

N O R T H S T A R JOURNAL

NEWS ON OUR EFFORTS TO KEEP THE ENVIRONMENT HEALTHY FOR MINNESOTA COMMUNITIES

Summer/Fall 2026
Volume 46 Issue 2



DATA CENTER ACTIVISM

POSTCARDS FROM THE FUTURE

**THE BWCA FIGHT IS IN
MINNESOTA'S HANDS NOW**



SIERRA CLUB
NORTH STAR CHAPTER

Illustration by Brian Bradshaw

Chapter Co-Chairs Column

As we move into summer, affordability is still on people's minds. You're not the only one worried about rising prices; your friends, family members, and neighbors are all feeling the pressure, too. Although we may not be as worried in the summer about a Minnesota winter heating bill, families are still being squeezed by food, transportation, energy, and basic household costs.

That is why community matters. Mutual aid, shared resources, and local solutions are how people hold each other up when systems fall short. And as our systems continue to prove inadequate, many of us sometimes feel lonely or depressed, wondering how things will ever change.

But together, we can move beyond fixing the immediate problem to transforming the conditions that created it.

That is where the Sierra Club comes in. Our work is not just about protecting the environment – it's about systems change. It's about ensuring that our leaders – elected officials and state agency heads – are held accountable to us. It's about fighting for policies that make energy more affordable and renewable, systems that make zero waste possible, and ultimately moving beyond constant economic growth to valuing people over corporate profit.

Consider this an invitation. Plug in. Get involved. Help build the kind of community and political power we need. Join us in imagining, working toward, and welcoming a more hopeful future in 2027 and beyond.

Tom Thompson & Kamau Wilkins
North Star Chapter Co-Chairs



Kamau Wilkins



Tom Thompson

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Explore, Enjoy, Protect

The Sierra Club North Star Chapter is 50,000 Minnesotans united to protect the clean air, water, lands and climate we all depend on.



Photo credit: Michael Shoop

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PEOPLE NOT POLLUTERS



Some of the crowd who joined the first-ever Senate hearing on "Polluter Capture".
Photo credit: Devon Young Cupery

Scott Russell

Organizers at the Sierra Club were hoping that the first Senate Committee hearing on polluter capture (which is when polluting industries hold too much influence over state regulatory agencies) would be well-attended. But even the most optimistic among them did not expect the halls of the Minnesota Senate Building to be so packed with supporters that not everyone could fit into the hearing room.

As the session was beginning, a capitol official opened up an overflow room. Between these two spaces, more than two hundred people witnessed the Senate Environment, Climate, and Legacy Committee hear from those who had come to speak about state regulators' failures to enforce environmental laws.

The turnout was a win for People Not Polluters, a coalition of eighteen environmental groups who joined forces more than a year ago to highlight regulators' inaction and lack of transparency, due largely to the influence of the polluting industry, which historically has wielded great power over the enforcement of environmental laws.

Testifiers focused on three examples of polluter capture, where polluting industries effectively stopped state agencies from enforcing the law.



Senator McEwen at the hearing. Photo credit: Devon Young Cupery

“We know that agency staff, who are experts in their fields, work tirelessly to preserve our state’s natural resources and public health. But political interference coming from the top has often prevented those public servants from doing their jobs.”

- Senator McEwen

1. Failure to Protect Public Lands (Wildlife Management Areas)

Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) are public lands set aside for wildlife protection, public hunting, and recreational uses. On these lands, the DNR has permitted harmful amounts of logging in order to meet the demand of the timber production interests, even though in 2023, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service withheld \$22 million in federal grants because the DNR was not complying with its WMA management agreements. According to the Star Tribune, it is unclear even today “whether the DNR is protecting wildlife habitat as required by law.”

2. Failure to Protect Minnesota’s Drinking Water and Climate from Nitrogen Pollution

Nitrate pollution, which comes from farming, feedlots, and industrial wastewater, has risen to such dangerous levels in some parts of Southeast Minnesota that the water is not safe to drink. But instead of addressing this crisis head-on, state regulators have relied on an ineffective voluntary compliance initiative that passes the cost and responsibility for cleanup on to small farmers and rural landowners instead of demanding accountability from the massive agricultural corporations that created the pollution in the first place. Even though the EPA under Biden has insisted that state agencies must “develop and implement a long-term solution to achieve reductions in nitrate concentrations in drinking water supplies,” those regulators have failed to provide the data, limits, and enforcement that such a solution would require. As Matthew Kaplan, Senior Attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council says, “You can’t fix a public health crisis with a suggestion; you fix it with enforceable limits and real data.”

3. Failure to Protect People Against Health Impacts of Trash Incineration

Hennepin County and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency’s refusal to shut down the HERC trash incinerator in North Minneapolis means that residents continue to breathe polluted air that directly increases their risk of asthma, cancer, and other major health issues. According to public health expert Dr. Joanne Hill, “The disparities are too large to be explained by behavior. Ongoing, preventable harm continues to impact the health of people in poor, mostly black communities. North Minneapolis isn’t just managing its own waste; it’s managing the health burden from the waste of Hennepin County... We are spending up to twenty million dollars a year treating pollution-related illness, while our safety net hospital struggles to stay afloat, treating it.”

At the hearing, regulators downplayed their failures instead of

taking responsibility for them. We expect and deserve better.

Still, the hearing was a major step forward for the People Not Polluters campaign, and a win for all those who remain committed to holding state agencies responsible for enforcing the laws designed to protect our environment and our communities.

