

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Environmental Watchdog and Lakeshore Residents Sue MPCA for Failure to Protect Minnesota's Lakes

St. Paul, Minnesota – The Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy (MCEA) and the Lake L'Homme Dieu Association filed suit Tuesday against the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) for failure to protect Lake Winona and downstream waters from pollution. The groups say they're asking for the state agency to do its job and protect the environment.

Lake Winona is a shallow lake bordering the city of Alexandria, Minnesota. The lake has extremely high levels of phosphorus – more than four times the water quality standard – which causes algae blooms and negatively impacts connected downstream lakes. Summer algae blooms can be toxic to animals and humans and the MPCA has instructed people to stay away from lakes during algae blooms.

The MPCA listed Lake Winona as impaired by excess phosphorus in 2002. The primary source of phosphorus is the Alexandria Lakes Area Sanitary District (ALASD) wastewater treatment plant, which discharges treated sewage directly into Lake Winona.

Although pollution from the sewage plant had already severely impacted the lake, the MPCA approved an expansion of the ALASD plant in 2006, an action challenged by MCEA. In argument before the Minnesota Supreme Court, MPCA said it would force the treatment plant to reduce its phosphorus pollution to a level that would protect Lake Winona's water quality. That plan, according to MPCA, was to be done by 2009, but no action to reduce the pollution has yet been taken. The plant's permit expired a year ago, and it has been allowed to operate on the expired permit.

"These endless delays from the MPCA are totally unacceptable," said Kris Sigford, water quality program director at the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy. "The agency knew about the phosphorus impairment in 2002, and they knew that the permit they issued in 2006 would not alleviate the problem. Lake Winona's phosphorus pollution is as bad as ever, and now it and two downstream lakes are also impaired by excess chloride – all because of ALASD's discharge."

"The MPCA said to the state's highest court that it had a plan and would deal with this sewage discharge to the lakes in Alexandria," said Kevin Reuther, legal director at the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy. "They haven't done what they promised."

The groups are now seeking a court order forcing the MPCA to issue a new permit to the ALASD that has more stringent limits to control pollution. The MPCA is required to establish protective limits on the amount of pollution that can be discharged into the state's waters, under both state and federal law.

"We regret that it has become necessary to resort to legal action to obtain resolution to a longstanding problem of contamination," the Lake L'Homme Dieu Association said in a written statement. "This contamination not only affects Lake Winona but other lakes immediately downstream from Winona including Lake L'Homme Dieu. This is a situation that the MPCA promised to address several years ago. They have failed to move forward on their promise."

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