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DANGER DOWNSTREAM MINNESOTA'S THREATENED RIVERS



MIGHTY MISSISSIPPI AT PERILOUS BEND

Part 1 of 3 • Story by JOSEPHINE MARCOTTY • Photos by AARON LAVINSKY • Star Tribune staff



PARK RAPIDS, MINN. — The mating dance of the hex mayflies drew John Sorenson to the Straight River at sunset.

As the bugs floated like snowflakes in the fading summer light, he pulled on his waders and waited patiently for the distinct sound of trout breaking the dark water to feed.

"It's a treasure," he said, stepping to the edge of the grassy bank and casting his line, as he has for years.

But the Straight River is becoming warmer and more polluted as farm irrigation rigs multiply along its banks. Now Sorenson fears that the fish huddling in the cooler deep spots are a stark sign that northern Minnesota's only naturally producing trout stream is in trouble.

"In 10 years the Straight River could be a big muddy stream good only for carp," he said.

And the peril is flowing downstream — into the Mississippi River and across a watershed that covers almost half of



A stunning transformation of the land is threatening the Mississippi. While the state monitors the river, above, it has limited power to protect it.

"If we are polluting this area, it's floating downstream. ... It's coming at you, baby."

Randy Wenthold, who lives near Park Rapids

Minnesota, signaling a new and rising threat to one of the state's great natural wonders. Like many others across Minnesota, the great river is heading toward an ecological precipice.

In the last five years, the Upper Mississippi watershed has lost about 400 square miles of forests, marshes and grasslands — natural features that cleanse and refresh its water — to agriculture and urban development. That's an area bigger than Voyageurs National Park and represents the second fastest rate of land conversion in the country, according to one national study.

That breathtaking transformation is now endangering the cleanest stretch of America's greatest river with farm chemicals, depleted groundwater and urban runoff. At this rate, conservationists warn, the Upper Mississippi — a recreational jewel and the source of drinking water for millions of Minnesotans — could become just another polluted river.

See **MISSISSIPPI** on A8 ▶

Trump got a \$916M tax break

Loss from 1990s casino debacle set stage for years free of federal income tax.

By DAVID BARSTOW and SUSANNE CRAIG
New York Times

Donald Trump declared a \$916 million loss on his 1995 income tax returns, a tax deduction so substantial it could have allowed him to legally avoid paying any federal income taxes for up to 18 years, records obtained by the New York Times show.

The 1995 tax records, never before disclosed, reveal the extraordinary tax benefits that Trump, the Republican presidential nominee, derived from the financial wreckage he left behind in the early 1990s through mismanagement of three Atlantic City, N.J., casinos, his ill-fated foray into the airline business and his ill-timed purchase of the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan.

Tax experts hired by the Times to analyze Trump's 1995 records said tax rules that are especially advantageous to wealthy filers would have allowed Trump to use his \$916 million loss to cancel out an equivalent amount of taxable income over an 18-year period.

Although Trump's taxable income in subsequent years is as yet unknown, a \$916 million loss in 1995 would have been large enough to wipe out more than \$50 million a year in taxable income over 18 years.

The \$916 million loss certainly could have eliminated any federal income taxes Trump otherwise would have owed on the \$50,000 to \$100,000 he was

See **TRUMP** on A13 ▶

Urgent push in state for urgent care

Observers say boom in clinics could drive costs up.

By CHRISTOPHER SNOWBECK
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Urgent care clinics are proliferating across the Twin Cities as patients footing a bigger share of their medical bills hunt for convenience.

Up to 19 new urgent care centers will be rolled out across Minnesota by the end of next year by the Optum unit of Minnesota-based United-Health Group, bringing a 20 percent increase in the state from just one provider.

Hospitals and clinics that have been offering urgent care for several years also are promising expansions, setting up a battle to retain patients and capture new business.

Urgent care operators cite the potential savings of keeping people out of pricey emergency rooms, while some observers lament that the proliferation could drive up costs by undercutting efforts to coordinate patient care.

Most agree that the growth reflects a broader shift toward retail-style medical services

See **URGENT CARE** on A7 ▶

Twin Cities' tax hikes loom large

By ERIC ROEPER and JESSIE VAN BERKEL • Star Tribune staff writers

Minneapolis and St. Paul each want to boost property tax collections next year at a rate not seen since the recession, and residents are expected to feel the pinch despite the booming economy in both cities.

Minneapolis is seeking \$16.4 million more from taxpayers and St. Paul is asking for an additional \$8.3 million, in large part to cover the rising pay of city employees. Other factors include a lack of new state aid — particularly in St. Paul — tackling deferred park maintenance and the hiring of more police officers.

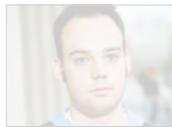
The budgets in both cities won't be set until December, but preliminary estimates show city taxes would rise up to \$79 on a median-value home in Minneapolis and \$46 on a median-value home in St. Paul.