For the first time, at a formal oversight hearing, agency leaders had to show up and respond to citizens’ concerns. This is a win for accountability in Minnesota, particularly since DFL chairs were demanding answers from agency leaders appointed by a DFL governor. We recognize and lift up Chair Senator Hawj and Vice Chair Senator McEwen as environmental champions fighting corporate power. We aim to maintain oversight hearings as a regular part of good governance, regardless of who holds the governorship.



Senator Fong Hawj shakes hands with former Representative Karen Clark after the hearing. Photo Credit: Devon Young Cupery

Critically, 2027 will bring new legislators, a new governor, and very likely new appointees to agency leadership. We will continue to track these issues and find new ways to hold agencies accountable.

In the words of Peter Wagenius (Legislative Director, Sierra Club): “It’s past time for Minnesota to stop riding on our reputation for good government or environmental protection. Environmental laws are not environmental suggestions. They are laws and need to be enforced against polluters.”

The BWCA Fight is in Minnesota's Hands Now

This is a photo of my favorite campsite in the Boundary Waters, from one of our family trips. Whenever I get to go to the BWCA, I'm amazed by the landscape and wildlife, the experience of wilderness camping, and spending time with family in such a special place. And I am reminded of the purpose that drives the work we do together at the North Star Chapter. Thank you for standing with us.

— Margaret Levin, State Director



WHAT HAPPENED TO FEDERAL PROTECTIONS FOR THE BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE WILDERNESS AREA (BWCA)?

In April, the U.S. Senate voted to approve a controversial proposal, backed by the Trump Administration, to end the ban on toxic copper-sulfide mining in the BWCA watershed – one of the country’s most visited wilderness areas.

Senate Republicans utilized a baseless interpretation of the Congressional Review Act (CRA) to overturn a 20-year moratorium on mining in the Superior National Forest in the watershed of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. The House approved a similar resolution in January. And it was signed by Donald Trump on April 27, 2026.

The CRA only allows Congress to disapprove of administrative rules. No previous administration has considered mineral withdrawals to be “rules” that are subject to the CRA.

This is a loss, but with a 50 - 49 vote in the Senate, it was closer than any other public lands vote in this Congress. Our organizing is working. The Trump administration is not all-powerful. While Trump and anti-environment senators just chose the interests of foreign, billion-dollar corporations over us, we can and will fight back.

WE CAN STOP TOXIC COPPER-SULFIDE MINES AT THE STATE LEVEL: NO MINE CAN BE BUILT WITHOUT STATE APPROVAL.

We are grateful to Minnesota’s U.S. Senators Tina Smith and Amy Klobuchar — who spoke out for defending Boundary Waters protections at the federal level, and to Senator Smith and Representative Betty McCollum for their longtime leadership on this issue. Now we look to state leaders – including gubernatorial candidate Klobuchar – to act.

Governor Walz should use all the avenues available to him to cancel or stop these mineral leases. In the race for the next governor, gubernatorial candidates must show us that they will commit to fighting copper-sulfide mines. This is a clear case of federal overreach that is hugely unpopular with Americans and Minnesotans. We are calling on Governor Walz to stand up to the Trump administration in his final months in office by using his full authority to stop these dangerous mines.

The MN DNR could revoke current permits or not grant future permits. This includes one of the four mineral leases Twin Metals currently holds, which could be cancelled in June.

The Minnesota Legislature could pass legislation to protect us from the dangers of copper-sulfide mines. There are several possible bills related to this.

- “Prove it First” legislation would require the corporations proposing copper-sulfide mines to demonstrate they have owned and operated a copper-sulfide mine for at least ten years and closed it down for ten years without polluting the water. This has never been done.
- The Boundary Waters Permanent Protection Bill would prohibit copper-sulfide mining on state lands in the Boundary Waters watershed.

The Sierra Club will be active in harnessing the full power of our members and supporters (YOU) to advance these solutions. This means public pressure campaigns, electing environmental champions to the Minnesota Legislature, lobbying and legal fights.

Minnesota voters of all political stripes overwhelmingly back natural resource protection. We can win this fight.

HOW CAN YOU HELP PROTECT THE BOUNDARY WATERS?

These copper-sulfide mining projects we are fighting have terrible track records – in fact, they have a 100 percent failure rate at preventing spills. They simply do not belong in our water-rich state. It is our right and duty to protect this water.

Join us:

- Contact Governor Walz, leave him a simple message stating why you want to protect the Boundary Waters.
- Make a social post with your message and tag the Governor
- Get organized with other Sierrans at: sc.org/mn
- Donate to power this work.

“There are some spectacular natural places, because they give us life and heal our spirits, that should never be seen as a resource for extraction or sacrificed for financial gain. The Boundary Waters is one of these places.”

– Dr. Luther Dale, volunteer leader



Spice Up Your Summer Calendar



Kate Havelin

In a state famous for epic winters, summer is always special. Minnesotans relish our season in the sun and at the lake.

Sometimes it's easy to get in a groove of the same hikes, rides and swims. This summer, mix it up and check out some varied parks and pursuits. Here are a few options to spice up your calendar with events and activities hosted by our local, regional and state parks and conservation organizations:

COMMUNITY BAT COUNT

FORESTVILLE MYSTERY CAVE STATE PARK, July 11 and July 25, 7-9:30pm

Gather near historic Forestville to count bats as they emerge from caves for their nightly hunt.

DROP-IN FREE CANOEING

LORING LAKE, Loring Park, Wed June 17-Aug 26, 5-7pm

POWDERHORN LAKE, Powderhorn Park, Tues June 16-Aug 25, 5-7pm

EVENING PADDLE UNDER THE MOON

WILD RIVER STATE PARK, Fri, July 24, 3-9pm, (Ages 8-adult, \$10 shuttle fee)

Enjoy a relaxed nine-mile canoe trip with park naturalists as the sun sets and moon rises.

