



## *Farmers got the fever... but nature always gets the last word*

by Mike McGrath

**F**OR THE LAST SEVERAL YEARS, folks in rural Minnesota have been so worried about the possible onset of soybean aphids, mad cow disease, or bovine tuberculosis that they failed to foresee the outbreak of crop fever that has infected nearly every farmer in the Midwest — “corn crop fever,” to be exact.

One could define crop fever as, “an obsession with finding all the answers for life’s needs and wants — physical, economic, social, and environmental — in one good cash crop.” It’s a phenomenon that occurs when farming societies look for short-term answers that produce quick profits, without considering the grandchildren.

To paraphrase a recent USDA news release: Farmers are stepping up to the challenge created by ethanol demand and will produce enough corn this year to meet our nation’s food, energy, livestock feed, and export needs. With the price of corn approaching \$4.00 per bushel, who can blame them.

Corn crop fever came on quickly over the last eight months, and, by the look of things, it will most likely be around for a while. For the Bluffland region of southeastern Minnesota, the impact of “corn crop fever” upon this fragile landscape without a balanced public policy supporting long-term conservation will be devastating, and it could rival the landscape damage that occurred during previous times of callous mono-cropping fevers.

When first opened to settlement following the signing of a treaty with the Sioux in 1851, the landscape of southeastern Minnesota was dominated by prairie grasses, oak savannahs, and steep wooded bluffs that descend into deeply carved river valleys, all draining to the great Mississippi River and the Gulf.

By the mid 1850s, a wave of Yankee settlers from the northern half of the nation, as well

as new immigrants from Ireland, Norway, and Germany, swept into the area on a tidal wave of homesteading fever, laying claim to the land and building new communities.

For a brief period during pioneering agriculture history, wheat was the staple crop of the local growing economy. Wheat was all the farmers grew. It was sometimes even the currency used to purchase land and supplies. In the beginning, wheat was king.

As the plow turned over the tall grass prairie, the black organic soils that had been created by eons of natural cycles readily accepted the seed of the golden, waving grain and brought forth great yields for the struggling homesteaders. A way of life developed around its planting and harvesting, and an infrastructure of commerce and transportation was established to reap its profits.

The annual harvest would begin in August and could take up to four weeks, with nearly everyone in the countryside working in the fields with scythe and cradle. Family and friends worked together, ate together, and even sang together to bring in the harvest. The culture of the Minnesota family farm and its small town community base was founded on the wheat crop.

Planting wheat in the early days of agriculture in southeastern Minnesota may have been grounded in the culture, but it was not ecologically sound. Farmers broke sod on new ground in the summer,

*continued on page 6*

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Top row from left: Chris Barnier, Dave Frederickson, Sig Anderson  
Seated from left: Mary Hanks, Jean Andreasen, Gary Holthaus,

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## Dear Readers...

IN THE LIVES of every organization, there come times to renew commitment to a mission as well as times to restructure internal systems. For the Minnesota Project, the spring of 2007 is one of those times. You may have heard that our Executive Director, Diane Jensen, left her position in February. And I'm honored to have been asked to temporarily step back into the role of Executive Director, this time as an interim whose goal is to successfully replace herself by Labor Day. Help me make it happen.

Meanwhile, each and every person at the Minnesota Project has put out 110% and more to make this leadership transition successful. Dedication is a true asset.

And it's probably not a coincidence that this all happened in the springtime, in the opening of the light when animals are out there taking on a little more courage as they fend for themselves newly out of hibernation or on a new migratory path.

That Cardinal sings in that oak for the fourth year in a row — or is it a younger, newer redbird singing in place of the old? That is our goal in life, to so attach ourselves to community and to heartfelt good organizational missions that whenever we must detach ourselves from the music of The Cause, there are young, bright voices to pick up the song.

The other day, Lola Schoenrich and I were sitting with the staff over lunch re-telling something funny that had happened in the Minnesota nonprofit

world in 1980. A stillness told us that there were a few in the room who might not remember back that far and sure enough, a quiet voice arises, "I was two." And another, "I was three," and I felt a deep sense of gratitude for those who carry on with the verve and motivation of their own generation.

