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The fact that the Minnesota River has made the American Rivers list of the most endangered rivers on multiple occasions should make all Minnesotans deeply ashamed. Minnesota is blessed with incredible natural resources and biodiversity, including unique glacial geology and the remnants of a once-great prairie ecosystem. We have a duty to ourselves and to our descendants to protect our watersheds, our drinking water, and our wildlife.

In practice, that means we must make significant strides on the issue of agricultural drainage, which plays a large role in polluting rivers in Minnesota. Increased tiling and drainage for corn and soybean farming carry sediments and nutrients right off of agricultural fields into our waterways. This comes with a serious cost: worsened erosion and flooding, impaired drinking water, and an increased need for costly dredging and well-drilling projects.

The good news is that we know there are technological and regulatory solutions available. The cumulative impacts of agricultural drainage must be considered on a more holistic basis.

Additionally, we must use a mixture of education, incentives and regulations to engage farmers in a variety of practices, including conservation tilling, using cover crops and buffer strips, and deploying detention basins. In certain cases, implementing solutions from a list of best management practices (including those just listed) should be required by the MPCA. This requirement could fall under a general permit system for agricultural drainage, which is within the MPCA's statutory authority and scope to implement.

But to really get at the heart of the issue, we must restore wetlands and their vital ecosystem functions on the landscape. Unlike in the late 1800s, when the foundation of our state's current drainage code was written, we now know that wetlands are critical to slowing and cleaning water, fostering biodiversity, and absorbing and storing carbon dioxide. Armed with this knowledge, MPCA should invest in programs that create and restore wetlands in areas that are heavily impacted by agricultural drainage pollution.

We cannot continue to undervalue our state's precious natural resources. Coming together as Minnesotans, we can do better to clean up our watersheds while maintaining our farming legacy.