

# Lower Minnesota River East One Watershed One Plan

## Steering Committee Meeting Minutes

January 17<sup>th</sup> 2024

**Attendees at meeting:** Holly Bushman (Le Sueur County), Mike Schultz (Le Sueur SWCD), Meghan Darley (Scott SWCD), Troy Kuphal (Scott SWCD), Steve Pahs (Rice SWCD), and Linda Loomis (Lower Minnesota River WD)

### Welcome & Review Agenda

- The Lower Minnesota River East Meeting was held on Wednesday, January 17, 2024. The meeting was held virtually.

### Discussion Updated LoMRE Plan & 60 day Comment Period

- Holly mentioned that the 60 day comment period is coming up pending on Policy Committee approval tomorrow. There were some details that needed to be sorted out before the 60 day comment period could begin, and wanted to discuss with the Steering Team. Holly also mentioned that she met with BWSR to discuss 60 day comment period requirements.
  - The plan must be posted somewhere for the public to access. A link to download the plan would not meet BWSR's requirements. The Steering Team thought posting the draft plan on the watershed's website would work out.
  - The next detail to discuss was the format in which we want to receive comments. ISG had mentioned that during the informal review process all comments were submitted through an excel document. The excel document works well for grammatical errors.; however, it was too time consuming for to review comments in regards to content. The suggestion was made to have content related comments in a memo or letter and grammatical comments in the excel spreadsheet.
  - The next item to discuss was who should receive comments during the 60 day review period. BWSR suggested Holly and Anne. We would forward comments onto ISG as we receive them.
- Holly then mentioned who should be notified of the 60 day review period. BWSR has required participants (State agency staff), but beyond that it is up to the partnership on who we send the draft plan to. After some discussion the Steering Team agreed that our we should notify the stakeholder list that was developed for the public kickoff meeting.

- A formal draft letter/memo will be sent when notifying individuals of the 60 day review period.
- If all goes well and we can get a copy of the 60 day draft plan to BWSR, the goal would be to have the comment period go from January 22<sup>nd</sup> to March 22<sup>nd</sup>.
  - Grammatical comments can be addressed as soon as possible.
  - Content comments would need further discussion before changes are made.
- Holly also wanted to have the Steering Team start discussing/thinking about the Public Hearing that is required after the 60 day review period.
  - Best case scenario we would be able to host the public hearing on April 18<sup>th</sup>. There are certain timelines we need to meet. We can hold the public hearing sooner than 14 days after the 60 day comment period ends, and we need to send out a notice of the public hearing no later than 10 days before.
  - The Steering Team agreed to post in one local paper for each county when the public hearing will be held (similar to the public kickoff meeting).
  - Additionally, we would like to only host one public hearing.
  - We would need to decide where to host the public hearing. The Steering Team would like a more central location. We like the idea of having more of an open house concept where questions can be asked prior to the public hearing.
    - Host the public hearing later in the day (4:30pm-6:30pm) to make sure if individuals want to come they have the opportunity to do so. No more than 2 hours.
    - Mike stated we need a facility that can hold around 100 people.
    - We were thinking the Brewery in New Prague. Staff will start looking into details to see if we can reserve the room.

## Roles

- Holly mentioned that we have discussed as a ST the different roles we would like to have with planning efforts. At our meeting in January, we were able to review two different roles handouts to assist describing staffing needs for plan implementation efforts. At tomorrow's PC meeting, we would be requesting support for the different roles and anticipated hours needed each year. We would not provide any budgets for each position until we start working on our biennial workplan.
  - Project Coordinator-Le Sueur County
  - Fiscal Agent-Scott SWCD
  - Legal Services-Hire out services
  - Project Tracking/Reporting-Scott SWCD
  - Education and Outreach-Le Sueur SWCD
  - Agronomist-Shared amongst partners

- Holly mentioned at some point, she will have send out draft subagreements developed that will need PC, staff, and local legal counsel review. These need to be ready by the time a plan is approved, a workplan is approved, and implementation efforts can begin (Summer-early Fall of 2024).