FANTASTIC FIREFLIES

LEBANON HILLS VISITOR CENTER, Fri Aug 7, 6-7:30pm

These flying creatures are beetles, not flies. Their glow is part of what makes summer sparkle.

FOREST BATHING

COTTAGE GROVE RAVINE REGIONAL PARK Sat July 11, 9-11am, \$45

Forest bathing, or Shinrin Yoku as it's known in Japan, is a guided practice that helps people reconnect with nature and feel rejuvenated.

KNITTING IN NATURE

ELOISE BUTLER WILDFLOWER GARDEN & BIRD SANCTUARY

Knitting in Nature, second & fourth Thurs, May 14-Aug 27, 6-7:30pm

MUSIC IN THE TREES

BELWIN CONSERVANCY Sat Aug 15 and Sun Aug 16, 11am-3pm \$10-\$35 per car

Dozens of artists perform from 16-foot-high treestands while listeners walk, sit, or enjoy picnics below. Don't miss this one-of-a-kind concert in nature!

PADDLE THE MISSISSIPPI

NPS PADDLE SHARE, May 22-Oct 31, single kayaks \$20-\$40; double kayaks \$35-\$50

Kayaking, looking up at the only gorge along the Mighty Mississippi, lets you see wildlife, from muskrats to eagles, and appreciate the natural world in the heart of the Twin Cities. Rent one or more kayaks and explore the river on your own or sign up to paddle with a National Park Service ranger in a small tour.

Find links to these events online: sc.org/mn-summerispice

And of course, your very own Sierra Club outings are a great way to get outside and connect with fellow nature lovers. You can find upcoming Sierra Club outings and sign up at sc.org/mn-outings



**Gas Prices,
Foreign Oil
Got You Down?
Try Transit.**

Catherine Windyk

Public transit has been on a wild ride the past few years: impacts from COVID, rollout of new safety programs, increased investment from the state legislature, and service expansion are just a few of the headlines.

Operation Metro Surge likely impacted transit ridership, too. Ridership declined due in part to safety concerns that may have discouraged riders from leaving their homes or waiting at transit stops. However, similar patterns in 2024 and 2025 suggest the change may also reflect seasonal trends.

Rising gas prices caused by the conflict in Iran could be impacting transit by compelling those of us who drive regularly to reconsider how we get around. As in 2022, when Russia's invasion of Ukraine caused gas prices to spike, many of us may be experiencing uncertainty and anxiety. "How long will the conflict last? How high will gas prices climb?"

If you haven't ridden transit in a few years, or ever, you will find a more robust system: the METRO B Line, Gold Line, and E Line Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) routes all launched in 2025. There are many ways to get helpful real-time information with NexTrip or the Transit app, as well as digital signage at BRT stops and some stations. Perhaps the most impacting change for many people: increased official presence, including Metro Transit police, security guards, and Transit Rider Investment Program (TRIP) agents who check fares and assist riders.

Metro Transit is making additional service expansions and facilities improvements, like station renovations and new BRT lines. The Green Line Extension is due to open in 2027, and planning for the Blue Line Extension continues.

What does all of this mean for the day-to-day experience of someone who takes the bus or train? I have been riding transit regularly since 2021 and have witnessed many changes firsthand. Official presence is the biggest difference impacting my rides: I see or interact with TRIP agents almost everyday, including more recently on BRT routes. While I have not felt unsafe on transit in the past, I know that increased official presence can help others who feel unsafe. I have noticed far fewer incidents of people openly smoking on the trains, which was a huge issue in the years around the pandemic.

I see more riders on many of the routes I ride regularly than in the past, and even run into friends on the bus and train from time to time, which is always a pleasant surprise. I love the improved frequency on a number of my routes and appreciate a reduction in cancelled trips, which makes transit more reliable.

I frequently use the Transit app to help me time my trips and to report on station and vehicle conditions such as cleanliness, number of open seats, signage, and announcements.

Often, transit takes longer than biking or driving. But factors such as time spent looking for a parking space, cost (no gas!), and the ability to safely multitask while traveling can make transit competitive. And with additional improvements on the horizon, transit is becoming more convenient than ever.

Go green! If you're looking to save money on gas, not contribute to wars over foreign oil, and help reduce pollution, give transit a try. Another major bonus of leaving the car at home: some dedicated time out of your busy day for reading or napping, while leaving the driving to the professionals. Tap the transit icon on your map app and see where the bus or train can take you. And even if transit doesn't work for you, remember that it relieves traffic congestion and pollution for everyone. That's why the Sierra Club is working to continue funding and improving transit for all. This year we are proud to have fought to keep \$40 million from being cut from transit service. More at sierraclub.org/minnesota/land-use-transportation

Catherine Windyk is a volunteer with the Land Use & Transportation Team, and loves getting around town by bus, train, bike and her own two feet.



Black Spruce Bog that Escaped the Fire, painting by Don Luce. See more art at: DonLuce.art

The Deconstruction of the U.S. Forest Service

Meg Bishop

In the Northwoods of Minnesota, scientists at the U.S. Forest Service's Grand Rapids research office have spent decades doing the kind of work that forests demand. They have tracked how peatlands store carbon, studied the resilience of red pine forests, and monitored environmental mercury. Itasca County, where the facility is located, is one of the fastest-warming places in the U.S. making it a front line for understanding how climate change reshapes northern ecosystems.

