

Guest Commentary: Clean water helps businesses thrive



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Seven years ago, after working as a chef in world-class restaurants from New York to Colorado to Las Vegas, I had an epiphany.

I realized that to become a truly great chef, I needed to know not just how to prepare great food, but also to understand where it comes from, to help bring people closer to the food they eat. So began my entrée into an enterprise that has now grown into a farm, two — and soon to be three — restaurants and a food

wholesale business that supplies some of the finest establishments in Illinois with fresh produce and meat.

The evolution of Epiphany Farms and our restaurants has been a deep learning experience. And one of the most important lessons I've taken away from my journey is how essential clean water is to our success.

Water is the most valuable resource on our farms. Without it, we can't feed our cattle, our goats and our pigs. We can't irrigate the fields that sustain more than a hundred varieties of vegetables and fruits. Ultimately, we can't serve the customers who make the Epiphany Farms Hospitality Group a thriving business for us and our 70 employees.

The cleaner the water is, the better for our bottom line.

It was gratifying recently, then, to see the Obama administration announce new safeguards that will help keep our vital water supplies from being polluted and exploited. The clean water rule released jointly by the Environmental Protection Agency and Army Corps of Engineers has been in the works for more than a decade, and it's long overdue.

It protects millions of miles of small streams and millions of acres of wetlands nationwide that are the lifeblood of the larger rivers, lakes and reservoirs that supply water for one-third of the country, 117 million Americans. Until the rule was finalized, these waters were vulnerable to pollution and industrial development because of ambiguous court decisions that excluded them from the Clean Water Act.

In Illinois, nearly 5,700 miles of small streams could have been affected by spills, accidents, dumping and digging without clean water protections — 57 percent of the stream miles in the state's Source Water Protection Areas, which supply water to 1.7 million people.

We know firsthand at Epiphany Farms what happens without clean water protection. There is a stream that runs through our farm on the south side of Bloomington, and we'd love to be able to use it as a source of water for irrigation. But the health of our gardens and orchards

is too important to risk irrigating them with water that is tainted with high nitrate levels and other contaminants. So we instead rely, reluctantly, on well water.

Americans' water doesn't just spring up magically from large sources. Our water supplies are fed by a network that includes ephemeral and intermittent streams that don't run all year long and wetlands, which act as important filters. Whatever is dumped into these waters eventually makes its way downstream to the bigger rivers. And into our vital water supplies.

My hope is that the new clean water protections will serve as a call to action so that everything from wetlands to small streams like Little Kickapoo Creek on our farm to the Illinois River downstream all enjoy the same level of protection. They all matter to clean water. But I'm fearful that forces beholden to big polluters are also at work trying to kill the new clean water safeguards before they have a chance to work. Members of Congress have been working to undermine the new rules with proposed bills in both the House and Senate.

If these politicians continue to march to the orders of big polluters, they need to understand that they are threatening the long-term sustainability of businesses like Epiphany Farms as much as they might be helping industries that want to be free of restrictions for using our waters as their dumping grounds.

There are a lot of corporate-funded naysayers criticizing the new clean water rule. But clean water is vital to businesses across America. It has helped Epiphany Farms become hugely successful. The clean water rule can help others thrive, too, if it's given a chance to work.