

16th Minnesota River Congress 6-13-24 Kato Ballroom, Mankato MN
Questionnaire Responses, voting results with comments
And additional direct general comments

Question 1. Should our current voted number one priority of increasing water storage on the landscape continue for this next year? If not, what would you replace it with? What would be a strong second priority to water storage on the landscape?

Responses:

- Plain Yes 54
- Yes, it is going to take a lot of money so it needs public support.
- More flexibility for grant making
- Yes, it's worked pretty good so far. We actually have a program to work with.
- Changing priorities year to year seems to be shortsighted and ineffective. Sticking to long term priorities leads to results.
- Water storage is important to work with in natural areas and with agriculture.
- Water storage has a lot of bi-partisan support so work with elected officials to make it happen.
- Water storage is the most important priority stick with it.
- More state funds for water storage.
- We should lobby for Federal dollars to put into water storage and soil health.
- Get this before the public and get them behind it, get more cities and counties to endorse it with all the ones you already have.
- Yes, structures or ditch/stream realignment to slow down water already in the water system.

Strong second priority:

- Nitrate loss reduction.
- Groundwater improvement.
- Registering all private drainage.
- Could you ask the Army Corps of Engineers to look for opportunities for larger scale storage like the Red River projects.
- Plan and Implement on the 1 Watershed 1 Plan scale, create governance/admin/grant reporting/ and plan on holding on a larger scale. For instance the Cottonwood, Redwood, lac qui Parle, Yellow Medicine should have individual plans to implement, but could be governed/accounted/managed as one.
- Yes, seek greater transparency for drainage projects and mainly all new and substantial improvement ones, they should have to report to the state early in the process.
- How to generate dollars for the program in a non-traditional way.
- To reach out and educate/make aware elected officials especially state.

- I would like to see soil health as a strong second priority or are we considering that the same thing?
- Yes, link soil health messages more coherently
- Tile outlet treatment. (SBS)
- Water storage is great but considering evapotranspiration in storage projects and in BMPs is more important. Vegetation on riparian buffers, permanent cover using cover crops, regenerative agriculture and storage with large scale surface areas.

Question 2. As specific water storage projects come forward for funding consideration, does it need to be assured that future project approvals depend on a specific percentage minimum decrease in peak and yearly rate flows downstream of the proposed project?

- It should be mandatory
- Plain Yes 47
- Yes, but there should be some flexibility.
- Yes, that would be good but with climate change yearly could be difficult. Peak flows must be reduced.
- Plain No 6
- Not quite so specific
- Yes, Measurable input is important to sustainability of funding.
- Good criterion, but not the only one.

It should be one factor considered in applications, but not be a limiting factor, because was mentioned tonight some projects produce other benefits like sediment and nutrient reduction as well as wildlife value etc. making it difficult to compete with flow/cfs projects etc.

- Both peak and average flow should be decreased
- Yes. I am concerned that BMPs that increase soil organic content, evapotranspiration and infiltration, while encouraged are not considered in permitting projects. The given concern is on maintaining those BMPs.
- Having goals for water storage projects remains a good idea. Proposed projects may vary in effectiveness. Striving for maximum results makes sense.
- Don't have a problem with this. Would like to see higher ranking of projects that help mimic historical (pre-settlement) conditions. Projects cannot be cookie cutter must be ranked on individual basis.

Question 3. If engineering for a drainage improvement project confirms that an established downstream minimum percentage decrease in peak and yearly rate flows will be the result. And if a mandatory independent review of the engineering of the project confirming the methods and result of the project were to be established. Should then funding from the Water Storage Program be made available for consideration in drainage improvement projects?

- Do we not trust engineers' professional judgement? Is there an ethics issue at play here.
- Plain yes 44
- Funding is key. Many projects will happen this year only because of funding. Monitoring review is not necessary, some of us have figured out how to design these.
- Outside funds should not be used to offset the regulation or standards set in 103E. Projects that go above and beyond the minimum requirements I would not have trouble supporting for funding.
- Only if real world results match engineering. Too many engineering plans don't match what really happens.
- Aren't there significant variables outside the applicants control that could prevent and affect the establishment of a project regarding peak flows.
- It depends on what baseline the starting point is. I think base line needs to be at a point in the past when water quality was good.
- It is a public benefit to improve water storage while engineering drainage projects. Storage should be built in. Public funding should be "part" of that.
- Mandatory independent review is important. But projects need to be prioritized. The largest decrease might not have the largest impacts. We need to evaluate where the largest vulnerabilities exist.
- Yes, both decreased peak/average flow and transparency to allow independent review should be prerequisites.
- Long term maintenance (e.g., pond sediment removal) Average flow must be included. Include some requirement to evaluate cumulative flows and potential impacts.
- This is silly, engineers don't always interpret data like other engineers. Same as attorneys not agreeing with other attorneys.
- Add BMP's add vulnerabilities, not sure the impacts will affect the Minnesota River so checking hydrograph is important, different projects will affect the tributaries.

