

Voices Driving Change Podcast Episode 1

In Limbo: The Fight to Protect Public Waters, with Tom Kalahar

Welcome to the Voices Driving Change Podcast by the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy. We're releasing this episode of the podcast as part of our September 2020 online event. State of the Environment. Voices Driving Change from September 15th and 24th. You can hear from the voices driving change for climate, justice and clean water across Minnesota in 10 different ways, including live online events, webinars and podcasts like this one. Each of them highlights ways in which people are driving change here in Minnesota by speaking up for the communities and places that they care about. Learn more, go to [Voices Driving Change dot org](https://www.voicesdrivingchange.org). That's [voices driving change dot org](https://www.voicesdrivingchange.org) to read more about this stories we feature in the podcast and register for all of the online events. And be sure to join us at 7 p.m. On Thursday, September 24th, for our grand finale, a live online event called Legally Green in your Living Room. Again, you can learn more and register for all of the events and learn about all the podcasts in September at [Voices Driving Change dot org](https://www.voicesdrivingchange.org). Thanks to all of our supporters and sponsors, who make our work and this podcast possible.

Hello, I'm Aaron Klemz from the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, and you are listening to Voices Driving Change. This is episode number one of our new podcast. Next few weeks will be traveling across Minnesota and even North America to hear from people whose voices are driving change for climate justice and clean water.

Today's episode is titled "In Limbo. The Fight to Protect Public Waters in Minnesota." We're talking to Olivia, Minnesota's Tom Kalahar, about a battle in his backyard to protect a modest stream that flows into the Minnesota River in Renville County. Limbo Creek is aptly named, and an example of why local residents who care about water quality in their communities are absolutely essential to our work. MCEA is proud to be part of the fight to save Limbo Creek. We're proud to stand beside Tom and others, raising their voices to drive change in their communities. But first, let's hear from Tom and other area voices driving change calling to protect Limo Creek from being destroyed.

[00:02:11] This area to me is beautiful. I mean, it's home and, um, I don't know It's just a beautiful place to be. It's a great neighborhood and just I love it here. I think about what is it going to be like for kids in the future? Um, and how is it affecting down South. Well, I don't think we're taking care of our our land like we should and what it should be.

[00:02:41] So the creek has turned into not so much a creek, it's more of a drainage ditch now. So I kind of joked to some people that earlier property tax should be going down because we're losing land.

[00:02:53] 90% plus of Renville County is drained. We have more miles of drainage ditch than we have miles of roads. It's remarkable, um, that over the last 80 years, we'll probably 100 years how totally we have changed the landscape. It amazes me how we can have a 100 year, 500 year flood every other year. Somebody ought to be going What is really going on here? The hydrology of Renville County is lost forever. Limbo Creek is, um, the only intact drainage system left in Renville County.

[00:03:29] Limbo Creek is about four miles west of here. It meanders right now and joins the Minnesota River by the county park. I've seen what has happened in other situations when a natural waterway has turned into a ditch and this farm is a typical example of that. On the north side of our barnyard is another little pasture. And, um, in 2004 that area that correct was turned into a ditch. Um, that ditch created a lot of erosion for us. We ended up with 15 ft cliffs in our barn yard, and, um, or before it even got to the Minnesota River. I would really like to see for everybody to be more aware off what their actions are doing or what they're doing and to think about the future. It may not affect them now, but think long term. How is it going to affect the rest of the area and their Children and their grandchildren? If we don't have clean water, we don't have healthy people. Yeah, so I guess to me, clean water is a matter of life and death.

Can we fix this issue?

[00:04:50] Absolutely. Like I said, it's not rocket science. We could fix our water quality and water quality problems in 10 years or less. Absolute, there's nothing this country can't do, And, uh, there's no shortage of money. There's no shortage of technical expertise. It's just a shortage of political will.

Today we're talking with Tom Kalahar. Tom recently retired after a 35 year career as a conservationist working for the Soil and Water Conservation District in Renville County. He's an avid angler and hunter. He also serves in the city Council of Olivia Minnesota, where he lives, and he has been involved in the fight to protect Limbo Creek for decades. Tom, thanks for joining us today.

Kalahar: I am very glad to be here.

Klemz: Tell the listeners about Limbo Creek. It's a pretty modest stream, really, by a lot of standards, what makes it so special and important?

