

My name is Sandra Fernow. I am a current resident of Morris, and have been for the past 10 years. I have two kids, age 8 and 5, who were born at the local hospital, and now our family has come to call this place home. I may not be a farmer, but I do have a career in housekeeping, so I care about ensuring the community has a clean, safe environment to thrive in. I waited until after I had attended the MPCA public comment meeting at Old No One Southside on April 28th to submit my comment. I have to inform you that I was one of the last to enter the room before the doors were closed for the extent of the public comment meeting, and I had arrived about 15 minutes early. I was guided to standing-room-only, from where I had a vantage point of the main entry door. There were waves upon waves of concerned citizens who attempted to come to the meeting to be better informed, and/or to make their concerns, questions, or whatever else be heard, and their entry to the venue was denied due to the Southside being at capacity. I watched some friends, some community members, and more I didn't recognize, have their whole body demeanor sink as they heard the news that they were not allowed to enter the "public" comment session. I won't forget their faces. This experience left me frustrated, and I believe it revoked some of the voice of the community and other farmers, and effectively silenced their concerns or potential opposition to the proposed expansion. Even now, amongst the public comment period board, there are many submissions stating "No EIS needed, I support West River expansion" type of a generic comment; it makes it feel like that same moment, of filling the space in a similar manner so it's harder to see the worries people may have surrounding this.

An old college acquaintance of mine first messaged me in September of 2025, directing me to a video on some of the less-than-ideal impacts that Riverview had done to the community in Arizona; this video was put together by Perfect Union, and posted April 25, 2025 on their Instagram. The first example in the video, an Arizona resident, had their well run dry due to Riverview's over-usage of groundwater there, so the resident had no running water in their home for 6 months. This person had hoped to pass their house down, a stability for generations, but feared they could no longer do so due to the manner in which their land was impacted. I saw an article from January of this year, that Riverview reached an agreement to reduce groundwater usage and pay \$11 million to affected residents in AZ over 20 years; but is money enough to repair damage to our natural world? Does money paid after-the-fact undo damages which dictate how we leave the land for our children? At what point are we crossing the line here, away from being farmers and into something more reminiscent of resource miners, extracting the land and exchanging it for the all-mighty dollar? Are there things which could be done unto our local land out here, thanks to decisions made by investors, which could be irreversible?

These sort of questions is why I think we need an Environmental Impact Statement.

I'm concerned about Water Quality, as a recent story from Minnesota Public Radio described in their headline, "Nitrate is quietly polluting rural drinking wells. How researchers are working to help." I may live in town, but have daydreamed about buying property somewhere out of town for more room to garden and enjoy nature's bounty, so I'm concerned about rural groundwater quality. Groundwater pollution is especially difficult to filter, needing expensive equipment a lot of people probably can't afford. I worry that surface water could be polluted as well, impacting local hunters and outdoors-people who want to enjoy what western MN has to offer. The manure runoff from factory farms can have a big impact on putting nitrates in water. I think the community should be able to achieve a sense of security, in having detailed and clear answers to the many questions they may have. CAFOs (or Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) are notorious for contaminating water with nitrates, and I have real concern that a massive operation such as this could potentially pollute our area in a way that impacts our precious resources for years, and generations, to come.

Ground water and surface water contamination is a greater risk with factory farm style projects of this size, and I'm concerned about our water resources being negatively impacted with such a massive expansion. The types of pollutants associated with potential spills concern me, because of their environmental impact to wildlife in the form of algae blooms, and the increased risk of cancer rates associated with nitrates. I know fisherman friends who have shared Snapchat videos to their story while out at the lake and along the Pomme de Terre watershed near here, and possibly north of town, which depicted algae of an unnatural color along the shore line. Another concern I have for stability of the land is for future generations out here, because Blue Baby Syndrome is caused by drinking from nitrate-contaminated water wells. I worry, also, as a "townie" here, about how well our own municipal water facility is capable of filtering out harmful pollutants. We do have a reverse osmosis system in our home, but the option we chose has monthly payments, and not everyone can afford luxuries like water filtration systems within their home. Many in our town are also renters, who may not find it feasible to have their own RO system, or are limited to the water fill up station at places like Willie's grocery store, which is dependent on the local water supply as well. I'm ultimately concerned about the future of this community, if we are allowing a major expansion at this scale, and the implications it could have for people down-stream from this operation, or for the people who are connected to the aquifer below this massive expansion, or in the areas which the "fertilizer" is applied. Even in application of the manure to fields, which in a way is just a bunch of micro-spills, I am concerned about potential for water to run off of the fields, and contaminate area waterways of both surface and groundwater.

