WATONWAN RIVER WATERSHED LEVERAGE POINTS

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Watonwan River Watershed citizens and local conservation partners came together to talk about the watershed and to explore the question: Are there some leverage points that might lead to more conservation adoption across the watershed? A group of approximately 30 people met over a series of seven meetings in 2017-2018. They talked about broad concerns residents have about water, what is already working well with conservation adoption, what challenges they see, and some potential action steps to get more conservation adoption across the watershed.

The group thought about landowner perspectives — their own experiences as well as a learning from landowner interviews and focus groups held across the watershed. For more information, see the summary report Perceived Benefits and Barriers of Land Management Practices. They also discussed the latest MPCA scientific research about the Watonwan River Watershed. The ideas from this group will be used to inform the Watonwan River Watershed’s Restoration and Protection Strategy and more broadly will help shape conservation delivery across the watershed in the future.

This report contains (1) a summary of the brainstormed strategies that the group came up with and (2) prioritized action steps that the group was collectively interested in working on in the near term.

“One-on-one education is very important. Conservation partners need to build relationships and trust. Once you are talking with people they become more aware of programs and what you have to offer.”

“ Soil health practices may hold more promise than structural practices and could make a big difference for watershed health. There is an emerging interest in soil health as noted by the large attendance at recent soil health events in the area.”
BRAINSTORMED STRATEGIES

Conservation Outreach: Locally

- **One-on-ones** — The group discussed the importance of local staff prioritizing one-on-one meetings and farm site visits across the watershed in order to build relationships and trust. Experiment with the “Conservation Consultant” idea, seeking funds for a dedicated local staff focused on farm visits.

- **Provide education for producers.** Increase knowledge about available conservation programs — one-on-one and groups.

- **Economics** — Explain the economics of best management practices (BMPs) and clarify costs for landowners. Explain that conservation practices can make farming “easier and less stressful.”

- Create a “Traveling Conservation Circus” — The vision is to have a trailer that has a rainfall simulator, soil testing equipment and other BMP and watershed information. Conservation partners would travel across the watershed and host events in big and small towns and on farms.

- **Conservation Mapping** — Use a more systematic approach to target conservation and identify high priority areas. Use GIS mapping programs like the Agricultural Conservation Planning Framework (ACPF) to create targeted maps at field and/or subwatershed scale.

- **Experiment in a subwatershed** and choose two-to-three land management strategies to focus on. A combination of soil health and other practices would be helpful to meet the needs of operators.

Conservation Programs:
State and Federal

- **Conservation Programs** — Clearly identify what landowners have said about barriers to BMP adoption. Landowners expressed frustration with rigid and inflexible government programs, long processing time frames, too much red tape, insufficient cost share as well as long term management costs with some BMPs.

- **Explain local partner needs and barriers.** The group identified the lack of engineering services available, the need for staff stability and funds for staff training.

- **Inform local, state, and federal partners** about barriers to conservation adoption. Share information and documents with local government, state and federal legislators.

- **Clarify the types of programs needed** in this watershed. We need more water storage, but how? Which programs? Where on the landscape?
BRAINSTORMED STRATEGIES

Soil Health

- Promote and increase use of soil health practices across the watershed. Improve education and information about strip-till, no-till, conservation tillage and cover crops.

- Form a Soil Health Team (like Freeborn and Faribault Counties).

- Host field days and demonstrations that include no-till, strip-till, and cover crops.

- Obtain a strip tiller that could be shared among landowners. (Potentially through an Ag BMP loan).

- Create a spreadsheet that compares economics of different management approaches.

- Create a banker education program that includes long term economics of different management approaches.

Other Programs

- Ditch Improvement — Map and identify upcoming ditch improvement projects and see if it is possible to get more water storage as part of the improvement process.

- Marginal Lands — Use Profit Zone Manager or another program to help identify long term economics of farming marginal ground. What will it take to set these lands aside? Get the message out: “Don’t farm lands that don’t pay; square off the fields.”

- Alternative Crops — Learn more about alternative crops and the “Forever Green” and “Green Lands, Blue Waters” Initiatives.

- Crop Consultants & Advisors — Network with crop consultants and co-ops. They are trusted advisors. Could they play a different role in improving watershed health? What role in soil health?

- Owner-Operators — Create a program or find existing examples of lease agreements that conservation-minded landowners can use to promote more conservation on lands they rent. For example, a renter agreement could include more conservation practices in exchange for a lower rental rate.

- Conservation Partner Engineering Training — Train local partners to be able to give engineering advice so landowners can implement practices on their own or via programs and cost share.
PRIORITY ACTIONS

Group members voted on priority actions and the following strategies got the most votes.

More Conservation Outreach
Create a “Traveling Conservation Circus.” The vision is to have a trailer that has a rainfall simulator, soil testing equipment and other BMP and watershed information. Conservation partners would travel across the watershed and host events in big and small towns and on farms.

Promote Soil Health
Form Soil Health Team (like Freeborn County).

Clarify Economics
Explain the economics of best management practices (BMPs) and clarify costs for landowners. Explain that conservation practices can make farming easier and less stressful.

Target Conservation with GIS Mapping
Use a more systematic approach to target conservation and identify high priority areas. Use GIS mapping programs like the Agricultural Conservation Planning Framework (ACPF) to create targeted maps at field and/or subwatershed scale.

Focus on Marginal Lands
Use Profit Zone Manager or another program to help identify long term economics of farming marginal ground. What will it take to set these lands aside? Get the message out: “Don’t farm lands that don’t pay; square off the fields.”

Ditch Improvement
Map and identify upcoming ditch improvement projects and see if it is possible to get more water storage as part of the improvement process.

Clarify Barriers to Conservation Adoption
Explain local partner needs and barriers. The group identified the lack of engineering services available, the need for staff stability and funds for staff training.

Inform local, state, and federal partners about barriers to conservation adoption. Share information and documents with local government, state and federal legislators.

The Watonwan River Watershed is located in south-central Minnesota. It is a major tributary to the Minnesota River and drains 878 square miles (561,600 acres) within all or parts of Blue Earth, Brown, Cottonwood, Martin, Jackson, and Watonwan counties.

For More Information
http://www.watonwanriver.org
https://www.pca.state.mn.us/water/watersheds/watonwan-river
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