

# Lower Minnesota River East One Watershed One Plan

## Steering Committee Meeting Minutes

February 21<sup>st</sup> 2024

**Attendees at meeting:** Holly Bushman (Le Sueur County), Mike Schultz (Le Sueur SWCD), Kourtney Spitzack (Rice SWCD), Linda Loomis (Lower Minnesota River WD), Anne Sawyer, Joe Jirik (Le Sueur SWCD), Barb Peichel (BWSR), Brad Behrens (Rice County)

### Welcome & Review Agenda

- The Lower Minnesota River East Meeting was held on Wednesday, February 21, 2024. The meeting was held virtually.
- Anne had a quick announcement about the UMN hiring two soil health educator positions.

### Cost-Share Policies & Project Tracking

- Staff first discussed cost-share policies for the planning area. Soil Health staff were in attendance to discuss current policies.
  - Mike wanted clarification if low rates for soil health practices were allowed? However, he also wanted to make sure that rates are competitive with one another across the watershed. Currently Scott County has higher rates.
    - Barb stated that we just need a plan on what we want to use, however, local policies are allowed.
    - Barb stated we should have a discussion on what we want to do. Since some staff are absent from the meeting today, we will need to continue these conversations next month.
  - Mike asked what mechanism should be used with our local rates?
    - Barb stated it would just need to be mentioned in the work plan. Can do certain practices or all practices will local rates.
    - Just would need to include as an attachment in elink.
  - Barb mentioned that the draft document could likely be broken up into two parts. One for process on how to issue cost share for different practices and one that specifies our cost-share policies.
  - Mike mentioned again we want to stay competitive. If there are varying ratings for soil health practices across the watershed, could see that being complicated. Especially if part of the field is in two different counties.
    - Potentially could add to current policies within a certain distance from jurisdictional line, rates would follow a one local policy.

- Mike further commented that we might have to increase our rates anyways with all of the new soil health funding coming in.
  - Anne commented that being in a planning area with metro entities can impact rates.
  - There was additional discussion about providing an incentive bonus for those that fall within priority areas.
  - Mike stated we could use soil health funds and add an incentive with WBIF funds.
- Barb mentioned that staff have mentioned flexibility is important. Include that within our thought process when trying to set rates.
- Joe commented that having a uniform cost share can be helpful for staff.
  - He has worked with landowners who have experience with different rates, and then often get upset with staff.
  - Staff could go a Tier route and explain priority areas. Incentivize the highest priorities with higher rates versus others.
  - This would remove a county aspect and just focus on the watershed.
- Kourtney mentioned that she likes the level of detail within the Cannon which uses tiers for different rates.
  - She did mention the only thing she doesn't like is when a field falls within multiple priority areas there is a percentage associated with determining which tier it falls into.
    - Mike stated that if the project area falls/touches our top priority area (level 1) then just fund entire field as Level 1.
    - The ST agreed this made the most sense and created more flexibility.
- The ST took a step back from the conversation and asked the question what we want to focus on when setting these cost-share policies. Is it priority goals or priority areas?
  - We stated priority areas make the most sense.
  - If project falls within a priority area it would get a higher incentive rate versus outside of the priority area.
  - Barb stated we can fund projects outside of the priority area, but we should be trying to target our priority areas.
  - Mike suggested that we give higher rates for those within our priority areas and use tiers to put preference on what we want to fund.
- There was some discussion about having multiple different cost-share policies and if that would be difficult.