On March 31, 2026, the Trump administration announced a sweeping reorganization of the U.S. Forest Service. As part of the overhaul, 57 of the agency's 77 research and development

facilities will close, gutting a nationwide network that took generations to build. In Minnesota alone, research offices in Grand Rapids and Ely are slated to shut down. The agency's national headquarters will relocate from Washington, D.C. to Salt Lake City, and the existing regional offices will shrink. Under this new structure, Minnesota's two national forests, the Superior and the Chippewa, would be managed out of Madison, Wisconsin. The only remaining Minnesota foothold would be a research station in St. Paul, miles from the nearest national forest.

The damage extends far beyond organizational charts. The Grand Rapids facility oversaw 22 experimental forests and decades of long-term ecological datasets that simply cannot

be recreated. Brian Palik, a senior scientist who spent 30 years at the station before retiring in early 2025, helped pioneer the field of ecological forestry. He and other researchers warn that proximity to the forest isn't a nicety; it is a scientific necessity. Long-term studies succeed because researchers develop relationships with local land stewards, tribes, universities, and communities over years and decades.

Scientists and conservation groups counter that the reorganization will fragment institutional knowledge, dissolve critical partnerships, and destroy invaluable long-term datasets. A report issued last December found that most public stakeholders commented against the restructuring. And yet, the administration proceeded anyway.

Forests and peatlands are among the planet's most important carbon sinks. Understanding how they respond to warming, drought, and shifting species ranges is foundational to any serious climate strategy. When the researchers who study these systems are separated from the ecosystems themselves, the science can become impossible to continue at all. The full cost of what is being lost may not be known for years. But the loss itself is already underway.

Local Action: Together with legislative champions and allies, the Chapter Forests & Wildlife Stewards are working on legislation that would establish a Lowland Conifer and Habitat Reserve to protect these lands.



How to be green but not mean

Our resident etiquette expert, Truly Green, offers advice on how to talk to friends and family about making greener choices. Change begins with individuals, and it takes many individuals to create a movement. Submit your Truly Green questions to deartrulygreen@gmail.com.

Dear Truly,

Lately, I've been receiving more and more emails from colleagues and family members that I can tell have been polished by AI (if not written entirely by bots). Meanwhile, I live ten minutes away from a data center construction site that is wreaking havoc on bird populations, siphoning water from the Great Lakes, devastating local flora, and increasing air pollution. How can I convince people that they don't have to passively accept AI's increasing dominance in their lives, and to be judicious in weighing the convenience against the consequences of its use?

Sincerely,

The Luddites Were Right

Dear The Luddites Were Right,

In an ideal world, our adoption of AI systems would not be considered inescapable or automatic; rather, we would be encouraged to think critically before employing a tool with so much power, promise, and potential for harm. I, too, resent the fact that we are constantly being pushed to use (often with no opt-out button) a product that produces massive profits for Big Tech while harming the environment, stealing from artists, and undermining educational systems. And I, too, struggle when people talk about AI as if using it is inevitable. The first rule of building a better future is to remember that nothing is inevitable; we need to imagine the future we want, and then keep working toward it. You're right about the environmental impacts of AI: some scientists estimate that an AI search demands five times as much energy as a standard web search (MIT). Yet being "right" typically isn't enough to convince anyone. Studies show that people respond better to conversational questions than to moral positioning. What if you asked your correspondents how and why they're using AI? If they are embarrassed about their writing style, you could affirm how much you appreciate their voice. If they claim they don't have time to compose their own messages, you could talk with them about their stress and help them find ways to cut back. If they still want to use it, would they be open to passing regulations that provide safeguards? If you listen closely and look for common ground, you'll have much more success when you do (gently!) suggest a change in their approach. Good luck!

- Truly Green

Session Debrief: “Historic” Swings, but Hope and Hard Work on the Horizon

Peter Wagenius, the author and Legislative Director, firing up the crowd at an Earth Day rally.



Peter Wagenius

The 2023-24 biennial Legislative Session was described as “historic” and for good reason. On many issues, including the environment and climate, that group of legislators passed huge laws which were sometimes decades in the making.

Comparatively, the 2025-26 biennial session might be seen as historically unproductive. Elections have consequences, both good and bad.

Whereas the 2022 election had given us a DFL trifecta and a new group of environmental leaders, the 2024 election

gave us the most evenly divided legislature in decades. Democrats still held on to the Senate by a razor thin 34 to 33 margin but the House was now tied exactly 67 to 67. As a result, we needed to protect the previous sessions' victories from attacks led by both Republicans and a small group of pro-polluter so-called "Blue Dog" Democrats.

Since the legislature passed a two-year budget in 2025, there were no real "must pass" bills in 2026. So this session was a less fraught replay of 2025.

The legislature did finally pass a bonding bill to pay for capital projects, and this year that included funding to allow the East Phillips (EPNI) Urban Farm project to move forward – a long-fought victory for environmental justice.

We also successfully defended against transit cuts proposed by Governor Walz and Republicans.

Data centers were a major focus this session as well. We helped strengthen a broad coalition fighting for protections and were successful in getting a moratorium or pause on data center construction introduced in both houses, and passed a ban on Non Disclosure Agreements on the Senate floor. However, opposition from Big Tech and the AFL-CIO successfully blocked any new protections from the risks of hyperscale data centers.

Our expectations were low and they were met: most bills had no path to pass. The assassination of former speaker Melissa Hortman also hung over this year's proceedings, as did the Trump administration's multifaceted attacks on Minnesota, especially Operation Metro Surge.

And then came the turning of the tide. Minnesotans' successful resistance to Trump's authoritarianism, as well as his cratering poll numbers, brings us and our allies to a place of righteous determination. The polling numbers look good. We have every reason to believe our hard work can produce a much better 2027.