This issue is full of courage, and I name that as our theme. On the cover, you read Mike's courageous words, willing to remind us of our history on Minnesota's farmland, willing to ask the tough questions about monocropping that could save humankind from repeating well known mistakes. In like manner, when Loni Kemp spoke in Washington or on the radio the other day, I was struck by the courage in her convictions. Here, you will enjoy her window into the world of advocacy. And Lola's article about Minnesota energy policy relates that Minnesota legislators are beginning — just beginning — to act with a courage that will eventually help take us to the other side of the slope of so many energy and climate trends. It's all about courage. Do you have the courage to change your lifestyle and give your grandkids a better set of choices?

Oh, and if there was ever a time to take out your checkbook and write a generous check to the Minnesota Project, do it today. We will put feet under it and turn it into good work for the world of renewable energy, local food options, and sustainable agriculture. Thank you,

— Beth E. Waterhouse,  
Interim Executive Director  
(and still Editor, Community  
Connections, since 1992)  
bwaterhouse@mnproject.org

*The Minnesota Project says hello to three new staff people this spring.*

*Dave Glenn joins the administrative team as Business Administrator. Jocie*

*Iszler will work for renewable energy as head of the Midwest Ag-Energy*

*Network, and Kara Ferguson joins the Heartland Food Network as its Program Assistant. New faces — new energy for the cause.*

# Minnesota Sets Higher Standards for Electricity

**I**N FEBRUARY, the Minnesota Legislature passed the strongest renewable electricity standard in the country. The new law, signed by Governor Pawlenty, will assure that a growing percentage of electricity sold in Minnesota comes from renewable sources such as wind, solar, and biomass — that at least 25% will come from these clean resources by the year 2025. The Minnesota Project and its community partner organizations have been working for a decade to pass such standards for the sources of our electric power, and we are pleased to be able to report this success.

Global warming is real. Folks are getting that, but few are clear about what actions to take — what to do about it. We must reduce carbon dioxide emissions by producing a higher percentage of our energy from renewable sources. We know that we'll soon begin to see this in the Minnesota countryside, and we believe we can do it best in local communities. First the science:

Carbon dioxide (the global warming culprit) comes from burning coal,



gasoline, and other fossil fuels. Today, almost 70% of our electricity in Minnesota comes from coal, and we must reduce that percentage as quickly as we can. Today, producing electricity from coal in Minnesota emits 40 million tons of carbon dioxide per year.

Visualize it this way: a 7-foot (!) diameter balloon full of carbon dioxide equals about 5 pounds. There are 2,000 pounds in a ton, therefore 40 million tons equals 80 billion such balloons. And that's just for our electricity.

The new Minnesota renewable energy standard, when implemented, will eventually reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 16% (eliminating 12 billion of those huge balloons). With new efficiency laws (also being debated this month) that percentage could more than double.

Soon the new Minnesota electricity standard will begin to show in the countryside. You'll begin to see more wind turbines, since a large percentage of the new renewable energy will come from wind. Today, we have about 1,000 MW of wind energy up and running in the state. When 25% of our electricity comes from clean renewables, we will have between 5,000 and 6,000 MW in place. The most common 1.8 MW (huge) turbine supplies enough electricity to power 600 homes. Eventually, with the new policies in place, we will likely have 3,000 or more such wind turbines scattered across the state — most of them

in the southern and western prairies. You might see them grouped together in large projects or in groups of two or three.

Finally, the new standards are good for the state's economy. The higher renewable electricity standards could generate \$10 billion in renewable energy investments — including transmission — by the year 2020.

We may be glad of that, but we at the

*"The higher renewable electricity standards could generate \$10 billion in renewable energy investments — including transmission — by the year 2020."*

Minnesota Project ask even harder questions, and we believe that local ownership is best. Today, the electric utilities own nearly all of the generating facilities, but this trend is beginning to shift.

Studies have documented that landowners can earn between 5 and 10 times more if they are part owners of the projects, and typically they keep more of their dollars near home. More groups of landowners, communities, counties, and tribes are exploring wind energy ownership. Democratizing energy production in this way stands to benefit us all, as local communities step up as the decision-makers to implement the state's new standards, and as people address global warming by helping to create the electric system of the future. ☛

To monitor the status of other clean energy legislation in Minnesota, go to: [www.cleanenergyminnesota.org](http://www.cleanenergyminnesota.org).

This article was written by the energy team at the Minnesota Project.