- Kourtney stated right now all watershed planning efforts have different policies in addition to their local policies.
    - Mike stated he wanted to see if it was a huge deal because we did have a few comments from staff about sticking to our local policies. Generally our cost-share rates are the same, but there are some differences.
- Holly wanted to ask some more general questions about soil health cost-share rates and what typically is required locally.
  - The first question was about single species and multispecies and different rates.
    - Anne asked if multiple species could create any limitations?
    - Joe stated there are benefits with produces being familiar with more than one cover crop species. However, there may be only one species they need to achieve their goal.
  - Holly mentioned that she saw in the Lower MN West cost-share policy that they require an interview with the producer once they enroll to implement cover crops. She wanted to see what staff thought about included that as part of the policy.
    - Kourtney stated that we could start with a paper survey and do an in person follow up.
    - Anne stated that make sure all questions asked are consistent then we can track data. Start thinking ahead on how we would use that data.
  - The next questions was about payment schedules for soil health practices.
    - Mike stated Le Sueur SWCD pays the producer in the first year.
    - Kourtney stated Rice SWCD pays each year, instead of all at once.
      - Mike asked if you are out of contract year how do you deal with payment?
        - Kourtney said they make sure the contract is closed out on year 3. They would just pay for 2 years then.
  - Holly asked staff what they thought about the acreage cap on soil health practices?
    - In the Cannon, the cap is 100 acres.
    - Rice SWCD local policy is 80 acres.
    - Le Sueur SWCD local policy is 160 acres.
    - Staff liked a higher acreage cap.
    - Joe stated that with a higher acreage cap they have the option to start small and can expand/try different things.
  - Joe mentioned that often produces will sign up for a certain amount of acres, and then do acres on their own.

- There was concurrence to have different cost share rates for single versus multi species. Additionally, leave the option to have producers sign up for a timeframe of 1-3 years.
  - The shorter timeframes of 1-2 years producers enrolled in cover crops likely partner with local canning companies.
- Holly then wanted to ask about tillage practices and nutrient management. In other watersheds, this has been more difficult. Staff have little less experience with these BMPs and may not have the JAA.
  - Currently Rice SWCD does not have a local policy for cost-share for Strip or No Till. They use the watershed partnership policies.
  - Le Sueur SWCD likes to stake programs like cover crops and tillage to get a higher cost share incentive.
    - Typically No till/strip till has been \$20/acre.
    - The contract length for tillage practices has varied. There are 2 tiers that tillage practices are put in; immediate in order to reduce erosion or long term for soil health benefits. Either contract has value; depends on the producers goals.
  - Nutrient management demand and opportunity is a big unknown. Typically it is a really cumbersome process and takes a lot of staff commitment. Lastly, there are not many staff that are certified and have JAA for nutrient management.
    - There was discussion about asking Scott SWCD about their programs and if their staff would be able to assist with this watershed.
    - Do we provide some kind of incentive for producers that incorporate nutrient management into their operation.
- Staff then briefly went over the rest of the cost-share policy. Since a few staff members from the SWCDs were absent, we decided to start discussing the other items, but will need to dive deeper at the next meeting.
  - Currently, we have that \$75,000 and over, requires JPB approval. Anything below this threshold can be approved by staff. Just double check with the PC that this is okay.
  - Holly mentioned that for some practices we likely will need to seek out other funds and not use any WBI. She mentioned that Mike and her have been in conversations with the DNR about state and federal funds for stream restorations, improving fish habitat, and dam removal.
  - Structural practices right now are at 90% in top priority areas and 75% outside priority areas. That is just a starting point.

- Barb recommends having no cap in our actual policy but can put a cap in our workplan. That way we have some more flexibility to move money around.
- Linda stated that depending on our annual budget may determine the cost-share. We likely will have to assess these rates annually. If we have the funds to provide cost-share then we can move forward.
  - Linda also commented that with these larger projects we may not know the costs right away and it likely will vary. She liked that we kept the flexibility with the larger projects. Impossible to predict.

### **Measurable Goals Ranking**

- Holly mentioned at our last meeting we had ranked all of our measurable goals for the plan; total of 14. Next step was to determine how we want to move forward with projects in order to track progress towards our measurable goals.
  - Different watershed partnerships have done this in a variety of different ways; however, a large spreadsheet that includes all of the projects seems to be the most efficient. The ST talked about putting the spreadsheet on the shared drive for everyone to see. Make sure the sheet includes the type of project, size of project, reductions, and project locations. Private information doesn't necessarily need to be on there.
  - Barb had examples from other watersheds the ST could view.
  - Using the spreadsheet as a communication tool.
  - Mike mentioned the Scott SWCD tracking sheet is great. The ST would like to see the sheet and see if it is something we could use.
  - The ST also discussed that we should find a mechanism to track progress towards our goals within the watershed utilizing other funds or efforts as well.
    - Barb stated the Lower Saint Croix has a good example of this.

