

## Testimony to the LCC Subcommittee on Water Policy

7-15-24

From Scott Sparlin, Executive Director, Coalition for a Clean Minnesota River, and  
Coordinator/Facilitator for the Minnesota River Congress.

Co-Chairs Weber and Hemmingsen-Jaeger and Members, My name is Scott Sparlin, I am the Executive Director for the Coalition for a Clean Minnesota River and Coordinator/Facilitator for the Minnesota River Congress. I live in the heart of Minnesota River Valley in New Ulm, Brown County. The organizations I work for have been advocating on behalf of clean water and our state's namesake river for the past 35 years.

I thank you for this opportunity to give the subcommittee an update on our recently held 16<sup>th</sup> Minnesota River Congress full session held in Mankato.

Director Stark has provided you with our recap of the event which summarizes presentations given by the regional director of the MNDNR, Scott Roemhildt Assistant Commissioner of MPCA, Dana Vanderbosch, Mn Dept. of Ag. Director of Marketing and Development Mark Dittrich, John Jaschke, Executive Director of the Board of Soil and Water Resources, Rita Weaver Chief Engineer for BWSR, Ted Suss, Izaak Walton League of America Upper Mississippi River Initiative, Carly Griffith, Minnesota River Drainage Collaborative/MCEA and Julie Blackburn, Business Unit Leader, ISG Engineering.

Several elected officials from county governments along with state and local staff together with numerous citizens from a diversity of backgrounds and interest also rounded out participation in the event.

Awareness raising about a collaborative network of people currently working on drainage issues in the Minnesota River Basin, which is recognized as the Minnesota River Drainage Collaborative, was presented by the aforementioned network representatives Ted Suss and Carly Griffith. A pamphlet explaining and describing the collaborative is included with the other summary materials forwarded to you from Director Stark to help create further understanding of what the collaborative is and its actions are. Other pertinent documents about the Minnesota River Congress and our Water Storage Initiative have been forwarded to you from him as well.

The voted on and continuing number one priority of the Minnesota River Congress remains as it has for the past 5 years, water storage program establishment and advocacy for its expansion throughout the entire watershed.

To date we have been successful in helping to bring it to the legislature, offering input on bill development, testifying on its behalf and engaging state elected officials to support the establishment by program creation in state statute. Due in part to our efforts the program

now exists. We continue to advocate and work with elected officials to urge for the allocation the necessary funds that will bring the program from a demonstration phase and move it to a larger implementation scale that will assure that the program is effective in achieving much improved water quality in smaller and larger streams, as well as tributaries, connected lakes and the main stem of the river.

Storing water in our soils is also part of the bigger water storage picture such as efforts to increase soil organic content, cover crops and other regenerative agricultural BMPs. We support and recognize this as a part of our number one voted priority as well.

We have secured and continue to secure a solid list of support which I have provided Director Stark with for your reference along with our other support materials. Resolutions and endorsements from 47 entities including 15 basin cities, basin SWCDs as well as recently added Hennepin County. We will be aggressively seeking additional cities and counties along with other entities to join in resolving to advocate for more water storage.

Some of the reoccurring themes and take aways are listed in the questionnaire document. I have provided BWSR Executive Director Jaschke, Ms. Weaver and all the other presenters with the questionnaire results document for consideration moving forward with the water storage program.

I hope as the committee reads and ponders the results of the questionnaire, that you could potentially find useful and appropriate actions or ideas that it can use to advance the need for water storage in our Minnesota River Basin and beyond. We are at a critical time given current and predicted climate changes and land uses that both exacerbate the already stressed system. If we continue with business and policy as usual, we will undoubtedly experience considerable infrastructure, public property, personal property, and natural resource damage. That damage will far outweigh the costs associated with pro-actively using a set of solutions such as all forms of water storage that are staring us in the face and that we know will work. We need to make the sincere, and yes, costly and difficult, but necessary effective effort.

Some have said there is no amount of water storage that would have affected what has happened to us regarding rainfall recently. That is fatalistic to throw your hands up and simply not true. Peak flows can be brought down enough to avoid catastrophic results and they already have. Ask yourself where you think we would be now without the 100,000 acres of formerly cropped and now reclaimed floodplain in the Minnesota River system made possible by the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. That 100,000 acres today is floodplain forest and provides us with a large amounts of storage and room exists for more. Then ask yourself to compare the amounts of rain it used to take to bring on societal losses compared to now. Our land in the basin is for the most part, including our municipalities, all connected by pipes and ditch which didn't even exist as little as 20 years ago. The zeal with our

continuing approach of removing precious water resources from the land is driven in large part to not only producing crops, but the significant increase in land value it provides for the property owner of well drained, pattern tiled production land. The cost of converting poorly drained land to well drained property is minimal in comparison to the increase in land value. Our financial sector is well aware of this and often suggests or even promotes it as a part of financial advice or prior to any future consideration of sale.

I am sure you have heard time and again that we seem to have to digress to crises before we act. I think the canary's have quit chirping because they are out of fresh air.

Again thank you for this opportunity and I will take any questions the committee may have at this time.