# Ms. Kemp Goes to Washington

An Interview with Loni Kemp

**F**OR A PERSON who has developed policy for a couple of decades, testifying before a committee of Congress is the *crème de la crème* of policy work. You can't ask to testify, of course, and must be chosen by the committee, so when I got this call in the midst of a busy week, I had to say yes!

A few days prior to the testimony day (for me, April 19) invited witnesses must submit their written testimony for the record and website. Other details follow, just to fly into that city and find a hotel at cherry-blossom time. Then the lengthy written version must be honed down to a very strictly limited five-minute oral presentation. Of course, in all this I had the support of the Minnesota Project staff as well as the staff at the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition office in DC.

Representative Collin Peterson chairs the House Agriculture Committee and he has instituted a process that harkens back to other democratic leaders before him — one where the full committee will allow for much input from its subcommittees. I was actually testifying at the Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Energy, and Research — a committee of 26 members of the House, some represented by their staff.

That morning in my hotel, I was practicing over and over on my testimony to make it fit into exactly five minutes. Note that this was also the morning when Attorney General Gonzales was on the "hot seat," so I figured if I was nervous, I had absolutely nothing to worry about compared with Mr. Gonzales at that time.

That day also happened to be the day we were releasing our Midwest CSP Assessment. It was printed, shipped

from Minnesota, and already in the hands of the SAC office for our press conference and distribution that day. Timing is everything.

Ferd Hoefner of the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition and I made our way to the hearing room located in one of the house office buildings. When we got near, we could see a long line already formed of people waiting to get in. There are three doors to the room: one for the committee members themselves, one for the witnesses (each with one assistant) and one for the public. We slipped into our seats.

The first panel consisted of people from the commodity and farm groups. I was happy to hear all give strong statements supporting higher funding of conservation programs in the new farm bill this year. Then the warning bell started ringing marking an upcoming vote over in the Capitol. At this point, the room emptied but soon filled again, and members were in and out — an audience in motion.

I was the thirteenth speaker of thirteen speakers that morning (and the only woman). You'd be interested to know that there's a wooden box in front of each speaker with a green light, yellow light and red light to keep us close to our time limit.

I tried to go back to the basic message that the Conservation Security Program is unique among programs, that this one actually sets high environmental standards for outcomes on farms. I stated that the Conservation Title of the upcoming Farm Bill is our nation's most important environmental law since it governs the use of half of our land (land in farming) and sets the fate of the soils, birds, and animals on that land.



## TESTIMONY

- "CSP is unique because it is the only farm bill conservation program that requires farmers to actually solve resource problems to a sustainable level on working acres and then encourages farmers to exceed that high standard."
- "Congress should provide adequate and protected funding to ensure the implementation of a true nationwide program serving all of agriculture."
- "Regarding energy, perennial biomass must be the focus of intensive research and on-farm production for the next few years. The surge of corn production stemming from the potential of corn ethanol itself demands that all of our conservation programs step up to assist farmers in minimizing environmental harm."

In short, I'd say that yes, this day was effective. This is the group that is going to mark up the Conservation Title, line by line. We were able to bring our ideas directly to those who are right in the middle of our democracy. This is the way that democracy works, and through the media it obviously goes beyond that room. This experience re-affirmed, for me, the importance of the work we do in connecting people with this sort of policy work to bring about sustainable agriculture and renewable energy. It rewards years of learning about process and years designing policy language. We were asked our opinion, and we were at the table. Our voice was heard. ♣

For a copy of the Midwest CSP Assessment report, "Conservation Security Program Drives Resource Management: An Assessment of CSP Implementation in Five Midwestern States," call 1-800-366-4793.

# Spring Growth at the Heartland Food Network

by Marjorie Hegstrom

**T**HE PLUM TREE in my backyard is literally blooming before my eyes. Each time I walk by it, a new branch has exploded with tiny white blossoms. The syrupy sweet aroma cloaks the backyard, and fallen petals dot the ground like an April snowfall. This spring, the Heartland Food Network is bursting with growth as well. The program has a new mission statement, we welcome our first full time Program Assistant, Kara Ferguson, and we've launched new public activities for the spring and summer!