I have also heard from one of the smaller time farmers, that Riverview had a manure spill near Pennock, MN, and this was supposedly not reported for a full week. Supposedly there was no environmental contamination indicated from that 2025 spill, but I remain concerned that there could be things unreported, or issues to be had in not having a baseline to compare data to if a spill occurs, or things could be cleaned up before a spill was fully reported, so the scale of a spill could potentially be underreported. This contamination would be difficult to undo or remedy, once it occurs. As I said, I have already heard from friends who fish in the area along the Pomme de Terre water shed, that there were noxious algae blooms in area waterways in the last several years. I am concerned that a project of this size may go up, before we even have baselines of data to compare anything to, to monitor the effects of the expansion over time. I believe we need more accurate data than is currently the standard, in order to protect the environment from the people who are “farming” on it and straining the land for what they view it is worth.

To couple the risk of the pollution of the waterways, with the increase risk of abnormally dry times and increased water demand on local supply that this project would cause, it makes this project expansion seem like it could potentially cause more harm than good. I know that in the last several years, there have been summers filled with Red Flag Warnings, abnormally dry to moderately dry periods of drought, and there has been some cause for concern in the arid climate of the Great Plains steadily creeping eastward, potentially now swallowing Morris up with it. This type of climate shift may be hard to come to terms with, but I think it gives cause for concern that a proposed expansion of this size could get its fingers deep in the watershed, thus jeopardizing the safety and security of the residents and others who call west central MN home. There are more who live out here than the cows “churning” a profit for their investors, but this expansion would ensure there are more cows than people here.

The effect this expansion could have on small family farms is potentially irreversible. I just today saw a news article from MPR news titled, “Agriculture is changing. To protect farmers from stress, mental health support has to change, too,” which was written by Tadeo Ruiz Sandoval and Molly Castle Work. This article described the immense stress that small farms have in the face of the current turbulent economy. With the proposed expansion of Riverview’s operations in Morris, I fear for the small-time farmers who may “go under” because the influence of flooding the market with this many cows may be “the straw that broke the camel’s back” and negatively impact those who gave their testimony at the MPCA public comment meeting at Old No One Southside on April 28th. Riverview wanting to expand from 7,885 to 18,885 cows has small family farms worried about what the future holds for their farm.

With Riverview having so much capital, I wonder also how they have been influencing the housing market in town in Morris. I have seen recently a home was for sale, then swooped quickly off the market, where now a truck with “Riverview” on the side is parked. This could be a good thing on the surface, or could be a more complicated thing at the heart of it. If Riverview is able to purchase properties, they could then rent them to employees, setting terms for rent and making even more profit as an entity. By purchasing homes right when they enter the market, I fear that other people and families in this town may struggle to then become homeowners themselves, due to not being able to put as big of a downpayment on a potential home purchase in comparison to those associated with Riverview. Morris has an abundance of renters, and I wonder how much their ease of access to evolving to the level of homeownership is impacted through this potential pattern in rapid property buy-ups.

And while Riverview may not own all the land which they interact with, I fear they still have the “air of a monopoly” due to the amount of influence they have upon farmland which they contract with; they may not own all the acres, but in a way they do, by having the ultimate say on what cover crop is planted and what is used to fertilize via their cow-barn liquid excrement. I heard that this liquid manure is tested once a year? Well, I don’t think testing this liquid manure once a year is enough, because I imagine there could be some variations over the course of the year which could impact testing results.