See **BUDGETS** on A15 ▶

ELECTION 2016 RACE FOR PRESIDENT



"I'm registered, but I don't know that I feel strongly enough to vote," says new voter Aalayah Robb.



Trump's debate performance sowed doubts for GOP-leaning Nate DeLisle, 19. He's considering Clinton.



Hoku Aki, 23, is leaning to Trump at the moment, but says he might write in Bernie Sanders' name.

MILLENNIAL VOTERS KEEP OPTIONS OPEN

Story by PATRICK CONDON • Photos by GLEN STUBBE • Star Tribune staff

To understand why Democrat Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign is pouring so much effort into energizing millennials, talk to a new voter like Aalayah Robb.

"I'm registered, but I don't know that I feel strongly enough to vote this year," said Robb, a first-year University of Minnesota student from Sioux Falls. Robb has been turned off by what she called Donald Trump's "racial comments," but not so much that she's ready to pull the lever for Clinton. "I don't want to vote just because I can," she said.

As of this election year, millennials have overtaken baby boomers as the largest living generation in the United States. In Minnesota, these 18- to 34-year-old voters make up more

than a third of the voting population — tied with Generation X and easily exceeding boomers. Poll after poll has shown millennials lean further to the left than their older peers, but are also less likely to identify with traditional political parties — and less motivated to vote at all.

"I don't like Trump so much that maybe I'll vote for Hillary just because I don't want him to win," Robb said. "But I don't know if that's fair."

In a Star Tribune Minnesota Poll in September, Clinton tallied her best margins among millennial voters, scoring 51 percent support to just 24 percent for Trump. It

See **MILLENNIALS** on A13 ▶

On the trail: Where Pence and Kaine stand on the issues and what to expect at Tuesday's VP debate. A12

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ANGER DOWNSTREAM THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

NEW THREATS ARE CHOKING THE MISSISSIPPI

MISSISSIPPI from A1
Here, around Park Rapids, potato fields are replacing forests, and drinking wells show rising levels of nitrate contamination from fertilizers.

Above the western edge of the vast watershed, soaring demand for irrigation is depleting sensitive aquifers and rivers that feed the Mississippi.

And where the Upper Mississippi curves like a giant question mark through the center of Minnesota, many of its tributaries are showing signs of stress — phosphorus that breeds algae, sediment that makes the water cloudy, even bacteria that stretches farther downstream.

"What we must find, we do to our water," said John Linc Stine, commissioner of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. Yet because most land-use decisions are in the hands of private property owners and local governments, Minnesota has limited power to protect the river. "We can see it coming and still not be able to do something about it," Stine said.

About this series
Danger downstream examines the way dramatic changes to Minnesota's landscape are jeopardizing water quality.

Part 1: Deforestation, irrigation and urban development pose growing threats to the watershed of the Upper Mississippi, and Minnesota is in a race to protect it.

Part 2: Pollution from private drinking wells has nitrate concentrations above the level considered safe for infants and pregnant women.

Part 3: In western Minnesota, an ambitious but simple experiment on the Chippewa River shows what it would take to save a river before it's too late.

More online
Liquor the Mississippi River watershed and the threats it faces through the eyes of its people of the Twin Cities. It's coming at you, baby. Whether you like it or not.

For decades, much of the aquifer was covered — and protected — by forests managed by the Potlatch Corp., the largest private landholder in Minnesota. But now that it is moving most of its tree-growing operations elsewhere, above the sensitive Pineand Sand Aquifer, about 200,000 acres have been or soon will be deforested for farming, and another 200,000 could be.

The expansion of agriculture has slowed for now in part because of a drop in corn prices. Ironically, Offutt published on the expansion of its potato fields in large part to reduce phosphorus runoff into drinking water. Adding more fields meant it could rotate potatoes more often with other crops that require fewer nutrients. Last year it reduced its request for permits to five, and the DNR and other state agencies are trying to gauge the scope of the problem.

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture is studying how nitrate moves from soil to groundwater in land that's never been cultivated. And the DNR is planning a \$15 million project to study the movement of water to and through the aquifer — and just how much irrigation it can tolerate.

Sorenson, the Straight River trout angler, said he's glad the state is stepping in. Even so, he worries about the rising big drought. What will happen to the trout he wonders. If all the groundwater goes to corn and potatoes?

"If it was for national defense, if it was for hungry people, I'd be all for that," he said. "But for French fries for an already overweight country? That irrites my ire."

In addition to studying the aquifer, state agencies and conservation groups are taking advantage of the landowners' version to acquire prime pieces of the Potlatch complex.

But that can go only so far, said Richard Peterson, who manages a forest easement program for the DNR. Peterson estimates that the state will be able to protect only 10 percent of the forested land over the Pineand Sand Aquifer. A key reason: local governments often own the land, and public ownership hampers the progress of private development and reduces local tax revenue.