Kalahar: Well, what makes a Little Creek special is that it's, uh, the last remaining intact flowage in Renville County. And by that, I mean is that it hasn't been channelized and drained to the point where it no longer looks like a natural water. Basically what it is is a complex of wetlands that extends for about 9 miles. Um, in the western part of Renville County. It's a filter for agricultural runoff, and it provides a tremendous amount of wildlife habitat.

Klemz: So why is it so important that something be listed as a public water like what goes along with that designation? And how does that protect the stream for the future and for public use? If it is

Kalahar: If it's not listed as a public water, it loses a layer of protection. Basically, that layer is probably the most important is because it's the most local protection. That protection is administered by the Department of Natural Resources - the other layer of protection is with the Army Corps of Engineers. That's a federal agency, you know. So without the designation of being a public water, Limbo Creek only had, the only agency that really was going to look at this with the Army Corps of Engineers, and you never want just one agency looking at an issue when it comes to water. And when it comes to wetlands and we all know, you know

that agencies, whether they're federal or state, uh, you know, just always don't make the right decisions for the right reasons, you know, and there's a lot of politics involved with all of this so the important part about designating this as public waters is so that we have an additional protective layer of protection. And in order to be able to do any work in this wetland, if it is designated public waters, you would have to receive a permit from the Department of Natural Resources which means the department would come out physically look at it, make a determination of whether or not the project that is being proposed falls within the protection rules of public waters. Right now, today that protection is not there, and that's why this is so important.

Klemz: People didn't just stumble on this idea that they wanted to ditch or channelize Limbo Creek. They did it for a reason. So can you talk a little bit about tiling and ditching and what it means for the whole water system in Renville County? What has it done over the years?

Kalahar: You know, if we go back to pre-settlement days, Renville County was an extremely wet county, literally hundreds of thousands of wetlands and shallow lakes. If you look at the county today, we have built, constructed over 800 miles of surface drainage ditch. That means going out there and digging with a great big backhoe and making a series of fishbone type drainage ditches through the entire county and draining them all towards the Minnesota River. Every drainage ditch in Renville County outlets into a public water, every one of them. Okay, so a drainage ditch is visible on the surface of the landscape. You drive by in a car down the highway. You can actually look and see. So they're really visible and really easy to find and locate. Subsurface tile is the hidden infrastructure. That's the fishbone type infrastructure that is buried beneath the ground, and it is used to drain subsurface water, which it falls out of the sky onto a field or onto a landscape. It seeps about 3 ft or 4 ft into the soil surface and then into a drain tile, which then is connected to the drainage ditch, which then is connected to a creek, which then is connected to the Minnesota River. Renville county now is 90% drained. We have drained 90% plus off all the wetland shallow lakes. And we have straightened almost all of our natural water courses and converted them into drainage ditches. And so the minute that I, uh, you know that the rain falls on our landscape, 90% of our landscape does not store any water. We convey it into the tile, we convey it into the drainage ditch, and we convey it into the creek and into the Minnesota River and ultimately to Lake Pepin, the Mississippi River in the Gulf of Mexico, as fast as we can get it there.

Klemz: And so where you were once had wetlands that would filter this this water coming through off the landscape and then slow it down before it hit the Minnesota River. Now we have a whole system that quickly ushers that water through the subsurface into the ditch into the Minnesota River and downstream.

Kalahar: Exactly. Also, the entire county was native prairie, which sucked up a tremendous amount of moisture and rainfall. Now we have pretty much plowed ground row crops, 800 miles of drainage ditch and an unknown number of millions of miles of drainage tile. And the other interesting thing about drainage tiles is that in Renville County it's not regulated. And so we have no idea how much and where all these drain tiles are on. If I wanna tile a field, I'm a landowner. I wanna tile a field, I could go out and put as much tile in the field I

want to, and I don't have to tell anybody where it is. So it's like I said, it's the hidden infrastructure. And if people would drive down the road and could actually see the amount of drainage tile that is in our landscapes, you would blow your mind. You would just go, Wow, you know. Basically, we start no water. We dump it into the Minnesota River just as fast as we could get it there. And it's not very clean water, either because we're not filtering anything. And that's what's so important about Limbo Creek. Is that all the water that drains into Limbo Creek has to run through a series of wetlands, and by the time it gets to the Minnesota River, it's clear is a trout stream, and that should be the goal of every drainage system that we have, not only in Renville County, but the state of Minnesota.

Klemz: Well, that name Limbo Creek. It's always kind of captivated me since I was aware of this issue because it's literally been in legal limbo for decades. Why is the legal status of Limbo Creek so in doubt?

