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OUR OPINION

University fumbles big time with decision on showing film about Mississippi River

The University of Minnesota fumbled its handling of the documentary, "Troubled Waters: A Mississippi River Story."

First, the U of M canceled the premiere on Twin Cities Public Television without articulating a good reason. Then Dean Al Levine of the College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences told Minnesota Public Radio that the film "vilifies agriculture."

The documentary, Levine told MPR, isn't inaccurate, but it's unbalanced. He said it should have included scientists who are trying to figure out how to feed 9 billion people by 2050.

We haven't seen the film, but we have serious concerns about the university's actions.

First off, the film was paid for using taxpayer money. The allocation came from the LCCMR to the Bell Museum. The museum is part of the college. The university contributed in-kind support. If anyone was to pull the plug on the project, it should have been the LCCMR, since they provided \$349,000 in grant money for the project.

The U of M shouldn't have the right to censor a film made with taxpayer money just because they don't agree with the content.

The cancellation also begs the question: What kind of agriculture does the university support? Many farmers are using technology to reduce the amount of fertilizer they apply, not only to reduce pollution but also to save money. Fertilizer costs are skyrocketing as crop prices rise.

Other farmers practice organic agriculture to raise crops. Others have switched to grass-based farming.

Does the U of M have a favorite? Is that why they canceled the film?

Levine said scientists who are trying to figure out how to feed 9 billion people by 2050 should have been included in the documentary. Does this imply that water pollution is a necessary by-product of raising more food?

We certainly don't think so.

Farmers have improved their fertilizer and pesticide efficiency as cost-saving measures. They are producing more food with fewer inputs.

They are being creative, as farmers tend to be, to not only raise more food, but also to protect and improve our environment.

On Sept. 23, the university reversed their earlier position and allowed the premiere to proceed at the Bell Museum, which was also canceled after the university raised concerns. On Friday, it was announced that the university had given the go-ahead for the documentary to be aired on Twin Cities Public Television. A TPT spokeswoman had said the documentary would air once the university granted its approval.

Broadcast dates and times weren't known at press time.

The university didn't do itself any favors with the way it handled "Troubled Waters." If anything, it calls into question the impartiality of the information the university provides.