

# ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION ELEMENT

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## **EXISTING ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS**

After humans, air, water and soil are the three most important Mower County natural resources. Each plays an essential role in the health and economic welfare of the County. The serious degradation or loss of any of the three would render the County unfit for habitation and unable to sustain its economy.

Air quality is not in serious peril because the County has no major air pollution sources other than, perhaps, the contribution agriculture makes to global warming. Far more serious are the pollution threats to surface and groundwaters, and the loss of wetlands and soil. Most of the County's wetlands have already been tiled and/or drained. Those that remain generally correlate with the County's riverine system where agricultural activities are impractical due to difficult terrain. Their protection is reasonably assured by the County's Shoreland Management Ordinance. The County has completed and is implementing a Water Management Plan, the purpose of which is to improve/maintain the quality and quantity of the County's surface and groundwater resources.

Agricultural soil loss is generally regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Soil Conservation Service (SCS) and is limited to five tons per acre per year of loss, which is approximately equal to the rate of soil development. More significant, is soil erosion during construction which can have a highly deleterious effect on surface waters quality, both during and after construction, if soil is not stabilized. This phenomenon can be corrected with the adoption of a soil erosion permitting process and appropriate standards. The County is in the process of adopting such an ordinance.

The most critical environmental problem currently facing the County is the future disposition of its groundwater supply. Is it sitting on a time bomb made of DDT, Lasso and Atrazine which has yet to detonate and may be exacerbated by the addition of new chemicals, or has it dodged a bullet? What if Mower County loses its relatively economical water supply? Can commercial agriculture, the very heart of the region's economy, be sustained? How can a balance be struck which maintains the economy while protecting the environment? Sustainable agricultural practices may offer a longer-term solution.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION PLAN**

### Objectives

1. Establishment of a balance between commercial agriculture and environmental protection.
2. Protection and enhancement of ground and surface waters quality.
3. Responsible use and management of essential natural resources (water, soil, air).
4. Protection of wildlife habitat and values.
5. Preservation of the County's heritage.

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6. Provision of County residents with opportunities for environmental education.
  7. Conservation of energy resources and the provision of opportunities for energy conservation education.

### **Environmental Protection Plan Elements**

Understanding and dealing with the interrelationships between human habitation/economic activity and the environment is critical to the survival of humankind. So far his/her record is not very good in this regard because he/she has chosen to exploit rather than provide stewardship over land and waters.

The County has relatively little say in how people use land, except as provided by its zoning and subdivision authority which includes State mandated shoreland, floodplain and wetland protection regulations and allows the County to designate where development should or should not occur. While these are all very important, things that it does not and cannot control can have a far greater adverse environmental impact. In such cases the County can only hope to plan an educational or philosophical role and hope the public listens.

Private actions that are supported by the County include a transformation over time to sustainable agricultural practices including the use of less applied chemicals and an increase in the number of crops to be rotated as a means to control weed growth and improve fertility with lower chemical inputs. While production will not be maximized, lower costs offer the potential to maintain economic productivity in the context of sustaining soil and water resources long-term.

Other practices supported by the County include the application of setaside acres adjacent to rivers, creeks and ditches, the establishment of buffers of permanent vegetation proximate to all surface water courses and natural system restoration (wetlands, forests, etc.).

### **Policies**

The following are the County's policies for Environmental Protection:

1. To require soil conservation and erosion control practices for all future urban and rural projects.
2. To use natural resource information (soils, water table conditions, etc.) as the basis for determining the location of urban development and lot sizes.
3. To protect wildlife habitat areas such as woodlands and wetlands.
4. To carry out the County's responsibilities to protect wetlands from further loss in accordance with the State Wetland Conservation Act of 1991.

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5. To cooperate with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Soil Conservation Service and the Mower County SWCD in the protection and, wherever possible, restoration of wetlands.
  6. To properly regulate and assume responsibility for the permitting of feedlots and manure storage so as to minimize impacts on ground and surface waters.
  7. To minimize the chances that sinkholes, quarries and gravel pits will become groundwater contamination sources.
  8. To continue to monitor and require the sealing of abandoned water wells in accordance with County and State rules and regulations, including requiring the identification of any wells of record and sealing of abandoned ones whenever any property is sold or ownership is otherwise transferred.
  9. To identify and minimize the loss of significant trees wherever possible, and encourage the planting and replacement of trees as a means to minimize soil loss and protect surface waters quality.
  10. To encourage the maintenance of wildlife corridors that are compatible with agricultural activities.
  11. To encourage the employment of sustainable agricultural practices as a means to maintain adequate yields, conserve soil and protect ground and surface water quality.
  12. To encourage the judicious and responsible application and disposal of rural and urban of chemicals, pesticides and fertilizers.
  13. To support sound and responsible agricultural irrigation practices which minimize water use and salt buildup.
  14. To formulate an environmental education program and make it available to all County residents which promotes sound and responsible environmental practices.
  15. To formulate an energy conservation program and make it available to all County residents which addresses potential alternative energy sources (wind, solar and earth sheltering), in-home conservation practices (thermal blankets, low flow shower heads, etc.) and energy efficient tillage practices.
  16. To protect historical, landmark and scenic values and resources, wherever practicable.
  17. Adopt by reference the objectives and action/implementation steps contained in the Mower County Comprehensive Water Plan.
  18. Continue to support countywide education programs about sustainability, global warming, energy and other emerging environmental issues.