EPA urged to protect Iowa’s rivers

Congress stalls on clean water, but EPA can lead

For more than a year, big polluters and their cronies in Congress have blocked legislation to restore the Clean Water Act. With action at a standstill on Capitol Hill, Environment Iowa is pushing the Environmental Protection Agency to step in and restore full protections to the streams and wetlands that feed Iowa’s rivers.

Recent Supreme Court decisions have weakened the Clean Water Act and called into question whether or not more than half of Iowa’s streams, including waters upstream that feed our rivers and drinking water sources, are still protected. Without these protections, polluters can dump waste with impunity. Ultimately, our rivers pay the price.

And it’s a price Iowa’s rivers can ill afford to pay—their waters already suffer from excess pollution. According to a report we released with our allies last summer, polluters dumped more than 1 million gallons of toxic waste into Iowa’s rivers in 2008. Contaminated water can make swimmers and people who drink it vulnerable to a host of waterborne illnesses, including stomach flu, skin rashes, hepatitis, neurological disorders and other serious health problems.

Restoring protection
As the health of our rivers continues to worsen, plagued by meat processors and other industries, it’s more important than ever that our leaders in Washington, D.C., and Des Moines find a way to rise above the fray and restore the Clean Water Act. But with no congressional action in sight, our staff and members are pushing the EPA to get involved. EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson is currently considering a new clean water initiative, saying that the EPA would “consider administrative action to restore the Clean Water Act protections to wetlands and headwater streams that provide clean water for human and ecological uses.” But with the new Republican majority in Congress itching to hamstring the EPA, and well-connected polluters lobbying against strong protections, the EPA needs all the public support we can muster.

We’ve banded together with our sister groups across the country to rally thousands of people nationwide to send the EPA a message: Americans want strong protections for our waters.

Visit our website to read the online version of our newsletter: www.EnvironmentIowa.org/newsletters/winter11
To our members

Once again, the political winds have shifted. New faces are in power in Washington, D.C.

Yet when it comes to Iowa’s environment, the challenges and opportunities we face remain the same. We’re doing a better job of keeping polluters from dumping into our rivers, but we need stronger protections. We have tremendous potential to rebuild Iowa’s economy on clean energy, yet the policies that can make it happen are being challenged.

Regardless of who’s up and who’s down in Des Moines and Washington, we have our work cut out for us. Thanks to your support, we’re ready to meet the challenge.

Sincerely,

Dan Kohler
Regional Program Director

Recent action

Solar jobs on the rise in Iowa
The solar industry is growing. According to a report by the Solar Foundation and Green LMI Consulting, the industry employs roughly 93,000 workers in the country.

Employment figures for solar power have nearly doubled in the last year and are expected to grow another 26 percent in the coming 12 months—at a time when overall employment is only expected to grow 2 percent.

In Iowa, there are now 20 different solar companies helping to fuel this rise in jobs. At a time when many companies and whole sectors were slowing down, this report shows that the solar industry really came off the bench to deliver a slam dunk for our economy and our environment.

Big storms, the new norm?
The last 36 months have been the wettest in state history, with an average of 134.72 inches of precipitation falling across Iowa. The toll has been incredible—flooding of the Des Moines River in 2008 caused between $8 billion and $10 billion in damages, and the deaths of 24 people.

Scientists project that global warming could affect the frequency and severity of such extreme weather events in the coming decades. Environment Iowa’s recent report “Global Warming and Extreme Weather” explains that the extreme weather events we’ve seen of late may be a taste of the new normal if we experience the worst effects of global warming.

We’re using the findings of the report to push our lawmakers to reduce the pollution that causes global warming. That means taking first steps, like introducing stronger efficiency standards for appliances and buildings, as well as launching larger-scale efforts to increase the amount of electricity we generate from the sun and the wind.
Report: As park visits rise, funds are being cut

First, the good news: Nearly 14 percent more people visited Iowa’s Effigy Mounds National Monument in 2009 than in years past. Effigy Mounds protects more than 200 sacred mounds, which were built by Native Americans between 700 and 2,500 years ago. Visitors can explore these massive symbolic mounds along self-guided trails, or join a park ranger on a guided hike or historic demonstration.