Kalahar: You know, I kind of took it as an omen 40 years ago that Limbo Creek ended up being such a controversial creek, or I like to call it more of a wetland system that, you know than a creek. And it's ironic that the name was actually limbo on, uh, it has been in limbo for, uh, 40 years, and the reason why it's there is that it has never really been officially designated as public waters. Uh, and it's been kind of batted back and forth between state agencies and federal agencies, and quite frankly, it's been pretty much forgotten and ignored. Um, and, uh, there's been several attempts made in the last 40 years in order to channelize this system. And that's why Limbo Creek is important today is that if we lose Limbo Creek, we will lose one of the last for ages that we have in the county.

Klemz: You're not just a conservationist or retire conservationist. You're also an angler who's out on that river a lot. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the changes you've seen in the 35 or 40 years you've been going out in the Minnesota River to go fishing or to just do you do your job. What's changed on the Minnesota River in that time

Kalahar: about 40 years ago, when I moved 41 years ago. Actually, when I moved to this part of the state, I'm from Ottertail county. By the way, there's 1000 over 1000 fishing lakes in Ottertail County. I moved down to Renville County and I was completely taken aback by the amount of land clearing and about the complete conversion off the prairie landscape to an agricultural crops situation. I was probably going to stay in Renville County for about a year, I thought, and then I'm gonna move on to something that fit more my hunting and angling opportunities. However, I discovered the Minnesota River. Shortly after I moved to Olivia, Minnesota, and I realized what a special and neat river the Minnesota River is. And so that year has turned into 41 years, I'm still there.

The biggest change that I have noticed is the physical amount of water now compared to 40 years ago, when I first was on the river and gradually over this 40 years, the amount of water that the Minnesota River are. Quite frankly, the amount of water that our creeks and streams have to receive even before it gets to the Minnesota River has multiplied many, many, many, many, many times. Talking to the Renville County, um, ditch authority here. A few years ago, they were estimating that are sub surface drainage tile was doubling every two years. Imagine that - every two years, Uh, but the biggest thing that you're going to see when you go down the Minnesota River in a canoe is the tremendous amount of erosion

bank erosion on that is right in your face. Very visible. Um, the Minnesota River is getting wider and wider and wider every year, in some cases, hundreds of feet. Most of our creeks that received the water from the drainage ditches have all been blowing out. Most of our creeks now are actual rivers that are trying to live in the skin of a creek, and that simply doesn't happen, you know, and most of the sentiment that you're seeing in the Minnesota you know, because the Minnesota is a murky, milky brown water. Most of that is sediment that's coming from the banks of the receiving creeks and the Minnesota River itself. So the river is being asked to carry and convey many, many, many more times water. Then it was naturally designed to do because we basically drained the entire watershed. We store no water, and, uh, we're trying to shove five gallons of water into a two gallon pail is what we're trying to do here, and we're blowing everything out.

Klemz: When I when I visited you last year, you took us to Hawk Creek, which is near Limbo Creek. Um, and you know, at the time you kind of described it to the MCEA folks who went out there is it is a cautionary tale about what might happen if we ditched and drained Limbo Creek and made it into a similar kind of water body. Um, tell us a little bit about Hawk Creek and what what you've seen in terms of erosion on a similar creek that's nearby to Limbo Creek.

Kalahar: Hawk Creek is no longer a creek. Hawk Creek is a raging river when we have major runoff events. And, uh, a quick rundown Hawk Creek. Uh, if you start, it starts way up by Eagle Lake in Willmar, uh, and outlets in the Minnesota River by Granite Falls. And back in the forties and fifties, the upper parts of Hawk Creek were actually channelized and water control structures put in. And that was a federal project by the Army Corps of Engineers. And so the natural creek was actually straightened, of course, which moves water faster. And so if you look at the upper reaches off Hawk Creek, it's no longer a creek. Uh, they're big, long, straight drainage ditches, oversized drainage ditches as Hawk Creek, then gets dumped into the natural part of Hawk Creek. What used to receive the waters prior to all this drainage had to accept the new water that is being that has been added to the system since the 1950s is, you know, several times more than it was ever supposed to handle. So the creek either has to get wider or it has to get deeper in order to be able to handle the volume of water. And it's done both. In some cases, it has taken farm sites. It has eroded the banks to the point where they're straight up and down cliffs. Um, last year I witnessed and said goodbye to a, um, to an oak tree that I've hunted turkeys around, uh, for the last 20 years. And I noticed Oh my God that big oak tree is gonna fall into Hawk Creek this year. And so I said goodbye to it. It's probably been there 150 or 200 years. And today it is in laying in the bottom of Hawk Creek. Uh, but that's what happens when we don't provide adequate outlets and no concern for downstream uh, downstream impacts on Hawk Creek is a really good example of exactly what Limbo Creek is gonna look like. If we channelize Limbo Creek. Because we're gonna dump that water again into a natural waterway that simply cannot handle the additional flow.