### **60 Day Comment Period Updates**

- Holly provided an update to the ST about any 60 day comments that were received. As of now, we have only received comments from Greg Entinger for content related changes and Le Sueur County staff in regards to grammatical errors.
  - Linda stated that the Lower Minnesota River WD will have some comments to submit during the 60 day review period and their board was discussing them.
    - Most of the comments were in regards to adding narrative. For example, making sure we mention high value resources such as Eagle Creek and Savage Fen are clearly defined in the plan.
- Both Barb and Anne provided an update/summary on next steps when the 60 day comment period closes. An email was sent out earlier by Holly with a rough timeline on how the partnership will move forward.

- On March 8<sup>th</sup>, BWSR will be checking in with state agencies to see how things are going with review of the plan.
- March 22<sup>nd</sup> is when the 60 day comment period ends. Note that in some other watershed agencies have requested more time. Up to PC and ST if want to include or not if comments come in after review period.
- The PC has to approve changes to plan from the 60 comment period and how to address before public hearing date.
  - ISG would have ability to start making changes to the plan then.
- How will review all of the 60 day comments and provide a draft response the last week in March. She will send out to the ST to review and see if changes need to be made to responses.
- The ST will meet sometime in between April 8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> to discuss comments and responses. Likely will not be able to go through every comment, but want to make sure we address comments that would require major changes to plan or are unclear. Hoping to finalize this at this meeting.
- April 18<sup>th</sup> at the next PC meeting they will be able to review, discuss, and approve changes and how to address comments. ISG then will be able to start working on those changes.
- Public Hearing
  - Can't occur until 14 days after the comment period has ended, and must be notice no later than 10 days before.
  - ST had talked last meeting about having more of an open house format and then allowing time at the end of the PC to start the official public hearing.
  - We only need one public hearing and it can occur anywhere.
  - The goal is to host the public hearing April 29<sup>th</sup>-May 3<sup>rd</sup>. The subsequent weeks following up to the regularly scheduled PC meeting in May will be a back up plan.
  - If we can get a quorum at the public hearing, the PC can decide that day on how to move forward with suggested changes and how to address.
  - ST provide a quick 10 minute presentation about the plan.
- There are tight timelines/deadlines in order to meet requirements to get on the BWSR Board meeting and Regional Committee meetings. Depending on the number of comments and how many changes need to be made will determine what meeting we can get on.
  - The options for meetings are either in June or August.
  - In order to submit a plan to BWSR all of the comments from the 60 day and Public hearing have to be listed and addressed. Additionally, the plan needs to be updated to incorporate comments.
- Barb wasn't sure if we wanted our local boards to approve plan pending BWSR approval? Additionally, they could have us approve the JPA at the same time. Timing on when this occurs may determine this and what the PC thinks.
- 90 day review period
  - BWSR will reach out to state agencies within the first week to ask support for approval of plan.
  - BWSR will still need time to review and prepare packet for board meeting.

- Staff, ISG, PC, or a combination of individuals can attend BWSR board meeting and present the plan.

#### **Check in with Joint Powers Agreement**

- Rice County attorney had a few comments that Brad was going to send to Holly.
- No comments from Scott County or Lower Minnesota River WD.
- Le Sueur County had no comments.

#### **Education & Outreach Campaign Framework**

- Holly was planning on sending out an email soon to start conversation on developing an education and outreach campaign framework.
- We should know in March if additional staff will be hired through Le Sueur SWCD to assist with education and outreach efforts.
- Education and outreach staff from Scott and Rice SWCD will be invited to these meetings to assist with efforts.

#### **Updates & Next Steps**

- The next steering committee meeting will be held on **Wednesday, March 20<sup>th</sup> from 1:30pm-3:30pm.**
- Next Policy Committee Meeting will be held **Thursday, March 21<sup>st</sup> from 3:00pm-5:00pm.**
- The next AC meeting will be held either **Wednesday, March 20<sup>th</sup>** or **Wednesday, April 17<sup>th</sup> from 10:00am-1:00pm.**