*The Heartland Food Network mission is to encourage and facilitate the increased consumption of local and seasonal foods as a way to build stronger communities, healthier lives and a cleaner environment.*

"Encouraging" is in some ways the easy part. With top-notch chefs preparing fabulous seasonal dishes, our message about local foods is easy to communicate. Every **Third Thursday**, chefs at our member restaurants offer seasonal specials featuring local ingredients. April specials included **Southwestern-style Chicken Salad** with Fresh Cilantro and Orange Dressing at the Arboretum Restaurant, Café Brenda's **Sautéed Fish Cakes** with Smoked Star Prairie Trout served with local spinach, beet and Shepherd's Way blue cheese and **Rotisserie Leg of Lamb** with Wheat berry Tabbouleh and **Watercress-Orange Salad** from Firelake Grill House and Cocktail Bar.

Although these exceptional flavors speak for themselves, it isn't always easy for food establishments to acquire great local foods. Heartland facilitates relationships among producers, distributors and chefs so that whether chefs purchase via distributors or farmer-direct they have more locally produced options. Another crucial step of this facilitation is helping farmers and producers work with food service establishments, a transition that takes special skills and experience. We provide training workshops for farmers and producers to gain these skills and build positive relationships with buyers. Currently, 13 restaurants, 4 distributors and more than 40 local producers make up the "network" of the Heartland program.

Our spring growth also brings new opportunities to educate and engage the public in supporting local foods. Heartland Food Network and Renewing the Countryside teamed up to bring a new element to this year's Living Green Expo. The **Home-grown Heartland Stage** featured local chefs, food educators and farmers demonstrating simple, delicious and healthful dishes prepared with local foods.

We are also excited to announce that Heartland Food Network is a proud sponsor of the Mill City Farmers Market cooking demonstration series. Each week at the Market (May 12th – October 20th), top local chefs create delicious dishes featuring all of the wonderful products the Market has to offer. Market customers learn from the very best how to make the most of the farmers market season with weekly recipes, tips on storing fresh produce, food samples and more. Watch for more information on our website [www.heartlandfoodnetwork.org](http://www.heartlandfoodnetwork.org) or at [www.millcityfarmersmarket.org](http://www.millcityfarmersmarket.org).

We're excited to share our spring growth with you and hope you'll join us in supporting the work of local farmers and the chefs, restaurants and distributors committed to using their products. For more information call Kara Ferguson at 651.645.6159, x9. 🍀

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Our thanks go to Marjorie Hegstrom for her year of dedication to Heartland as a part-time staff. You'll see Marjorie sticking close to these food issues in her work at the Mill City Farmers' Market.*

## Fresh Lake Superior Whitefish

*First, buy your Whitefish from the right company. Per Carver at Chester Creek Café buys his from the Lake Superior Fish Company in Superior, Wisconsin. The following recipe was run as part of the recent Living Green Expo cooking stage.*

### STEPS:

- Clarify a pound of butter by boiling it until the protein part sinks to the bottom. Carefully pour off the oil on top, leaving the milk solids in the pan.
- Lightly beat eggs and make an egg wash using enough to cover the fillets.
- Prepare a flat pan of bread crumbs. Add salt and pepper to crumbs.
- Use a non-stick omelet or frying pan over moderate heat and enough clarified butter to cover the bottom of the pan. Dip the fish fillet in the egg and then the crumbs and cook until golden — about a minute and a half per side.
- Then put the frying pan with the fish in a moderate oven until the fish is flakey. If it's not done, it will remain solid and retain a translucent look.
- To top the fish, warm butter to room temperature and whip with maple syrup.

Serve with roasted baby red potatoes and fresh asparagus for a wonderful spring meal.

Here, the chef used brown yard eggs from the Southeast Minnesota Food Network in St. Charles and Rogotske maple syrup from Duluth.



## FEVER *from p. 1*

left it bare throughout the winter, then dragged the soil and planted in the early spring. Throughout the spring thaw, soils would wash away down the unprotected slopes.

With Cyrus McCormick's reaper and binder and with the railroads arriving by the late 1860s, buying and selling wheat and flour was lucrative, and the prosperity generated from raising "King Wheat" built the foundations of the economy and social fabric of the villages and towns in those early days of settlement. But farmers weren't long in discovering that intensive monocropping of wheat was taking a heavy toll on the once productive soils.