Klemz: Can you tell folks a little bit about how you came to work with MCEA on this issue of Limbo Creek?

Kalahar: Prior to getting the announcement from DNA that they were going to take another look at this, I had become extremely frustrated. You know, you can imagine, after 40 years

of dealing with this I mean, you know, hey, you know, it's time that we really do something here, and I physically contacted M C E A and ran this situation by them, and there was a bunch of other folks involved here. Believe me, I'm not the only person here That's, uh, pushing this cart, you know, but thankfully, Elise and company down at MCEA listened to me. They came out and we tour the site. We looked at it. We talked to some people. MCEA decided that, yeah, this seems like a reasonable request. This seems like something you know, that's important. It seems like something that the people of Minnesota should, uh, want to see happen. And so because of them and a whole lot of other people. That's why we are here today. Finally, to the point off where we are getting some action and, uh, putting some real protection on Limbo Creek.

Klemz: Now, we've got this comment period open. What would you tell people who want to help? Because there will be an opportunity for folks to speak up and speak for Limbo Creek. Um, is it helpful for them to get involved?

Kalahar: Oh, absolutely. Uh, you know, most drainage issues are boring. They're fairly secretive. Because they're run by local units of government county commissioners. Most of the meetings are held during the day when everybody else is working. And information is hard to get. It's not impossible to get, but it doesn't come easy. If you look at the engineering report for this project alone, it's like 250 pages long. You know, I go, Oh, my God so they bamboozle with paperwork and figures and graphs and numbers and all that kind of stuff, you know. But you truly do need to care enough in order to be able to know enough about what's going on, and my advice to people is that if you appreciate clean water, if you don't think it's right to dump dirty water onto people, if you don't think it's right to dump nitrates into surface water and eventually into the Minnesota River, if you don't think it's nice right to blow out existing creek banks and the Minnesota River and the Minnesota riverbanks itself and send all that silt down towards Lake Pepin in the Mississippi River. If you don't think that those are good things to do, uh, then you need to comment on just about every drainage project that takes place. Because the reason for the drainage project is to move water off the landscape faster than it is previously being moved now. And the last thing that we need is more water into the Minnesota River or Mississippi River or the Gulf of Mexico. And the thing that really surprises me is that we treat water, which is the most important element on the planet, as a waste in Renville County. We ditch it, we dump it and we get rid of it just as fast as we possibly can, and that is just bad water management. It's easy, and it's fairly cheap water management, but it's water management that is negatively impacting lots of people downstream and lots of ways. And the real cost of that is mind boggling.

Klemz: Alright. So, Tom, for folks who are at home who are interested in thinking about this question of keeping water on the land or what they can do, what is what's one thing that you would tell folks that they could do in their own lives that would have a positive impact on this problem?

Kalahar: Well, everybody is different, but the, you know, for the folks that own property, you know, especially people that own lake homes, river homes or even if you own a home that you have control over where the water that falls on property that you have control on. Where does that water go? Most people don't give it a second thought. It's kind of like

where does my garbage go? Or where does my poop go? When I flushed the toilet, I mean, okay, it's gone. I don't care where it was it's just out of here, you know, that's the same way that you have to worry about this. What is you want to go on? Am I contributing to any of the negative impacts that you've heard on on this this podcast in my part of that problem? And I would have to say everybody is part of the problem. Absolutely.

You know, the only reason that Hawk Creek and that Limbo Creek is an issue right now today, and that farmers are being targeted is because that's a farming watershed, and the biggest impact is being caused by agricultural practices. But in a urban setting or a forested setting, there's just many opportunities to be able to slow your water down. Or even better yet, stop your water. And there's rain gardens that you can put up in your yards, uh, planting native prairie up next to your lakeshore so that you don't have a manicured lawn that you're putting fertilizers on and mowed grass right down to the lake shore. The same if you own river shore property. Which is probably just as important. I was just on a walk here this morning on the Willow River in New Richmond, Wisconsin, and there's a nice trail that kind of goes around a lot of these nice homes that are built on the river. And sadly, a lot of those homes have their manicured lawns right to the river edge. And so there's an opportunity for all of those folks, um, that have run off water that's coming off their lawn directly into the river. There's a great opportunity for those folks. To be able to put some native prairie up. There are some tree plantings that either slows that water down dramatically or stops that water completely. And, you know, and just simple things, you know, like not pouring, you know, like paint thinners and be careful what you put down the sink, you know, and believe it or not, I know people that have dumped all kinds of crazy things on their driveway, and it runs down and runs in the storm sewer. Well, where do you suppose the storm sewers go? It goes right to a drainage ditch, a creek, river or stream, every one of them, you know. So I guess it's just being aware off where your water from your own personal use goes. I've done everything that I could possibly do in order to make sure that I'm being a good neighbor and that I'm not passing some negative impact to somebody else.

