

Minnesota and Wisconsin officials hope a new and unique water quality standard will restore the Mississippi river in this area back to its former glory. Residents got more details on the standard Tuesday during an open house sponsored by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and the Lake Pepin Legacy Alliance, a local citizens group. Officials are developing a site-specific standard for the Mississippi River from Fort Snelling to Lake Pepin so the water becomes clear enough grow aquatic vegetation that benefits fish and wildlife. "We're looking at a standard that would provide increased protection for the resource," said Norm Senjem, with the MPCA. "This has implications for a wide area."

The standard is being developed as part of the MPCA's total daily maximum load study, which will measure pollutants in the water, identify their sources and recommend ways to reduce the pollutant levels so the water can meet quality standards. The Mississippi River south of the metro area is clogged with sediment threatening its aquatic life as well as Lake Pepin, Senjem said. Officials predict the lake will become a marsh within 300 years if sediment issues upstream are not dealt with. Research shows that sediment from the Minnesota River and other upstream bodies of water is to blame for the Mississippi River's current predicament.

Officials say implementing a standard of 32 parts per million of total suspended solids - the amount of sediment and other particles in the water - will help the river meet acceptable goals. "It can be done," Senjem said. "The purpose is a healthier community, a healthier ecosystem." Goodhue County Planner and Zoning Administrator Mike Wozniak said county officials hope to do their part in restoring the Mississippi River. He said staff have been working on more strict enforcement of the county's law requiring 50-foot buffers around bodies of water since being pressured last year by members of the Lake Pepin Legacy Alliance.

Enforcing a law most people do not know about is difficult, Wozniak said, but important. "Our hope is we'll make a difference here," he said. Lake Pepin was placed on the 2004 list of impaired waters because of its turbidity and excess nutrients, which cause algae blooms that are particularly severe during lower flow periods. Officials say reducing the lake's pollutants will not only help aquatic life but will increase the quality of recreational activities. Public comments on the MPCA's proposed water quality standard will be accepted until March 26. The MPCA Board will then review the standard.