Leaving the landscape devoid of a cover crop throughout the winter led to massive erosion that resulted in intolerable losses of topsoil and flash flooding in the spring. Valleys were buried in sediment, family homesteads along creek banks were washed away during summer thunderstorms, and once even an entire valley town in the Whitewater watershed was buried in displaced topsoil.

By the late 1870s, wheat yields were declining. Ground that had been producing 30 bushels to the acre began to yield only 8–10 bushels. Monocropping systems increased disease and pests, and it wasn't long before many of the original settlers were selling out and moving on to the Dakota Territory. By the early 1880s, for those farmers who wanted to stay, it was time to diversify. Mother Nature herself had dethroned King Wheat.

While the laws of nature spelled failure for those who pushed prairie

soils to the limit, some farmers realized early on that the grasses of this lush region could produce fine herds of cattle, and the railroad could ship them to eastern markets just as it did the wheat and flour. Even the local newspapers, worried about a declining economy, were engaged in editorial campaigns to encourage farmers to diversify to livestock and other cash crops like corn and alfalfa.

So agricultural diversification began to occur in the early 1880s, but it would still be another 50 years before a nationwide conservation effort would help establish long-term practices like contour planting, windbreaks, tree plantings, and runoff management.

Today we face similar challenges on the landscape. With the addition of intensive chemical inputs to compensate for the elimination of resource-conserving crop rotations and to meet the demand for greater yields, we are now also threatening aquatic life thousands of miles away in the Gulf of Mexico. Add energy to the mix and "corn crop fever" once again puts agricultural diversification on the decline.

This time we should know better — we should know that we cannot wait thirty years to learn a lesson that others before us once had to face.

Where early pioneer farmers thought soil resources were infinite, today's farmers more fully understand the consequences of managing their land for short-term gain. Yet, this time, the challenge is even greater because both the market and farm policies drive the crop decisions.

As farm policy is crafted in Congress this year, many think that corn is indeed the antidote for other problems like foreign fossil fuel dependence. But just as with the golden grain of wheat, the golden nugget of corn will only be a temporary solution, and farmers

will eventually have to look toward other crops when the landscape will not cooperate.

Progress is already being made in the research and development of other biomass energy crops. It is expected that we will soon see the return of perennial crops upon the landscape as our region moves to a cellulosic-based economy for those energy "needs and wants."

Because annual row crops are not compatible with more sensitive landscapes like Minnesota's Bluffland region, we should embrace the opportunity to encourage, through outreach education and conservation incentives, the transition of the sensitive croplands into native perennial grasses that can provide feedstock for regionally based cellulosic energy facilities, grazing pastures for family livestock operations, and habitat for wildlife.

Ironically, our progress as a civilization may lead us right back to a landscape that looks like the one we left, as natural in native grasses as it did when the early pioneers came to transform the landscape into working farms.

However, as we stand on the threshold of this new era of hope, we must ask, "Will we next see a 'cellulosic crop fever' infect our farmers causing them to strive for higher yields in a low priced market using genetically modified perennials that require expensive chemical inputs?"

If so, the antidote may only be temporary and the ending, once again, all too familiar. Hopefully we have at least learned, as farmers, that Mother Nature will have the last word anyway — good or bad, like it or not — she always does. 🍀

*Mike McGrath lives, writes, and farms just outside Whalan, Minnesota in the beautiful Root River Valley. He has also been an active part of the agriculture team at the Minnesota Project since 2002.*

## Going with the Flow

by Loni Kemp

ON A NICE SPRING-LIKE DAY in late March, good friends from Minneapolis called to propose an early canoe outing along the Upper Iowa River a few miles from us. With crocus and snowdrops blooming near the house, we confidently penciled in the third Saturday in April on all of our calendars. Then came weeks of below freezing weather, howling winds, and a post-Easter dump of over eight inches of snow. I thought for sure we would have to give up the canoeing fantasy.

But spring was her usual erratic self. The appointed day arrived with strong sun and warm gusty breezes, and our intrepid friends and their teenage son called to confirm. I made an apple crisp with the last of the stored apples, they arrived with lunch contributions including goat cheese from her sister's farm, and we reconnected over a quick feast before heading out into a truly brilliant spring day.