Klemz: Yeah, and I just somebody who's been thinking about that for my own property and I live in I live in Fridley, Minnesota. I live in a suburban community on the top of a hill, but you wouldn't necessarily think that the practices of my yard would have much of an impact. But it does. I mean, down the hill from my house is Moore Lake. It's an impaired water. It's impaired by phosphorus and other nutrients. And so I called up the Conservation district last year, and they've come out and take a look, and they're willing to build a rain garden in my front yard, and will cover it up to 90% of the cost of it. We haven't been able to move forward with it yet, but folks should know that there are programs like that across the state, where Watershed Districts or other conservation districts will help you pay for practices that will protect water downstream. I mean, here in the city of Fridley, for example, I could get a \$50 rebate on my water bill just by putting in a rain barrel. The goal of all of that is similar to what you've been talking about throughout this podcast Tom, which is how do we keep water on the land and avoid allowing it to flow downstream? So here in the suburbs, it's about pavement and asphalt and roofs and other impervious surfaces, causing water to flow quickly into lakes and rivers. Um, it's a little bit different in agricultural areas, but really the principles are pretty much the same thing.

Kalahar: Oh yeah, I mean the solution to cleaning up their cultural parts of water quality. Both quantity and quality is the same thing as it is in urban areas - to slow that water down and run that water through a filter. And guess what Limbo Creek does - slows that water down, runs that water through a filter. That's exactly the time the kinds of water treatment, natural water treatment systems that we need to install all across the community, in order to be able to responsibly say, I've done everything that I can do reasonably on my farm to protect my downstream friends and neighbors, And that's not happening. Uh, basically drainage law right now is about dumping water the fastest. You can get rid of it and dump it on your neighbor, and that's old school thinking. And it's something that we really need to really need to work on is because water quality and water quantity isn't something that we have to live with. We just simply have to change our behavior.

Klemz: That's a fantastic summary of this issue. And, Tom, I just want to thank you so much for the time today, joining us from Wisconsin. And also congratulations on your perseverance on Limbo Creek. If it weren't for people like you paying attention to this and fighting this issue all these years, it would have been lost a long time ago. So thank you so much for all your work on this. We really appreciate it.

Kalahar: Well, you're very welcome. And I think I owe it to the Minnesota River is because I love that river. I think it's the neatest place, uh, one of the neatest places I've ever been and I've been a lot of places, and so it's the least that I could do. Is in order to try to protect her and to make it a better place for others to enjoy long after I'm gone.

Klemz: Thanks for joining us for this episode of The Voices Driving Change podcast. I mentioned at the beginning of this episode that this podcast is just one of 10 online events the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy is doing between September 15th and 24th to celebrate the voices driving change for climate justice and clean water across Minnesota. We're releasing two more episodes of this podcast in the next week and a half, so be sure to subscribe to voices driving change in your podcast player, such as Apple podcasts, Google podcasts or Soundcloud. You can also go to voices driving change dot org to learn more about all of the podcast episodes register for the live events and webinars they're going on between September 15th and 24. That's at voices Driving Change or GE. If you want to join Tom Kalahari and ask the DNR to add Limbo Creek to the list of protected public waters in Minnesota, we have an action for you to take. Right now. You can go to our main website, mn center dot org, and simply click Take action and join him right there. You could also stay up to date with our work by following MCEA on social media. We're on all the really big ones Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. All you need to do is go to MCEA1974 on each of those platforms. If you want to help our work by making a donation as well, while you're at it, go to www dot m n center dot org's slash donate. This has been Voices Driving Change, a product of the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, thanks to Ian Levitt and Mike Compton of Studio Americana for editing and producing the podcast. And also thanks to Adam Reinhard from MCEA for producing and editing existence. Thanks so much for joining us, and we'll see you next time.