This hope for 2027 includes the environment. This year, my most energizing conversations with allied legislators happened when we explicitly acknowledged that our current work was all about preparation for 2027. Many of the bills we worked on this year, from solar permitting and land use reforms to transportation reforms and thermal energy networks, were designed to advance policy ideas which would build on the victories of 2023 and could pass in 2027. Our legislative allies are developing multiple models to raise needed revenue for climate mitigation and climate adaptation across multiple sectors of the economy. The common principle of these models is that we must make the polluter pay.

Another principle which guided our work in 2026 is that state agencies must do their jobs. Environmental laws are not environmental suggestions. State agencies like the Pollution Control Agency, the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Health must use their authority to protect Minnesota and to protect our environment for future generations. The Minnesota Senate took a strong step by holding an oversight hearing on this problem of polluter capture (read more on page 4).

The 2027 session is likely to be very different. In addition to a new governor, there will be many new legislators. This opens the door for the next legislature to include a stronger commitment to climate action and environmental justice.

Sierra Club's Political Committee, which screens candidates for endorsement, got to work early this year, helping to ensure environmental champions received a needed DFL endorsement. We are now focused on helping elect environmental champions in the August primary election, and then it's on to the general election.



Photo by Mara Koenig, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Are you thinking about making an estate plan?

Giving Docs is a simple, secure way to create your will and other important estate planning documents online. It's free for Sierra Club supporters—and it only takes a few minutes to create an account and get started.

You can even use Giving Docs to create your Sierra Club legacy by naming the North Star Chapter as a beneficiary of your plans. This is completely optional. A gift of any size is greatly appreciated!

To learn more about planned giving or to become a member of the Rachel Carson Society, please get in touch! We're happy to help.



Scan the QR code or
get in touch to learn more

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Make Solar Simple: Local Action, Right Now

Kris Acuña

Solar energy is one of the cheapest and fastest-growing sources of electricity in the country. But many Minnesota homeowners find themselves waiting weeks or even months for a permit. Delays are frustrating, but that's only part of the problem. Across the state, one in four residential solar projects gets canceled entirely due to slow, complex, or inconsistent local permitting processes. That means fewer installed solar panels, higher electricity bills, and lost progress on our climate goals.

As the federal government continues to rain down crisis after crisis, it's more important than ever for state and local governments to be a bright North Star and implement policies that are good for our environment, our wallets, and our communities.

The benefits of rooftop solar are clear: lower monthly energy bills, cleaner air, local jobs for solar installers, and a more democratized energy future (the homeowner or renter gets to benefit from clean energy savings, not just big utility companies). But none of that happens if homeowners can't get a permit in a reasonable time frame.

Enter SolarAPP+

SolarAPP+ is a free automated permitting software developed by the National Renewable Energy Lab (now National Laboratory of the Rockies) with local building officials, inspectors, and solar industry experts. Local governments can use it to process, check, and instantly approve or deny



“After insulating my attic and walls, solar power was an important early project for me as a new homeowner. I have been concerned about climate change for over two decades and was excited to do my part to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and increase distributed renewables. The solar panels on my garage have saved me hundreds of dollars annually on my electric bill and are a reminder of my commitment to clean power every time I step into my yard.

- Kelly M., pictured here with her solar panels.

residential solar permit applications — often in minutes instead of weeks.

But SolarAPP+ isn't just about speed. It's about standardization. Right now, every city in Minnesota has its own forms, requirements, and review processes.

Permitting automation can remove up to \$2,100 per project in direct and indirect costs to homeowners, according to a report from the U.S. Department of Energy.

The Sierra Club North Star Chapter is currently educating volunteers and local governments about the availability of SolarAPP+ in Minnesota. In 2024 the SolarAPP+ Solar Permitting Software Incentive was passed by the MN Legislature, enabling local governments to receive up to \$20,000 for adopting SolarAPP+.

Nearly 20 Minnesota cities have adopted SolarAPP+ and claimed their incentive, with more coming online every month.

Are you interested in seeing your local government come on board? We've developed an advocacy toolkit called "Making Solar Simple" that includes a Sierra Club petition to local leaders, speaking tips and sample emails, a letter to the editor guide, a SolarAPP+ Minnesota FAQ, and more. To get involved, learn more, and get tools to send to your local government, email me at kris.acuna@sierraclub.org.

Help us make solar energy easier for more Minnesotans!

Kris Acuña is the Sierra Club North Star Chapter's Climate and Clean Energy Organizer based in Rochester. This summer, you can find him running and biking on Rochester's trails jamming out to 2000's pop-punk hits.

Shut Down the HERC and Demand a Healthier Path Forward



Joshua Lewis, a hunger striker (center), with Sierra Club board member and Bloomington resident Lois Norrgard (left) and her sister at a Hennepin County Board meeting.

Marya Hart

The garbage-burning Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC) is still running, polluting, and threatening the lives of North Minneapolis residents. Despite a campaign of letters and protests; despite a hunger strike; despite appeals to morality and to reason; and despite activists proposing a reasonable transition plan, the Hennepin County Commissioners refuse to set a date to close the HERC.

Built as a response to the problem of landfills, the HERC has created a much larger problem that disproportionately affects low-income communities of color.

According to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, this garbage incinerator emits the equivalent of 755,316,938 pounds of global-warming carbon dioxide per year. From its smokestack, chemicals including nitrogen oxide, lead, mercury, and arsenic blow through the surrounding neighborhood, contributing to asthma, heart problems, birth defects, and many other sources of human misery. PSE Healthy Energy found that the health impacts from the incinerator in 2022 cost about \$24 million per year, which includes organ and respiratory damage, emergency room visits, and asthma hospitalizations.