One of my acquaintances, her husband works for Riverview tending the cows. They are from Mexico. She said they treat the cows better than their workers at times. They are very strict with timing of operations. My acquaintance is fearful that if the company might have something go wrong, that potentially people will blame the low-level workers, before they find any fault in the owners and investors of the company.

Situations like the overly-packed MPCA meeting are problematic; there were community members who were born and raised in Morris area, who were unable to attend the meeting due to capacity constraints. From comments I have read on local Facebook posts online, people became very frustrated that Hispanic/people of color (who potentially may not be proficient in English or may not have attended the meeting to make a public comment) were there “in their stead”, and thus occupying seats where other genuine concerns could have been sitting. Moments like this impact the resiliency of our community, because I believe there could be an increase in racial prejudice and racial stereotyping or profiling, due to someone reporting that they had attempted to speak with the Hispanic members of the audience, and were apparently greeted with “No English”. This issue has me feeling frustrated, because my Mexican acquaintance whose husband works for Riverview, said she had wanted to attend the meeting to maybe see more people

in the community, and to learn more about the scope of the project and impact it could have; she wants to maybe have a baby of her own, and needs to know if she should invest in a water filter for her home to protect her family, and she voiced concern about how the community may view her, and welcome her (or not) depending on the way this proposed expansion situation unfolds.

This sort of social impact is something that could be better understood, if an EIS were to be conducted. An EAW is small potatoes, compared to the in-depth analysis that this community deserves before this project is pushed through.

There is also the major recent concern, of having so many animals housed in a relatively small areas; given the recent hantavirus sensationalism in the news, I am now worried about what it means for the community in Morris to have so many animals in close quarters. Would an increase in capacity at the facility put the surrounding area at an increased risk of pathogens to spread or mutate in close quarters? What measures are in place to prevent and plan for this biological aspect of the project? Is there adequate confidence that a sufficient plan is in place if something were to go wrong, to prevent us from being a new “Ground Zero”?

I am not voicing that I am for or against this project, but I do have legitimate concerns regarding a project at this scale. It's great if it works, but I worry about what happens if or when it doesn't go according to plan. This is the only home my kids have ever known, and I would appreciate getting a sense of potential impact on the community and our area at large, and maybe even beyond, if this project proposal were to be granted. If this project pollutes the water, or air, or wrecks roads in the area, that is an issue I need to be addressed. How can we mitigate these potential impacts, and what sort of plan is in place, if these impacts are realized in our community, or by those who are downstream? I don't want to focus on potential jobs created by this expansion, or impact on taxes (although my worry for an increased burden on tax-payers is also real), I care most about our fundamental rights to have access to clean water and to retain our freedoms to accessible clean water, and to have ethical land management which considers the community at large, wildlife who doesn't have a voice to defend itself, and the state of Minnesota as a whole. I'm concerned about how much manure waste a facility of this size would have, what land this waste would be applied to, and how much of a risk there is for runoff to pollute our precious water ways, which could in turn impact local families, local wildlife, and the future of the land in west central MN and beyond, due to the precedent this facility will set. We need a thorough Environmental Impact Statement. The risks to the ecology of the area are too great to not conduct an EIS. How would this sort of precedent established by the project impact the way that other future operations are scaled up?

The only people who were advocating for a “more streamlined, faster” process of these proposals and project fulfillment, were the ones who stood to profit from it. What’s to come of the people, who are stuck in the area which they call home, after this area becomes altered in ways they struggle to voice, due to a project which was pushed through too hastily?

I request that an Environmental Impact Statement be completed, to ensure all necessary factors are considered, and controls in place to mitigate the potential risks of this project. I need to be assured that I have an answer that I can depend on, through scientific data and rigorous analysis of all facets of the proposal.