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October 16, 2007
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New Report Calls for Action to Halt Continuing Degradation of the Mississippi River

A report on the health of the Mississippi River, released today by the National Research Council of the National Academies (NRC), reveals that the quality and conditions of the Mississippi River will continue to deteriorate unless Midwestern farmers become significantly more effective at soil and water protection, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) actually enforces standards limiting nitrogen and phosphorous pollution.

“EPA’s policy allowing States to drag their feet must stop now,” said Susan Heathcote, Water Program Director for the Iowa Environmental Council. “EPA must require states to adopt nitrogen and phosphorous pollution limits to protect the Mississippi, our nation’s most vital river system.”

More than 50 cities and 18 million Americans depend on the Mississippi and its tributaries for drinking water. The River is a vital economic, recreational and natural resource to communities up and down its 2300 mile course. In 1998, the EPA called on states to adopt specific limits on nitrogen and phosphorous pollution to halt serious pollution problems. EPA warned States that it would enact its own limits if States had not complied by 2001. To date, every state along the Mississippi has virtually ignored the issue, yet the Federal government has not stepped in as required by existing law.

The NRC Report, *Mississippi River Quality and the Clean Water Act*, makes clear that the “The EPA has failed to use its mandatory and discretionary authorities under the Clean Water Act to ensure adequate interstate coordination and federal oversight of state water quality activities along the Mississippi River.” The report declares, “as a result of limited interstate coordination, the Mississippi River is an ‘orphan’,” from a water quality perspective.

Agricultural policies that enable unnecessary run-off of fertilizers and pesticides are the major source of the problem, according to the report, and “numerical federal water quality criteria, and state water quality standards for nutrients, are essential precursors to reducing nutrient inputs to the river and achieving water quality objectives.” The NRC said, “70 years of Farm Bills and other agricultural programs have had a tremendous influence on Mississippi River basin land uses,” creating problems with runoff patterns and water quality.

“The future of farming in this country depends on good water and soil protection,” said Craig Cox, of the Soil and Water Conservation Society. “Congress is working on a Farm Bill to help

agriculture over the next 5 years as it becomes increasingly involved in the production of energy crops. It is imperative that the Farm Bill contain far stronger policies and greater incentives that will encourage good water protection and soil conservation practices such as cover crops and more efficient fertilizer and pesticide use.”

Communities and conservationists up and down the river are calling on the EPA and Congress to carefully consider the findings in this report and take action. Congress should pass a farm bill with significant conservation incentives so that American agriculture can begin making immediate and cost-effective changes in their practices that will lead to a cleaner and healthier river system. At the same time, immediate action is needed by the EPA to make good on its obligation to enforce the Clean Water Act.

“There is a dead zone at the EPA almost as big as the Dead Zone in the Gulf of Mexico,” said Matt Rotta, Water Resources Director of the Gulf Restoration Network in Louisiana. “EPA has the authority to immediately jump-start EPA into coordinating state action and enforcing the Clean Water laws. I call on them to act now.”

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A summary of the NRC report is available for download at: www.nationalacademies.org

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