In willfully ignoring these dangers, the County Commissioners appear to be neglecting their role as custodians of the public's wellbeing. They are faced with a problem that only they can solve. None of us, acting individually, can create a zero waste infrastructure for the region. This is a job our elected leaders must shoulder.

We have been told that burning is better than landfills. Yet burning still requires landfilling of the resulting toxic ash. And a study by the Energy Justice Network in Maryland found that incinerators are more than 3.2 times

more hazardous to human health than landfills. A better alternative to HERC would include:

- Mandating curbside composting for all homes and businesses in the county, and increasing support for composting facilities. (Compostable materials make up 32% of the HERC's current load.)
- Increasing and incentivizing recycling. (Recyclable materials are 36% of what HERC burns.)
- The County could reduce trash further by supporting vital initiatives like plastic bans and Extended Producer Responsibility, which would put manufacturers on the hook for creating unusable waste and move us to recyclable or compostable packaging and materials.

WHAT'S NEXT

Hennepin County needs to consult the wisdom of its constituents and move forward with a transition plan. That plan must start now, with a vote to finally set a shutdown date for the garbage burner.

As Joshua Lewis, one of the HERC hunger strikers, wrote:

“For too long, systems of power have treated Black, Brown, poor, and working-class neighborhoods as places where harm can be concentrated, normalized, and ignored.

For me, this is painfully personal. I lost both of my parents...to cancer caused by environmental pollution. So when I stand here, I am not speaking in theory. I am speaking from grief. I am speaking from witness.”

POSTCARDS FROM A GREENER FUTURE

The first step to changing the future is imagining a better one. Below are postcards our readers dreamed up from a green future.



Dear Cathy,
Remember how we used to make iced tea just by steeping eight tea bags in a big glass pitcher set out in the sun. We were way ahead of our time, weren't we? Saving

energy without giving up our modest pleasures. Sometimes the best way forward is back.

Your loving brother,
D.E. Green

Sept 4, 2044
Water St.
Watertown, MN



Postcard graphic: Owen Griffin



Dear Jack,
I just got back from buying produce. It was awesome to see that almost everything came from local, organic growers – and I could afford it! I know Mom and Dad are really grateful for the support the Farm Bill gives their apple orchard, instead of it just subsidizing Big Ag like it used to. It seems the new bill is really working – fresh, healthy food is widely available to everyone now, regardless of where you live or how much you make!
Love, Ellen

Explore,
Enjoy,
Protect



July 2, 2030
Local Produce Lane
Farmers Rock, MN



Hi Mom,

We've been good! David's been working at the recycling plant, and I've been leading canoe tours in the Boundary Waters. I'm just so grateful that you fought so hard to create e-waste recycling jobs that prevented those copper mines from destroying the water here. Sasha caught her first fish last week. It was just a tiny yellow perch, but you should have seen her face when she realized that she had to get it off the line.

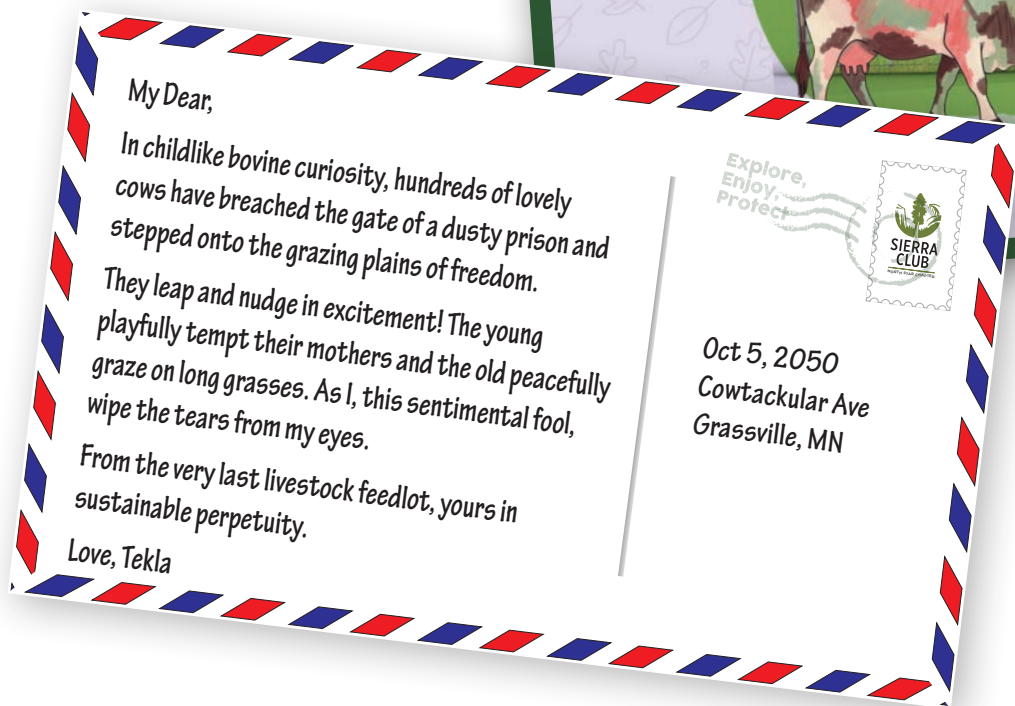
Love ya! Harriet

Explore,
Enjoy,
Protect



August 21, 2028
Eco Way
Everywhere, MN

Postcards submitted by:
DE Green, Ellen Rozek,
Anna Waugh, and
Tekla Hamilton.



My Dear,

In childlike bovine curiosity, hundreds of lovely cows have breached the gate of a dusty prison and stepped onto the grazing plains of freedom.

