

Opinion Editorial: Securing the Home Means Protecting the Land
By Melissa K. Scanlan, Executive Director, Midwest Environmental Advocates

For the past year we have been surrounded by the upcoming presidential election as it infuses itself in every day through media, billboards, and conversations. Primarily, the election has been dominated by arguments about which candidate can better lead the fight towards homeland security. Yet, protecting the land and conservation barely registers amid the clatter of politics.

We talk of homeland security with phrases like "dirty bombs" and "biological warfare," but we do not think of our other vulnerabilities. Our air, water and land are under attack not just by terrorists, but by politicians, government agencies, and industries who collude to create regulatory loopholes, exemptions, and back room deals. We must now ask ourselves: are we really securing our home and protecting our land?

The conservationist, Aldo Leopold, lived during another time of international crisis – World War II – and faced a similar reality. He saw that although our land was used as a source of patriotism, it was also just viewed as a commodity to be exploited. During that time, he asked the hard questions:

Do we not already sing our love for and obligation to the land of the free and the home of the brave? Yes, but just what and whom do we love? Certainly not the soil, which we are sending helter-skelter downriver. Certainly not the waters, which we assume have no function except to turn turbines, float barges, and carry off sewage. Certainly not the plants, of which we exterminate whole communities without batting an eye. Certainly not the animals, of which we have already extirpated many of the largest and most beautiful species.

Unfortunately, his words ring true across the country today. In the Central Valley of California, which supplies over half of the fruits, nuts and vegetables of the United States, much of its high desert is heavily irrigated. Anyone driving through the Valley can see that some land has been so over-irrigated that it is covered in salts and no longer productive. The air is so polluted that asthma is widespread. Thousands of houses spring from the earth like row crops as agricultural lands are lost to suburban sprawl. As we continue to lose these valuable agricultural lands, and in turn, our country's food security, we are putting our homeland at risk.

In Wisconsin, family farmers must fight wave after wave of government policies that encourage large-scale livestock factories, which contaminate the air and water by concentrating too much manure on too little land. It is not just family farmers that must fight to keep their livelihood and way of life. Rural neighbors to the livestock factories must also work to stop these factories from polluting their air and turning their homes into bunkers. Yet the Wisconsin State Legislature recently passed a new law that would significantly limit local government control over land use decisions effecting livestock

factories. Minnesota is now contemplating a similar law. As we restrict the rights of rural residents to keep the air they breathe clean and the water they drink safe, we are putting our homeland at risk.

It is not just our agricultural land we must secure. In the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky and West Virginia mountain-top coal mining is systematically destroying these legendary mountains. Every day thousands of tons of dynamite are used to break off the rock surrounding the coal in the mountains, while the excess rock, debris and waste are dumped off the side of the mountains into the adjacent river valleys. As we bury streams and reduce the area's economic capacity, we are putting our homeland at risk.

We must start to think of a broader homeland security. A homeland security that ensures the air we breathe will not make our children sick with asthma, the food we eat is from sustainable agriculture, and our most beautiful lands are passed on to future generations. It is not enough to defend ourselves from enemy attacks, we must also defend against attacks from within on our home and our land.

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