Question 4. If you answered no to the last question, what further assurances do you feel would have to be made in order to access water storage program funding?

- What will ultimately happen to the "Stored Water"?
- Storage has to go above, not just meeting the minimum requirements of documenting an adequate outlet.

Vote results for pursuing the Minnesota River Commission recommendation from 1994 were 84% in favor and 16% not in favor. Here are additional comments offered from the ballots.

- Let 1 Watershed 1 Plans do their work.
- Suggest regional, not basin-wide commission. 37 County large area with different needs. Planning fatigue at local level. Need for wholistic vision and approach and coordination,

but regionally focused. Who represents citizens vs. counties is critical. Mixed like LCCMR?

- The Lower Minnesota River Watershed District tried to establish a basin commission for more than 3 legislative sessions after the dissolution of the Minnesota River Board. There is no appetite for another level of government.
- Yes, with taxing authority.
- Yes, not an easy question, my answer might change. Tax authority, governance authority, purpose or policy statement may change my answer.
- Yes, if it had some way to generate local revenue to match state and federal on the ground projects. Like the Red River water management board does for the Red river of the North which was created in statute in the late 1970s.
- Yes, as long as it helps get projects done and not just more bureaucracy and talking and wasted funds.
- Yes, if it is made sure that the commission is not just another government agency, it is essential that at least half of the members of the commission come from this group. (citizens)
- In addition to the above shift, the proposal says the commission would be accountable, to the public, the Governor and the Legislature. It will strengthen the commission to articulate how the state agencies are accountable to the commission.
-

I'd like to make sure that the governance structure is well thought through and would like to have involvement from non-profits such as TNC, PF, DU, and others. I think their involvement presents a more well-rounded conservation approach that doesn't lean on governmental structures and focuses energy on the one thing we all can agree on – the Minnesota River is the priority. With that as a grounding force, I think there are better chances for success in stream, near stream, tributary, and upland areas. Because of these ideas, I don't think that commission should focus on government accountability (yuck), nor should it be focused on 'clean up' goals or evaluating effectiveness of expenditures. I think those are negatively slanted and are not inspirational. I think the focus should be on improving Minnesota River health, simply stated. When I look at what seems to be successful in other areas, big sticks and having people lose pride in their community or government don't seem to work. I think it's most effective to inspire passion that results in increased stewardship for a resource we love. I also don't think 'commission' is the best choice for what it should be called. Feels top heavy and authoritarian. I think we need more coordination, communication, focused efforts, and the ability to bring in \$\$\$ to implement that money locally with this 'commission' or whatever else it may be called. But I'm thinking more of a 501(c)3 org or something similar to that rather than government. I think getting connection with the Upper Mississippi River Basin Association would also be helpful. It's strange to me that they have all these goals and coordinated efforts, but don't come into the MN River.

Additional General Comments

- The Dayton buffer initiative provided the width of buffers to allow short term storage and treatment practices. Hundreds of opportunities are waiting for better utilizing that unused potential resource.
- Too much Ted at the beginning, Respect the audiences time and attention by tightening up the stories.
- On the agenda it had a question that was not included on this sheet, it was a better question.
- I think it was implied that ag profitability depends on drainage and is harmed by conservation practices. I think that is misdirection. Farm profitability is driven by the corporations that control markets and input.
- I think the public would support a program to try to restore historic drained named lakes I am talking identified on public land survey, Andreas, Atlas, thoughts? A Philosophical thought. Our waterbodies are a public resource with are in a degraded condition. Drainage authorities are public. Ag producers are private but provide a public benefit (growing food). Decisions on the landscape made by both public and private bodies degrade our waters, we as a public have probably tolerated degraded public resources for too long. For urban environments, stormwater management is paid for (as far as my knowledge goes) by private entities. Target corp. builds a giant building and parking lot and Target pays to put in a retention pond. Who should pay in rural areas? You own X number of acres, you put a pond in on your land? Something like 80 acres of crops to one acre of detention? Should the public pay for a program like this? I'd be willing, but not everyone would, so what do we do? How about voluntary check offs?
- A draft memorandum was received with comments on Julie Blackburn's presentation after the event. The following is that document.

MEMORANDUM

DRAFT

TO: Scott Sparlin

FROM: Len Kremer and Philip Solseng

DATE: Draft July 5th, 2024

SUBJECT: comments on Julie Blackburn's presentation at Minnesota River Congress.