They leap and nudge in excitement! The young playfully tempt their mothers and the old peacefully graze on long grasses. As I, this sentimental fool, wipe the tears from my eyes.

From the very last livestock feedlot, yours in sustainable perpetuity.

Love, Tekla

Explore,
Enjoy,
Protect



Oct 5, 2050
Cowtackular Ave
Grassville, MN

GET TO KNOW YOUR SIERRA CLUB NORTH STAR CHAPTER...IN BOOKS!

There are so many ways you can get involved in the work and fun of the North Star Chapter.

Do you want to work on an issue like clean energy? Or do you feel a strong need to do something to protect wild places, wildlands, and people in Minnesota? Maybe you simply want to get outside with a fun, supportive group? We welcome participation at any level.

Here we offer book recommendations from different volunteers. Get to know fellow Sierran volunteers and enjoy some great books!

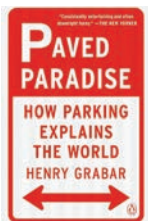


Island

Aldous Huxley

Even though I read it 50 years ago, this book has stuck with me. It is a very philosophical book. Huxley died two years after its publication, and the book seems to be his final thoughts on... well, just about everything. It is at once the highest quality fiction combined with the great, final insights of this remarkable man.

– Nic Baker, Communications

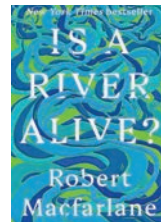


Paved Paradise: How Parking Explains the World

Henry Graber

I didn't anticipate that a book about parking, of all things, would contain this much hilarity, intrigue, absurdity, and enlightenment! *Paved Paradise* examines the origins and implications of the death grip that car storage holds over our built environment and land use, at huge expense to climate and people. You will never see a simple parking spot the same.

– Katherine Boyce, Land Use & Transportation



Is a River Alive?

Robert Macfarlane

Macfarlane is a British author who writes about the relationship between people and the natural world. In this book, he explores the rights of nature. The book is divided into three sections, based in Ecuador, India, and Canada. He focuses on a key environmental figure and the landscape of each place, looking at the questions surrounding whether nature has, or should have, its own rights to protection. Scholars of the law have long debated whether trees and other natural entities (lakes, rivers, etc.) have legal "standing" (see *Sierra Club v. Morton*, 1972, and Christopher Stone's article "Should Trees Have Standing – Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects" (1972)). Macfarlane's book grapples with that very question in ways that compel readers to rethink our perceptions of the natural world.

– Bob Lyman, Office support

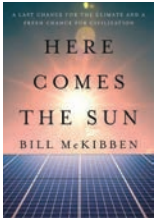


Driftless

David Rhodes

An unhurried, character-driven story of the people of a fictional town in the driftless area of rural southwestern Wisconsin. I really enjoyed how the writing connected the characters and the setting. I liked this book so much that I sought out and read the rest of David Rhodes' works.

– Greg Allison, Outings



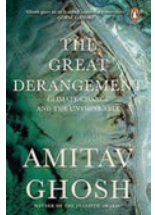
Here Comes the Sun: A Last Chance for the Climate and a Fresh Chance for Civilization

Bill McKibben

During this time of all-out assault on the environment, it is hard to feel optimistic

about our future. But this pithy little book gives us hope. McKibben looks at the solar revolution that is happening right now, since solar energy has become the cheapest form of energy. He takes us around the world to see the astonishing changes that cheap solar energy is making possible. For example, in Pakistan, diesel fuel sales dropped by 30% in one year due to farmers using solar panels for electricity to pump their irrigation water. He engagingly lays out the exciting possibilities for liberating ourselves from being dependent on who controls the spigot for fossil fuels.

– Carolyn Ham, Executive Committee



The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable

Amitav Ghosh

Ghosh begins by asking why climate change doesn't figure in much contemporary literary

fiction, and then moves into a history of colonialism and capitalism. What I like about this book: It's Global-South-centered; it offers both cultural and economic analysis; it's beautifully written.

– Marya Hart, Degrowth Team

Volunteer Teams:

Communications, quarterly meetings

Community Outreach, ongoing events

Outings, ongoing events

Forests & Wildlife, 2nd Mon. 7:00 pm

Water & Wetlands, 2nd Mon. 7:00 pm

Beyond Oil, 4th Mon. 6:00 pm

Land Use & Transportation,

2nd Mon. 6:00 pm

Clean Energy, 4th Tues. 6:30 pm

Zero Waste, 1st Tues. 7:00 pm

Degrowth, 3rd Mon. 6:30 pm

Rochester, 2nd Mon. 6:30 pm

Bike Lanes Are White Lanes

Melody Hoffman



Changes to infrastructure, even those geared towards being safer and more environmentally friendly, can lead to displacement and gentrification. Biking is a very interesting example of this

because it seems like the more accessible option compared to cars, but as bike infrastructure becomes trendy, bike lanes and other bike-friendly infrastructure can lead to issues of gentrification. Also, Minneapolis was one of the places studied for this book, which is another great reason to check it out.

– Maya Merritt, Land Use & Transportation

Call for nominations: The Chapter's Executive Committee is made up of 15 members, elected for 3-year terms. We invite you to submit names to the Nominations Committee! More info or contact us at north.star.chapter@sierraclub.org.

