Testimony of Doug Peterson
Minnesota Farmers Union

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Committee on Energy and Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water and Power

To Review the Status of Upper Mississippi River Water Quality

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SUBMITTED TESTIMONY OF DOUG PETERSON, PRESIDENT

MINNESOTA FARMERS UNION

BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER AND POWER

CONCERNING: UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER WATER QUALITY

JUNE 9, 2010

Chairwoman Stabenow, Ranking Member Brownback and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the status of water quality and data collection efforts in the Upper Mississippi River Basin. My name is Doug Peterson and I am president of the Minnesota Farmers Union (MFU). My family and I own and operate our farm located south of Madison, Minnesota, where we produce wheat, corn, soybeans and alfalfa. In addition to my responsibilities at MFU, I also serve on the board of directors for the National Farmers Union (NFU).

Farmers Union has been working since 1902 to protect and enhance the economic well-being and quality of life of family farmers, ranchers and rural communities through advocating grassroots-driven policy positions adopted by its membership. Our members understand the critical role of natural resource stewardship in maintaining our ability to provide food, feed and fuel, as well as a variety of ecosystems services such as clean water from our farms and ranches.

As the subcommittee considers S.2779, the Upper Mississippi River Basin Protection Act, I will highlight some key elements from a producer's perspective. Farmers and ranchers have a variety of tools available to properly manage sediment and nutrient loss. Federal programs authorized under the Farm Bill and implemented by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provide necessary technical and financial assistance to maintain and improve natural resources on farmers' property. Depending on the local resource needs and the agricultural production of the individual producer, a range of activities can assist in avoiding, controlling or trapping sediment and nutrient run-off. State-level programs work in partnership with federal programs to further improve natural resource conservation benefits.

In Minnesota the land of 10,000 lakes, the most recent listings of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency has over 2,500 surface bodies of water listed as impaired waters in Minnesota that have failed to meet water quality standards for their designated use. So far, about 40 percent of the water resources in Minnesota that have been assessed against water quality standards do not meet at least one standard, a rate comparable with what other states are finding. Only a small percentage of Minnesota's river miles and lakes have been assessed so far.

Because of the impaired waters issue and others, Minnesota Farmers Union has been very active in recent years on water related issues that pertain to the Upper Mississippi Basin. MFU came together with nineteen other Minnesota farm organizations including the Farm Bureau and commodity groups to form the Minnesota Agricultural Waters Resources Coalition to develop

and implement a strategic educational, communications and public relations program to inform agricultural producers in Minnesota about water quality issues. In addition, Minnesota agriculture groups have formed a drainage work group to work on issues that concern Minnesota's nearly 17,000 miles of public drainage ditches that are critical to the Upper Mississippi River Basin area.

The goal of this legislation fits well with the direction that Farmers Union and Minnesota have been moving. In 2006, the Minnesota Legislature passed the Clean Water Legacy Act, which is a policy framework that describes how Minnesota will restore its impaired waters and protect high quality water resources. The Act stresses the need for public participation to ensure that implementation plans contain pollution reduction strategies that consider local needs. Another key component of the Act is the need for state and local entities to cooperate and coordinate their water planning and monitoring efforts.

MFU is especially interested in monitoring and inventory efforts to establish parameters around natural background loading in waters, and this legislation would hopefully work to address that. MFU has supported projects to define DNA markers of animal species fecal matter, and natural sloughing, and establishment of pre-settlement levels.

Data collection and analysis plays a key role informing program implementation decisions. The Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watershed Initiative (MRBI) recently launched by the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is a conservation-systems approach to managing and optimizing nutrient use and minimize runoff and soil erosion. The MRBI targets watersheds and subwatersheds based upon consistent evaluation of data from a variety of sources, including the USGS and state-level water quality data. The USGS data collection network proposed by this bill would provide information essential to future program planning as well as providing a quantifiable measure of the program's effects.

In addition to conservation program implementation, the availability of sound data is also important in measuring outcomes to determine program effectiveness. Data collected by utilizing sound scientific methodologies and interpreted with rigorous statistical analysis can provide a wealth of information for lawmakers, government agencies and agricultural producers to help them make policy and resource management decisions.