Response to Julie Blackburn PPT entitled: Removing Barriers + Improving Drainage Project Outcomes

1. Starting with Introduction and conclusions:
 - a. Agreed: Introduction states that agriculture is big business that is important to Minnesota and the cost benefits are enhanced by agriculture drainage
 - b. Agreed: Introduction states that Agriculture has changed hydrology of Minnesota River increasing runoff with each inch of precipitation starting in about 1981.

c. Disagree: Conclusion states that agriculture needs more grants and outside assistance to continue with drainage improvement projects and suggests not using cost-benefit to justify projects especially if storage is required.

d. *My comments:*

i. *Agreed that agriculture is a big business and getting more profitable with drainage and is changing the hydrology of the Minnesota River Basin causing more damages with changed hydrology. These damages are currently not being assessed to the project.*

ii. *Mean discharge in rivers within the Minnesota River Watershed have more than doubled in flows and there has been a threefold increase in number of rare and extreme flows in the Minnesota River. Frequent channel forming flows have significantly increased in both discharge and duration causing erosion of the bed and banks and widening of the rivers within the watershed.*

iii. *Increased profit or cost benefit from improved drainage should be used to minimize damages (including water quality) downstream*

2. EAW vs 103E.015

a. Agreed: Many issues addressed by 103E.015 are also included in EAW; **therefore doing an EAW will not be a burdensome cost to a petitioner.**

b. The issues addressed by 103E.015 are specific to impacts on project and not as comprehensive as an EAW which address cumulative impacts on downstream damages.

c. *My comments:*

i. *An overall EIS should be required for drainage in the Minnesota River Basin because of the damages drainage is causing. An EAW process would provide information to move forward with an EIS for the Minnesota River Basin.*

3. Example of Watonwan JD 11 in power point presentation

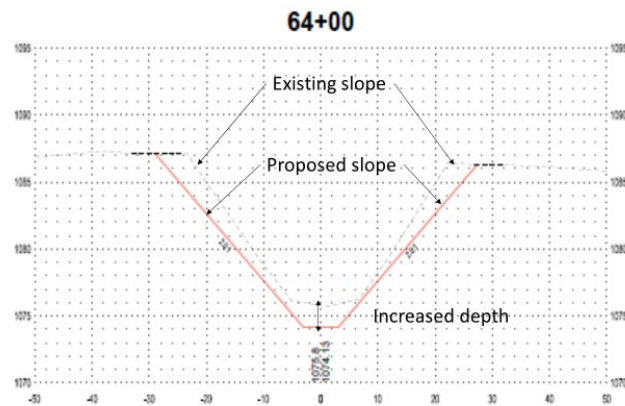
a. Example stated that:

i. Example indicated that water quality loads for sediment, Phosphorous and Nitrates are reduced in Watonwan JD 11 with the project. *However, the engineers report does not include enough information to evaluate the reported sediment or nutrient removal claimed in the report. To achieve the sediment and nutrient removals claimed in the report for a dry basin and dead storage in a ditch, frequent maintenance will be required. There is no information about planned maintenance of the water quality treatment facilities in the engineer's report.*

ii. Example indicated that existing erosion and bank instability would be repaired with the improvements for the project: *This is incorrect. The channel banks are re-sloped to about same angle of repose and will become unstable with time and the outlet remains unstable and inadequate.*



Outlet from Watonwan JD-11 with sloughing and instability and is an inadequate outlet for the project.



(excerpt from technical memorandum by Collaborative): “It is known that conditions such as overly steep side slope angles, seepage, and erosion will cause slumping and instability and will vary depending upon the soil type. The proposed ditch geometry is similar to the existing ditch geometry and since ditch stability is inadequate now, it will be inadequate with the proposed conditions along the open ditch.”

The ditch design is not provided in documents and as shown, assuming the deeper ditch bottom is below groundwater level, the ditch slope will be unstable.

- iii. Example indicated that discharges for floods are reduced with project. It is incorrect to say the discharges for floods are reduced from the original watershed, and incorrect not to include the increased discharge from the drain tile as part of the flood discharge. See table below from technical memorandum by the Collaborative that illustrates the flood discharge*

with a reduced watershed area. The discharge shown in table below still does not account for increased flow from drain tile:

Scenario	Area Draining to Outlet	Reduction of Area Draining to Outlet (Drains to NF Watonwan River)	Difference in Runoff Peak – Percent for 5-year to 50-year events	Difference in Volume Draining to Outlet – Percent for 5-year to 50-year event	Overall Difference in Volume Draining from Watershed
Existing	7362 acres	-	-	-	-
Option 1	5389 acres	1973 acres (27 %)	-20 % to -1 %	-14% to -9%	+19% to +25%
Option 2	6536 acres	826 acres (11 %)	-12 % to -3 %	+9% to +14%	+21% to +25%
Option 3	6536 acres	826 acres (11 %)	-25 % to -2 %	+4% to +5%	+14% to +17%

b. My comments:

- i. *Water quality: There is no information provided in the engineers report on the impact of the diversion of about 27% of the watershed for the project area from the Watonwan River watershed diverted to the North Watonwan River watershed on discharges, sediment loads or nutrient loads in the North Watonwan River. No information is provided in the report on the adequacy of the outlet for the proposed diversion to the North Watonwan River.*
- ii. *Erosion and bank instability would not be prevented with the improvement project because the ditch slopes are about the same angle, likely intercepting groundwater and will slough as before. Further, the outlet is inadequate with already failed channel banks.*
- iii. *The discharges are reduced because a portion of the watershed is being diverted into the Watonwan River without consideration for water quality and discharge impacts to the Watonwan River.*