Legislative Responses Needed to Address Hyperscale Data Center Risks

<p>Higher Electric Bills</p>	<p>RISK: Big Tech is very effective at passing off their costs onto the rest of us. Without needed regulations, hyperscale data centers could increase our electricity bills.</p>	<p>RESPONSE: Impose a <u>two year moratorium</u> on hyperscale data centers (“hyperscalers”) in Minnesota to give the public sector time to develop rules that will protect Minnesotans.</p>
<p>More Climate & Air Pollution</p>	<p>RISK: Hyperscalers require huge amounts of electricity. Big Tech claims their data centers will be powered by <u>new</u> clean electricity, but they lobby against requirements. Big Tech also wants diesel generators as “back up.” Hyperscalers in other states have siphoned off <u>existing</u> renewable energy. Any new emissions will further fuel climate change and air pollution.</p>	<p>RESPONSE: Require clean energy from the start. Hyperscalers must meet 100% of their energy needs with new solar, wind or battery resources—BEYONCE or “Build Your Own New Clean Energy (and Efficiency)”. At least 50% of the investment must fund community-based solutions, including rooftop solar, community asset solar, battery storage, and home electrification & efficiency.</p>
<p>Secret Deals</p>	<p>RISK: Big Tech is pushing cities to sign Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs), blocking citizens from knowing project impacts.</p>	<p>RESPONSE: Ban new Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) and prevent those who have signed NDAs from being the lead agency for permitting decisions.</p>
<p>Water Depletion & Pollution</p>	<p>RISK: Hyperscalers produce heat, and many of them use large volumes of water for cooling. This water may be treated with chemicals that can cause pollution when discharged.</p>	<p>RESPONSE: Require Big Tech to pay for drinking water and wastewater treatment upgrades and the best efficiency systems, such as “closed loop” systems that reuse water many times.</p>
<p>Local Impacts</p>	<p>RISK: Hyperscalers can cause major negative health and economic impacts, from noise and light pollution to new transmission lines and land use changes.</p>	<p>RESPONSE: Require a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). We can only ensure that hyperscalers are good neighbors if they are sited properly and go through robust environmental review.</p>
<p>Tribal Sovereignty</p>	<p>RISK: Tribal Sovereignty must be respected both on and near Minnesota Tribal treaty territory.</p>	<p>RESPONSE: Require hyperscalers to obtain free, prior & informed consent from Tribal Governments.</p>
<p>Our State’s Budget</p>	<p>RISK: Services that people rely on could be cut further to perpetuate corporate subsidies for Big Tech owners of hyperscalers.</p>	<p>RESPONSE: Repeal the uncapped sales tax exemption for hyperscalers, which has cost the state \$134 million before a single hyperscaler has even opened.</p>

DATA CENTER ACTIVISM

Marya Hart

Minnesotans became aware of hyperscale data centers only a few years ago. These massive energy- and water-guzzlers are often situated in rural communities, planned by mysterious developers, and shielded from public scrutiny by non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) between local officials and developers, as well as low standards of environmental review. The North Star Chapter has been organizing statewide legislative responses to the myriad problems data centers pose (see opposite page), and we are hopeful about what will be possible in 2027. But for now, a great deal of the organizing has been local: at city council and planning commission meetings, through lawsuits organized by residents, on facebook pages, in letters to the editor and town halls. And it appears that local responses are working and will continue to be required.

We interviewed three activists—Aubree Derksen of Pine Island, Nancy Aarestad of Farmington, and Margaret Sullivan of the Twin Cities—about their take on the struggle so far, and what they will need going forward.

Aarestad and Derksen learned about proposed data centers in their communities through messages from their neighbors. Sullivan was involved in a climate study group through Indivisible, and picked data centers as “her” issue. The more information the activists uncovered, the more dismayed they were by what they found.

All cite environmental concerns. Aarestad lists them: “Water (I have a well that may be directly affected), air pollution (diesel generators close to homes), high electricity need, light pollution, the destruction of our land and trees and animal habitats”.

Derksen says, “We’ve learned more from news articles about

the project than we have from the city, developer or the environmental review. The city and developer told us in the fall they didn’t know what they were building or who it was for, and that there were no talks about tax abatements. But now we have the emails going back to November 2024 that [the project] was a data center with Google and they would only engage in talks if the city offered a tax abatement.”

In addition to raising awareness and bird-dogging local officials, all have been involved in state legislation. Sullivan helped set up a list of communities threatened with data centers, and is organizing with Sierra Club to rally members in affected areas. The Farmington and Pine Island groups have both filed lawsuits against the development and are seeking support from all concerned environmentalists. All agree the fight is far from over, especially with no moratorium possible this legislative session.

Sullivan suggests that opponents should consider running for local office. “A loudly anti-data-center platform can set the terms of public debate. Even if a candidate doesn’t win, in the end, elevating and establishing public discussion would be huge. Nobody wants to live near a hyperscale data center.”

Most of all, these activists need your support. Aarestad says, “The future is bleak for all humans across this country if decent guardrails aren’t put in place soon. If you think you live in a location where they would never put a data center, think again.”

Some good news: The city of Rosemount, where one data center is mid-construction, has enacted a one-year moratorium on any new data centers and the Nobles County Board denied a zoning change the 640-acre Geronimo project needed to proceed. These are great victories for local activism!

Support local data center activists

With a lot of the data center action being local, you may want to support these local activists. You can join their Facebook groups, join in local actions as an observer or testifier, or contribute to their fundraising campaigns.

Find details and support these groups, online and on our blog: sc.org/minnesota/north-star-blog

Photo: Devon Young Cuperly



GET

SCAN HERE



or go to sc.org/mn-vol
to learn more

or current resident

INVOLVED

JOIN OUTINGS. VOLUNTEER. MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

Join us to get outside, organize, research, and advocate for our environment. There are lots of ways to be involved!
sc.org/mn | north.star.chapter@sierraclub.org | 612-659-9124



Outings leaders check out a migrating bird. Photo: pvtkach