

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

THE NEED FOR CLEAN AIR IS CLEAR

Jumping off a dock into a glassy lake or casting a line into the clear running water of a river makes it easy to appreciate clean water. Walking a trail under a green canopy or setting up camp at a state park makes it easy to notice the benefits of healthy public lands. But air is the element we tend



Paul Austin
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not to think about unless there's something wrong. And then, of course, it's hard not to think about it.

Like several summers in recent memory, this past summer was marked by air quality alerts. Children's sporting events were canceled. Freeway signs signaled the danger and encouraged reduced trips. We could see the haze of wildfire smoke in the air around us. We could smell it.

In March, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) began allowing companies, including coal-burning power plants, to ask for exemption from air pollution rules by sending a simple email. And by the end of July, **the EPA had proposed revoking its own authority to regulate greenhouse gas emissions** from burning fossil fuels under the Clean Air Act. With increasing climate change effects we can feel, see, and smell, **we need more—not less—action around harmful air pollution.**

Everyone deserves to breathe clean air. In the absence of federal action, we must respond at the state level to protect Minnesotans and the air we breathe.

The work of Conservation Minnesota is guided by your values and priorities. We listen to Minnesotans and focus on solving the conservation problems that matter most to you.

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THE AIR AROUND US

Climate change is causing longer stretches of hotter, drier weather, making forests more conducive to burning. Minnesotans have been impacted by the forest fires in Canada—which is warming faster than the rest of the world—and by the fires that burned within our state. **Wildfires are stark reminders of both the need for climate action and the importance of clean air.** But in recent months, we’ve seen federal rollbacks that ease restrictions on polluters, which will likely result in worse air quality.

In June, the Trump administration’s Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced it would repeal protections limiting mercury, arsenic, and other toxic air pollution. It also repealed a rule limiting pollution from coal- and gas-fired power plants.

In July, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) cut air pollution monitoring and rolled back clean energy tax credits, increasing our nation’s reliance on fossil fuels, which will further increase air pollution and raise energy costs for families. The OBBBA also ends rebates for household clean energy upgrades like rooftop solar panels, heat pumps, and electric vehicles.



Fall colors near the North Shore

by Governor Walz in 2023 requires all Minnesota electric utilities to produce only carbon-free energy by 2040 through sources like solar and wind. In June, Xcel Energy confirmed that, even with the predicted influx of energy-intensive data centers, it is on track for this commitment, planning to close its three remaining coal units and reach the interim goal of 80% clean power by 2030.

Everyone deserves clean air to breathe

Despite the progress we’re making in Minnesota as a state, some of our communities continue to feel disproportionate impacts of poor air quality. Due to toxic chemicals released from manufacturing processes, **areas around St. Cloud and Albert Lea have some of the highest rates of air pollution in the entire nation.**

left: Smoky skies obscured the view at Lake Itasca during the particularly intense 2021 wildfire season.

Minnesota solutions

Fortunately, Minnesota continues to honor our commitments to every person’s right to breathe clean air.

Our Clean Cars Minnesota initiative—adopted in 2021 and implemented in 2024—sets vehicle emissions standards to decrease **the #1 source of climate pollution in our state: cars and trucks on Minnesota roads.**

Minnesota’s second-largest source of climate pollution is electricity generation. Landmark legislation signed



St. Cloud State University on the banks of the Mississippi River

In addition to its air being impacted by toxic chemicals, St. Cloud set a state record in July 2021 for the worst wildfire smoke air quality with an Air Quality Index (AQI) of 692. (Grand Portage surpassed this in June 2025 with an AQI of 800.)


Neighborhoods near highways, industrial facilities, or power plants—often home to low-income families and communities of color—face chronic exposure to harmful air. These cumulative impacts add up, increasing rates of asthma, heart disease, and other serious health issues over time. While one smoky day might be a nuisance for some, for others, it’s another layer in a lifetime of exposure.

That’s why Conservation Minnesota partners with utilities, local leaders, and residents across the state to advance strong, community-focused air quality protections. As federal support for clean air weakens, **state and local action has never been more critical.** We’re proud of Minnesota’s legacy of clean air leadership, and we’re committed to building on it for the future.



TELL ME MORE

Want to learn more?

Join our next **Tell Me More** webinar, where a panel of experts will discuss the cumulative impacts of air pollution in some of Minnesota’s hardest hit communities. Watch our website and your email for more information! 

FRESH AIR FOR THE FUTURE

Join Conservation Minnesota with a gift today. Together, we can protect our Great Outdoors for the next generation of Minnesotans.