What’s the bad news? Even as the number of visitors to Iowa’s national park site is on the rise, the park faces budget cuts in the coming year—leaving it with fewer resources for maintenance, upkeep and stewardship. An Environment Iowa report, titled “The Best of America Under Threat from Underfunding,” exposed the growing threat that funding shortfalls pose to parks like Effigy Mounds.

“Last year, visitors poured into our great parks to explore our state’s natural beauty and history,” said Environment Iowa’s Jessica Buchberger. “Yet just as their popularity grows, they are under threat from underfunding.”

Growing popularity

Parks have taken on renewed importance for Iowans as the recession squeezes family vacation budgets. But despite the growing number of visitors, the National Park Service’s proposed budget for the coming fiscal year would cut Effigy Mounds’ operating budget.

The park relies on these funds to hire park rangers and keep facilities maintained, and to pay for popular programs like ranger-led exploration—rangers are on hand to demonstrate Native American tools and lead tours through the reconstructed Native American village and the 81 acres of restored tall grass prairie within the park. Budget cuts will also make it harder for park stewards to keep the park in good shape. The park already needs more resources to complete stalled projects, including recording histories of the groups associated with the site and performing archaeological surveys on recently acquired lands.

“Now is the time for protecting these great places,” said Buchberger. “Instead, they face painful cuts that could delay maintenance, lead to fewer rangers being hired, or force cutbacks on programs.”

Shrinking budgets

The threats confronting Iowa’s parks are also being replicated around the country. Environment Iowa’s report revealed that nationwide, two-thirds of national parks saw their visitorship climb in 2009, including parks in nearly every state.

However, almost three-quarters of these increasingly popular parks are facing budget cuts in 2011.

“Just like Effigy Mounds, parks throughout America are becoming more popular destinations,” said Buchberger. “They offer families affordable vacations and are ideal places for people of all ages to explore the great outdoors. We need to give our parks the resources to ensure that they are just as majestic in 2999 as they were in 2009.”

How many pies can you buy at 60 mpg?

With the Obama administration considering a new round of fuel efficiency standards for cars and trucks as millions of us took to the road last Thanksgiving, Alex Wall, an associate with Environment Iowa’s Washington, D.C., office, got to wondering: How much money would Americans save if we drove ultra-efficient cars that traveled 60 miles per gallon, instead of the current 26.4 mpg average?

After crunching the numbers, Alex came up with an answer: A cool $234 million. That’s enough money to put another few million pumpkin pies on holiday tables. And that’s just one more reason—along with our desire to help get Iowa off oil and reduce our state’s carbon footprint—that Environment Iowa is joining the members of our national federation and nine governors in calling for new government rules that will ensure that by 2025 the average car sold in the United States will go 60 miles per gallon.

After 14 states decided to adopt clean cars standards over the last decade, the Obama administration raised current standards to 33 miles per gallon by 2016. Now it’s time to take the next step.

Read the whole report online at www.EnvironmentIowa.org
None of us want to see another oil spill. But wouldn’t drilling for oil generate more income than our beaches ever could?

It turns out the reverse is true. According to our research, clean beaches inject $4 into the economy for every $1 that could be earned from offshore drilling. “Our research makes it clear that clean beaches and oceans are worth much more than drilling for the last drops of oil off our coasts,” said Federal Oceans Advocate Mike Gravitz.

Gravitz has testified before the president’s Oil Spill Commission three times, urging the administration to abandon plans to expand offshore drilling up the Atlantic coast. And thanks to our Gumbo for the Gulf fundraisers, he was able to fly four Gulf business-owners and one fisherman to Washington to lobby decision-makers against new drilling. We won a big victory in December when the Obama administration announced it would not allow drilling off the Atlantic coast for at least the next five years.