The legislation correctly recognizes the need to integrate data analysis with existing efforts across various agencies to create a baseline understanding of overlap, data gaps and redundancies. One of these already functional programs is the NRCS Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP). CEAP assessments are carried out at the field-, watershed- and landscape-scale and include analysis of the cumulative effects and benefits of conservation practices on natural resources and the environment.

USDA conservation program practices are being assessed under CEAP to quantify the environmental effects of conservation practices and programs and develop the science base for managing the agricultural landscape for environmental quality. Programs under consideration by CEAP include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), the Wetland Reserve Program

(WRP), the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), the NRCS Conservation Technical Assistance Program and the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP).

Given the vast landscape over which water quality information will be gathered, implementation of data collection as proposed under this bill will require an extensive network of monitoring stations, equipment and personnel. With more than 60 percent of the Upper Mississippi River Basin in cropland or pasture, private landowners are logical partners in the establishment of a nutrient and sediment monitoring network. I emphasize that private property rights should be recognized as a monitoring network is established and maintained, and it is absolutely critical that any data collected should be sensitive to landowner privacy as provided for in the legislation.

Program effectiveness must be measured in an outcome-based approach where real changes and environmental benefits are tracked and rewarded. Efforts to improve data collection and analysis related to water quality moves us toward that goal by providing essential information that can be used to continually improve programs and practices for the best possible outcome. Farmers and ranchers have historically been our best soil and water conservationists when given the proper tools and programs, and continue to seek opportunities to protect and conserve the natural resources that are essential to agricultural production and rural communities.

I thank the subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to your questions.

Doug Peterson, Minnesota Farmers Union President

Doug Peterson of Madison, Minnesota was elected President of the Minnesota Farmers Union (MFU) in April, 2002; re-elected in November, 2003; and again every 2 years since. MFU is a nonprofit membership-based organization that works to protect and enhance the economic opportunities and quality of life for family farmers and rural communities. Prior to his election as MFU President, Peterson served for twelve years in the Minnesota House of Representatives. He was first elected in November, 1990 and was re-elected six times from a legislative district that included Lac qui Parle, Swift, Chippewa and Big Stone Counties in western Minnesota. Peterson is widely recognized as an advocate for rural people and communities.

While serving in the Minnesota Legislature in 1996, Peterson founded and served as Chair of the Right to Be Rural Coalition; he was joined in this effort by U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone and U.S. Representative David Minge. His legislative committee assignments included Agriculture Policy, Environment & Natural Resources Policy, Environment and Natural Resources Finance, Commerce, and Transportation. Peterson also served as the lead Democrat on the Agriculture Finance Committee.

He is widely recognized for his leadership on several rural issues, including renewable fuels. Peterson was the chief author of legislation that made Minnesota the first state in the nation to require a 10% ethanol blend in gasoline—an effort that some renewable fuel advocates now call the "Minnesota model." Peterson also served as chief author of legislation for a new system of uniform safety standards and training for all recreational vehicles, and sponsored disaster relief legislation following major floods in 1997.

Since his election as MFU President, Peterson has led groups of farmers to Washington, D.C. on several occasions to push for better federal farm policies, including working for passage of the 2002 farm bill and disaster relief. Peterson has also testified before Congress on the need for laws that help farmers in cooperatives. His role as MFU President also includes leadership duties for the organization's state policy work. Peterson is chair of the MFU PAC, supervises three lobbyists, and works for a public policy agenda that is designed to benefit the majority of the state's farmers, whether they are involved in organic, sustainable, or conventional farming practices.

Peterson grew up on a family farm south of Madison, Minnesota and began his formal education in a one-room schoolhouse. A graduate of Augustana College in Sioux Falls, Peterson was an outstanding collegiate football player. After graduation, he was an art teacher, gymnastics coach and football coach in Glencoe, Minnesota before returning to Lac qui Parle County to run the family farm.

Peterson's legislative service is part of a unique and proud family tradition. His father, Harry, served as a state representative from 1964 to 1974. After Doug's twelve years as state representative ended in 2002, his son, Aaron, was elected to serve the same district. This is the only time in state history that a family has had members of three consecutive generations elected to the State Legislature.

Doug and his wife, Elly, who is employed by the Department of Revenue as a bookkeeper, have two grown sons, Aaron, a wind development specialist, and his wife, Leah, live in Seattle, Washington; and Ryan, a virologist in bio pathology for Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. In addition to farming, Peterson is a licensed auctioneer and an artist known for his vivid portrayals of wildlife.