### **Measurable Goals Ranking Exercise**

- There was some discussion from the Steering Team in December about having a more simple approach to ranking and scoring projects. Holly provided a few examples for the Steering team.
  - The simplistic approach was favored to create more flexibility for the partnership.
  - Holly asked that each ST member rank the measurable goals #1-14. Some things to consider when ranking goals are what existing funding opportunities are available for projects and practices to reach the goal and resource concerns that would be addressed for the goal.
- The measurable goals will be broken down into different levels. Level 1 is the highest priority and will be funded with WBIF. Level 2 may be funded through WBIF and it will be a case by case basis. Level 3 can be funded through WBIF only if additional fundings sources were sought out first and there are no Level 1 or Level 2 projects waiting to be funded.
- Meghan mentioned that typically there is enough funding for project and didn't want to limit ourselves. Still want to prioritize efforts, but try not to put too many restrictions on it.

### **Project Tracking and Cost-Share Policies**

- The measurable goals discussion morphed into cost-share rates and policies. The ST asked if certain goals and practices should have higher rates versus others?
  - One example would be soil health practices. With more soil health funds coming in we may need to bump up rates (higher than local rates) in order to incentivize and get higher adoption rates.
    - A suggestion was made to bring in soil health staff at the February ST meeting to get their input on how we want to set these rates.
  - There was discussion about well sealing practices and have different rates based on whether the project is located within groundwater priority areas. Well sealing is a watershed wide practice.
  - Another goal that was brought up to consider having higher cost share rates is Altered hydrology and storage.
    - However these projects are usually quite large and costly.

- Do we need to have some kind of cost-benefit analysis done to prioritize?  
Ex: top 20% of projects would be eligible for a higher cost share rate.
      - Mike commented it would depend on what the pollutant or stressor is that we are going for. He sees differences in benefits between sediments versus storage in acre-feet.
      - Troy mentioned to reduce amount of staff time in small projects we should further define what kind of cost-share can be approved for different type of projects.
    - Mike also commented that we may not know what projects are all out there yet until the feasibility study is completed.
    - Troy suggested maybe having a base rate for these projects and then add an additional percentage if there is a higher benefit/outcome.
    - Mike commented that water storage outside of drainage system will need additional incentive otherwise it is difficult to get adoption rates.
    - Barb suggested to keep it simple and look at the main issue areas. Decide which activities will be funded by WBIF versus others.
      - Linda commented that when trying to prioritize our goals, the public typically doesn't provide as much input for recreation and habitat as priorities.  
Recommend having it as a Level 3 goal.
- The ST was able to define Level 1, 2, and 3 goals after the ranking exercise and further discussion.
- Meghan mentioned that locally we have our own cost-share rates and policies like others. How do we set rates for this partnership when comparing our local policies?
  - Rates will vary depending on practice and what level the goal falls within.
  - Suggested having incentive rates for conservation cover practices.
- ST decided to not utilize WBIF for SSTS improvements.
- Perennial cover/native plantings
  - Steve stated we should consider incentive payments for CRP or RIM or other perennial cover programs.
  - There was some discussion about harvestable buffers and if that would be an eligible practice under perennial cover. Would need to follow up with BWSR.
- The ST discussed adding in our cost-share policy that if projects exceed what we have available in WBIF, they should try to seek out additional funding.
- There was discussion on how we want to track progress towards our goals. Meghan stated Troy created a spreadsheet that is simplified and does a pretty good job with this. We can ask Troy if we could utilize for this partnership.
- A few other items to consider:
  - How often do we want reporting to occur? Quarterly?

- Do we want batching periods?
- Should reductions be submitted when we get a project that applies?

### **Updates & Next Steps**

- The next steering committee meeting will be held on **Wednesday, February 21<sup>st</sup> from 10:00am-1:00pm.**
- January policy committee meeting will be held **Thursday, March 21<sup>st</sup> from 3:00pm-5:00pm.**
- Likely no AC meeting in February.