After complex calculations about how to get the cars at the beginning and end points of our route, out we set. The park at Kendallville was vacant as we put in to the fast-flowing river. High summer will bring throngs of people to float the only designated Wild and Scenic River in Iowa, but today we were nearly alone. The water was high and clear, which we counted as fortunate, considering how the "flashy" streams of our area tend to carry loads of sediment and farm runoff after heavy rains. The land surrounding the Upper Iowa River is nearly all private, with strong conservation programs by local government to help landowners keep the river clean. Indeed, this river is fed by coldwater streams and springs, and we could spy hefty sized trout as we floated over them.

Eager for a workout, we paddled with the current as we sped along the ever-changing riverbanks. Magnificent limestone walls lined with early wildflowers drifted by, interspersed by deep woods, occasional pastures and farm fields.

Though the trees were bare and brown, the forest floor sparkled with emerging bluebells, Dutchmen's britches, bloodroot, hepatica, and false rue anemone. I was delighted to discover the rare snow trillium in bloom, a species I had never found by myself before. Along the shore, kingfishers and mink entertained us, peering at their first intruders of the year.

We stopped periodically to inspect the flowers, to retrieve a remarkable bleached buck skull and antlers, and to watch our young friend take a quick swim. After graduation, he will join a group heading up north for a month long canoe trip in the arctic, so this icy spring dip was a foretaste of his summer to come.

As we approached the Chimney Rock palisades — stunning 200 foot vertical white cliffs that run for a quarter mile or more — I thought Minnesotans' assumptions about Iowa would be shattered if they could see this.

Ending our journey at the bridge past Bluffton, we were tired, a bit sunburned, but happy. Good luck had blessed our chosen day — but we made it happen by taking a chance on it. After all, you've got to go with the flow to enjoy spring in Minnesota. 🍀



### ANCIENT

A tiny sparrow, half  
a sparrow, the whole  
universe, just tumbled  
from its nest, easy  
as cottonwood seed

drifts

in this air, mightily

spreads now his stubby wings  
as if a conductor

before his orchestra, then  
*peeps,*

peeps mightily  
for his mother  
to feed him  
and feed him again—  
*peep! peep!* Such fine imperious  
fire in his eye — *peep!*

And she, a slender gray beauty, rises  
on tiptoe and swiftly  
her neck arcs downward  
and her bill thrusts deep  
into the yawning of her little one,  
releasing something there  
to relieve the rage  
of emptiness.

— Joe Paddock  
*Litchfield, Minnesota*

*Joe Paddock lives and writes with his wife, Nancy, in Litchfield. This poem comes from Joe's latest poetry book, A Sort of Honey, 2007, Red Dragonfly Press.*

# the MINNESOTA PROJECT

working for strong local economies,  
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1885 University Ave. W, Suite 315  
St. Paul, MN 55104  
tel 651/645-6159 fax 651/645-1262  
[mnproject@mnproject.org](mailto:mnproject@mnproject.org)  
[www.mnproject.org](http://www.mnproject.org)

**Greater Minnesota offices:**  
Loni Kemp, 507.743.8300  
RR1 Box 81B, Canton 55922

Mike McGrath, 507.467.3576  
RR2 Box 2101, Lanesboro 55949

Tim Gieseke, 507.359.1889  
40322 541st Ave., New Ulm 56073

#### **The Minnesota Project Staff:**

Beth Waterhouse, *Interim Executive Director*  
Loni Kemp, *Senior Policy Analyst*  
Lola Schoenrich, *Energy Program Director*  
Mike McGrath, *Agriculture Policy Specialist*  
Tim Gieseke, *Agriculture and Environmental Policy Specialist*  
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## **Minnesota Environmental Fund Photo Contest**

*The Minnesota Environmental Fund is looking for photographs that show the importance of Minnesota's environment to you. These images may show natural landscapes, farmland and working lands, wildlife, plant life, weather, people interacting with nature, or a picture that reflects your environmental values. The contest*

*kicked off on Earth Day, April 22, and will close on June 21, 2007. Judges will consider two categories – adult and youth. The winners will be announced at a special event August 1, 2007 at REI-Bloomington. Prizes will be awarded. Visit [www.mnenvirofund.org](http://www.mnenvirofund.org) for contest rules and submission guidelines or call 651-917-1876.*

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1885 University Avenue West, Suite 315  
St. Paul, MN 55104

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