"We are putting this price on conservation," said Matthew Hillgart, policy analyst for the Association of Minnesota Counties. "But at the cost of what? Property tax increases? Just the reduction of a hunk of



A GREAT RESPONSIBILITY: John Sorenson, top, fished the Straight River, a trout stream in the Mississippi watershed that is becoming more polluted from the increase of agriculture around it. Minnesota has an outsized responsibility for the Mississippi, which starts in Itasca, above center. The mighty river is facing battles over land use and water quality, tested above by Sarah Lo Schmitt. Farmers like Wally Perkins, right, who mottored his crops near Royalton, also feel the need to protect their livelihoods and their communities. He said, "We are big drivers of the local economy."

"What we do to our land, we do to our water. We can see it coming and still not be able to do something about it."

John Linc Stine, MPCA commissioner

to the local population?" Hillgart says the Legacy Amendment, though well intentioned, has spawned local animosity toward state government and conservation groups. Half of Itasca County, for example, is now in public hands, he noted.

"We have not reached this huge anti-government, atmosphere. But I don't want us to," he said.

Planting paradise
North of Brainerd, where the Mississippi starts to cut south, there's another kind of deforestation underway. But this one — exemplified by the four-lane Highway 271 — is driven by the growing number of people seeking the quintessential Minnesota getaway.

The population around Minnesota's lake country is growing rapidly, and is expected to accelerate as baby boomers retire. The population of Crow Wing County has risen 15 percent since 2000 — faster than the state as a whole — and is projected to rise another 12 percent in the next two decades. And that doesn't include the seasonal vacationers who clog the roads every summer weekend, driving the expansion of Highway 271.

"This is just a darn nice place to live," said Bob Oerholm, who's been working as a real estate agent in the Brainerd area for 30 years. "There's high quality water, fishing, hunting, lots of recreation and proximity to the Twin Cities." As a result, he added, "There's traffic all the time."

At the same time, grandparents are driving their kids home properties to help pay for college. "There's a lot of home properties to help pay for college," said Oerholm. "There's a lot of home properties to help pay for college."

to attend a meeting in town with state pollution officials. For two hours they listened to experts from the DNR, the Agriculture Department and the Health Department explain the hydrology of aquifers and the risk of high nitrates in drinking water.

"A baby can drink three bottles of it and die," said Rich Soyle, a hydrologist with the Health Department. "We lose sleep about it."

The farmers were hearing quite a different message: That their way of life was at risk. Collectively, they have invested millions of dollars in the chemicals and manure irrigation systems that over the last few decades, have transformed the sandy soils of Brainerd and Morrison Counties near St. Cloud into an extraordinarily rich region for corn, soybeans and potatoes.

Water from the aquifer, in short, is what built their lives, their families and their community.

Now these government officials were suggesting that the state might restrict their use of water — all to protect a modest stream called Little Rock Creek that carries a rising load of agricultural pollution into the powerful flow of the Mississippi River flowing serenely past them just 2 miles away.

"It's a god awful insult to us," said farmer Dean Zimmerman.

Conflicts like this one are intensifying up and down the lower part of the river's watershed. It's the way it got to be, as long as people need food and places to grow it. The historical transfer of forested land in history, he said, "And you can't put it back together."

Taken together, these trends mean more roads, lawns, docks, driveways and boats — all of which can drive water pollution.

Starting a few years ago, Crow Wing County began requiring stormwater management systems for any property that has 15 percent or more of its surface. That's the point where you start seeing problems in water quality, said county land manager Chris Finco.

But local governments are already facing hard choices.

This year the Crow Wing County Board of Commissioners created a tent map when it voted over unanimously to allow ATV and snowmobile trails in a protected forest area along the Mississippi near the Brainerd airport.

The land, once slated for development, was purchased from Potlatch with \$10 million in Legacy funds as a major forest conservation area. But motorized trails are not good for wildlife or habitat, said outgoing members of the state's Lesard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council, a body that advises the Legislature on the use of Legacy funds. Giving it to ATV and snowmobiles, they said, violated the spirit of the Legacy Amendment.

Crow Wing County Administrator Tim Hauke says the county was always clear in its intentions. But the larger problem, he said, is that other counties saw Crow Wing take a leading role and are now wary of conservation partnerships with the state.

"We have been misinterpreted by the Lesard-Sams folks," he said.

"It's just too bad, he said, that the state didn't step in 25 years ago — before it was too late for Little Rock Creek."

Nods doesn't blame local farmers for fighting to hang onto their investments and their way of life. "Naturally they are upset," he said, because their days of unlimited water use are probably over.

"I'm just too bad, he said, that the state didn't step in 25 years ago — before it was too late for Little Rock Creek."

Good enough!
One day this past summer, some of the farmers around Rice, Minn., left their fields