

Public Comment in Support of the West River Dairy Expansion

EAW Comment Period: February 10 – May 7, 2026

Submitted to: Charles Peterson, MPCA Resource Management and Assistance Division

I am writing in support of the proposed West River Dairy Expansion in Synnes Township, Stevens County, and to respectfully urge the MPCA Commissioner to issue a negative declaration on the need for an Environmental Impact Statement. Having reviewed the Environmental Assessment Worksheet (EAW), the Notice of Availability, and the supporting attachments, it is clear that the project has been thoughtfully designed, that its potential environmental effects have been carefully studied, and that those effects are localized, controllable, and well within the limits of existing state and federal regulatory programs. The EAW does precisely what the State of Minnesota intends it to do: it lays out the basic facts of the project and demonstrates that an EIS is not warranted.

Why the project should be allowed to proceed

Riverview, LLP proposes to expand the existing 7,855-cow West River Dairy by adding an 11,000-cow facility on adjoining cropland that is already in row-crop production. The site is in the General Agricultural District of Stevens County, with the nearest incorporated city more than five miles away, and it is fully consistent with the Stevens County Comprehensive Plan 2017, which directs feedlots of this size into precisely these kinds of agricultural areas. The project complements, rather than conflicts with, the surrounding land use: local growers will supply corn silage, alfalfa, and other feedstuffs, and the dairy will return a local, organic fertilizer to the same fields that currently rely on synthetic inputs.

The benefits are tangible. The project replaces roughly 1,545 tons per year of anhydrous ammonia with manure-based fertilizer, avoiding an estimated 9,038 tons of CO₂e per year associated with synthetic fertilizer manufacture, transport, and storage. Approximately 2,200 acres of row crops will be converted to alfalfa to feed the herd, sequestering an additional 2,662 tons of CO₂e per year and reducing tillage on those acres. The expansion creates skilled local employment, on-site housing for staff, sustained demand for area crops, and continued investment in the rural Stevens County economy. Riverview has operated the existing West River Dairy on this site since it received a negative declaration on the need for an EIS in 2003, and has compiled more than two decades of permit compliance, including the addition of an anaerobic digester (2008), dry manure solids storage (2010), and expanded liquid manure storage (2014). That track record matters.

Why this EAW shows that an EIS is not needed

Under Minnesota Rules, an EIS is required only when a project has the potential for significant environmental effects that cannot be adequately anticipated, controlled, or mitigated through ongoing regulatory authority. The EAW demonstrates that, on every resource category it examines, those tests are met.

Air quality and odor. Barr Engineering performed AERMOD dispersion modeling under an MPCA-approved protocol using five years of weather data. With conservative background concentrations added, modeled hydrogen sulfide concentrations at the property line (29.44 ppb) remain below the Minnesota Ambient Air Quality Standard of 30 ppb, ammonia concentrations at neighboring residences (15.11 µg/m³) are well below the 80 µg/m³ chronic inhalation Health Risk Value, and odor at the nearest non-feedlot residence (74 OU) is below the 83-OU faint-odor threshold. Impermeable synthetic covers on the liquid manure storage areas, knife injection of land-applied manure, and on-site good-housekeeping practices all reduce emissions further. (See EAW Item 17 and Attachment 13.)

Water resources. The project actually improves the water situation on this parcel. The site today is pattern-tiled cropland with no retention or treatment. After construction, three permanent stormwater basins, sized more than 20% larger than required for a 25-year, 24-hour storm, will capture runoff before any controlled release. The Engineer's Run-Off Hydrology Report (Attachment 24) shows annual runoff volume dropping from roughly 117 million gallons to 106 million gallons and modeled erosion falling from 0.41 to 0.05 tons per acre per year. There are no wetlands or surface waters on the project site, and the LMSAs use 60-inch compacted clay liners

(well above the required minimum), perimeter drain tile for monitoring, and 14 months of storage capacity rather than the required nine. Groundwater appropriation is governed by DNR Permit #2008-0230, which conditions pumping rates on real-time Pomme de Terre River flow and includes a complete cessation requirement when river flow drops below 15 cfs. (See EAW Items 11, 12, and Attachments 22–26.)

Manure management. Local producers have offered more than 16,500 acres for manure application, while the project and existing facility together require only about 13,200 acres — a buffer of more than 3,000 acres that provides operational flexibility, eliminates pressure to apply on unsuitable fields, and effectively rules out winter application. Manure is knife-injected at agronomic rates per an MPCA-approved Manure Management Plan, sampled annually, and tracked through the MPCA’s Nutrient Management Tool. Setbacks meet or exceed state, Stevens County, and Swift County requirements. (See EAW Item 12.B.5 and Attachment 23.)

Wildlife, rare features, and cultural resources. DNR Natural Heritage and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service IPaC reviews identified no federally or state-listed endangered species at the project site. Where threatened or special-concern species were flagged near manure application areas, the Proposer either removed those parcels or confirmed that the row-cropped fields do not provide suitable habitat. The State Historic Preservation Office, the Office of the State Archaeologist, and a Phase I archaeological assessment by Agassiz Archaeology cleared the project site, the waterline route, and the manure application sites. (See EAW Items 14 and 15, and Attachments 6–7.)

Noise, traffic, and cumulative effects. Modeled noise at the nearest residence is effectively at background. The project would add roughly 45 vehicles per day to County Road 8, an 8.7% increase well below any threshold that would trigger a traffic study. The Proposer also delineated an Environmentally Relevant Area encompassing the project, all manure application acres, and a one-mile buffer around the off-site well, ensuring that no other reasonably foreseeable project overlaps environmentally with this one. (See EAW Items 19–21.)

Regulatory authority is sufficient to anticipate and control the effects

The EAW catalogs an unusually thorough package of overlapping permits and approvals: an MPCA Individual NPDES Feedlot Permit, a Construction Stormwater Permit, two DNR Water Appropriation amendments, a DNR Dam Safety permit, a Utility Crossing License, a Stevens County Conditional Use Permit, and SSTS permits. Each carries enforceable conditions, monitoring obligations, and inspection regimes. This is exactly the framework Minnesota’s environmental review program contemplates when it asks whether environmental effects can be adequately addressed through ongoing public regulatory authority. They can be, and they will be.

Conclusion

The West River Dairy Expansion EAW is a complete, well-documented, and conservative environmental review. It identifies the project’s potential effects, quantifies them against state standards, and shows that mitigation, project design, and existing permit programs reduce those effects to levels that are not significant. An EIS would not produce materially better information, would delay a project with clear local benefits, and is not justified on this record. I respectfully urge the MPCA to issue a negative declaration on the need for an EIS and to allow the project to proceed under its proposed permit conditions.

Respectfully submitted,

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