LAND STEWARDSHIP PROJECT

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The Honorable Tim Walz
Governor of Minnesota
130 State Capitol
75 Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. #130
Saint Paul, MN 55155

Subject: Responding to the Rush Creek Fish Kill near Lewiston, Minn., in Winona County

September 21, 2022

Dear Governor Walz,

We hope this letter finds you well. We are writing as members of the communities around Lewiston, Minnesota, and as residents of Winona County, to share with you our concern about the recent fish kill that took place in late July in Upper Rush Creek, just south of Lewiston.

As has been reported multiple times, this is the third major fish kill to happen in our community in the past few years. In 2019, 1,500 fish were reported killed in Garvin Brook, a beautiful trout stream that goes through Farmers Park, just east of Lewiston, a favorite meeting place for folks in the area and a place where children regularly swim. In 2021, 250 trout were found dead in Trout Valley Creek, just south of Weaver, a great fly-fishing spot. If we go back further, to 2015, one of the most productive trout streams in the state, the South Fork of the Whitewater River that passes to the west of Lewiston, was the site of yet another fish disaster that was estimated to have killed thousands. Both the 2019 and 2015 fish kills were investigated by state agencies, and both were determined to be “unnatural” in origin, but a source was unable to be identified.

We know that the same geology of our area that gives us the beautiful bluffs of the Driftless Region makes our communities particularly at risk of groundwater contamination. The porous nature of the karst geology of southeastern Minnesota means that surface level contamination quickly makes its way into groundwater where it can pollute our aquifers, something that is already happening. For example, Lewiston itself had to dig a new municipal well an extra few hundred feet deeper to a second aquifer because the original aquifer had accrued dangerous levels of nitrate pollution.

As people who drink, cook, and wash with this water when it comes out of our taps, and who fish these streams as well as use this water to irrigate our crops and water our livestock, we see a troubling pattern emerging. Our water is a shared resource that does not fall under the control of one person or entity, and the health of the water that sustains us and the health of our communities are inextricably linked. We want to do our part to protect our shared water resources. But in order to do that effectively, we need to know the source of these fish kills so that we can address the issue.

As the person who appoints the Commissioner of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, we would like to ask for your partnership to help us and our neighbors get an answer to the source of the Rush Creek fish kill, so that we can take action to protect our land, water, and communities. We want this troubling pattern of aquatic destruction to stop, and we want to work with you, the MPCA, the DNR, and MDA, to help make that happen.

We want to invite you to meet with us sometime towards the end of October. We will be gathering to talk more about the Rush Creek fish kill, how we can act on the answers that we have been given, and what we can ask of our elected officials to help prevent future fish kills in the Lewiston area from happening.

Thank you and we look froward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

The undersigned residents of the Lewiston area on behalf of the Land Stewardship Project

CC: The Honorable Peggy Flanagan, Lieutenant Governor of Minnesota; Commissioner Katrina Kessler, MPCA; Assistant Commissioner Dana Vanderbosch, MPCA; Feedlot Program Supervisor Steve Schmidt, MPCA; Surface Water Monitoring Program Manager Kimberly Laing, MPCA; Commissioner Sarah Strommen, MN DNR; Lanesboro Area Fisheries Supervisor Melissa Wagner, MN DNR; Commissioner Thom Petersen, MDA; Policy Adviser Rachel Dame, Office of Governor Tim Walz; and Public Engagement Liaison Michelle Manivel, Office of Governor Tim Walz

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