such a beautiful place to live. The people of Minnesota deserve leadership that rises to that standard, acknowledges the scale of the challenge, and moves proactively to protect Minnesota's waters for the long term.

Patrick Belmont is a professor of hydrology and geomorphology in the Department of Watershed Sciences at Utah State University. He's conducted extensive research in Minnesota since 2007.