

South Branch Root River Watershed Project
Meeting Notes for September 14, 2005

In attendance: Bob & Eloda Wood (Wykoff), Stafford Hansen (Fillmore County Commissioner), Fred Beier (Property owner), Jeff Green (DNR Waters), Jeff Weiss (DNR Fisheries, Lanesboro), Denton Bruening and Mark Dittrich (MDA), Keith Voorhees (Clayton Township), Bill Sweetser (Supervisor and Chair Bennington Township), Mark White (MN DNR Forestville/Mystery Cave State Park), Linda Dahl (Whitewater River Watershed Project), Clint Miller (MN Land Trust), Lee Ganske (MPCA), Jaime Schaunaman (NRCS Fillmore County), Donna Rasmussen (Fillmore SWCD)

Learning from the Whitewater River Watershed Project: Linda Dahl, Watershed Coordinator, explained that the Whitewater Watershed Project has been in existence since 1987 and has been addressing water resource issues that are similar to those identified in the South Branch Root River. Linda talked about the history of the project. The 200,000-acre watershed is about 50% cropland and 25% forest with about 20,000 residents. In 1987, residents identified a need for better upland management. A Joint Powers Board was formed in 1989 comprised of one county commissioner and one SWCD Supervisor from the three counties in the watershed (Olmsted, Winona, and Wabasha). Initial planning was completed by 1991, and a coordinator was hired in 1992. In 1994, a Citizens' Advisory Committee was formed that developed a watershed plan addressing soil erosion, forestry, water quality, and biodiversity. The plan was adopted in 1996. Task forces were established to work on each issue. Education has had good success through teacher workshops and watershed trunks. A grant from the LCMR funded two demonstration farms for rotational grazing and streambank management. In 1998, USDA PL566 small watershed funding was received. There were 99 contracts funded that cost-shared waterways, diversions, sediment basins, cover crops, and managed grazing. A 319 grant for bacteria reduction is now funding loans for ISTS, low-cost feedlot fixes and ISTS education. Linda is the only watershed employee, although contracted employees have been hired to do forestry plans and GIS mapping, such as maps of farms showing setbacks and sensitive features. A study of the multiple benefits of ag is looking at practices in place now and in the past in the 10,000-acre Logan Branch and is developing scenarios if certain practices are adopted. There is an intensive effort to get incentives for practices there. Forestry plans have been found to be most successful with one-on-one contact with landowners with woodlands. Ways for measuring success in the watershed include 20 years of annual sampling of trout numbers, five years of citizen stream monitoring data that will include turbidity samples to correlate with transparency readings, and the monitoring done by other agencies, such as DNR, MDA, MPCA, and Winona State University. The watershed has a long history that is well documented concerning pre-conservation era conditions and subsequent practice implementation. The trend over the last 80 years has been good, but in the last 20 years, it is more difficult to see the effects due to the lag time in the system. Some troubling trends are the increasing levels of atrazine found in the streams and springs, the conversion to soybeans which is leading to more erosion, and decreasing trout fishing pressure due to new regulations which decreases support for the resource and the incentives to keep land treatment practices in place. The project is grappling with the common problem that piecemeal grants do not allow for long-term monitoring and sustained programs. The biggest influence on water quality are the farm programs, and those are in the control of the federal government. Watershed projects should come together to share ideas and long-term goals about water use, energy (ethanol production), etc.

Discuss ideas for watershed outreach: Donna distributed a timeline showing some ideas for information and outreach activities in the watershed, some of which have been completed or are in progress. Neighborhood meetings were discussed and may be tried if there are willing landowners to host the meetings. Forestry field days could be coordinated with existing DNR sessions for small

woodlot owners. Other ideas added were a display that could be set up in banks, schools, churches; use of the karst trunk and/or developing a watershed trunk with maps, monitoring tools, etc.; news releases when projects are completed; setting up a website; holding a press event with state agency leaders; designing postcards with general information about the project.

Discuss flexibility of program guidelines for “experimental” practices: It is difficult to anticipate the variety of requests that landowners will make regarding programs, some of which have already surfaced. The question arises whether to wait and bring special requests to the group or allow technical staff to make those decisions. The consensus from the group was that, in most cases, it would be best to proceed using the best judgment of the technical staff making sure that there is fair access to the programs for all who are interested. It was noted that those willing to try experimental practices are key to getting more people to adopt the practices if they are shown to be successful.

Updates: The 319 grant agreement was received and signed by the county board on August 23rd. The agreement has been returned with all the required signatures.

The DNR has completed a flyover of the watershed taking photos using full color and thermal imagery to detect changes in water temperature. There are about 2000 individual images which will be put into a mosaic. Many of the images are from the South Branch. Twenty temperature dataloggers were used in the South Branch main stem and tributaries to gather temperature data at the same time so that temperature ranges can be assigned to the imagery color in order to compare relatively warmer water to relatively colder water. DNR expects to have a complete analysis of the data done by spring. They may give us a partial report this winter either in November or January. The data is being used to validate a U of M computer model that will be used to predict the effects of development on streams. Jeff Weiss noted that there the temperature spiked to 75 to 85 degrees during warm weather runoff events and down to 37 degrees during snowmelt runoff.

The MDA riparian grazing study includes doing rain simulations on the three monitoring sites to compare runoff rates and water quality of runoff of different management practices: manured crop field at Heusinkvelds’, rotational grazing at Dan Miller’s, and conventional grazing at Tom Starcken’s near Fountain. Two replications are done at each site. Ten simulations were completed in August. The rotational site was studied one, two and three weeks after the cattle were removed. These will be repeated next year.

The next project meeting will be Thursday, November 10th at 6:30 p.m. Tentative plans are to have a joint meeting with the Friends of Forestville. They will meet in October to discuss this.

The manure application equipment field day sponsored by Extension at Larry Mathison’s drew about 55 people. There were several types of spreaders and other equipment there that were demonstrated plus information about how to calibrate a spreader, how to calculate the number of pounds of N, P, and K in the manure and the number of pounds being applied using the various types of equipment.

Planning has started for a stream monitoring volunteer recognition event probably in October. More information will be available in the near future.

Mark Dittrich showed a video about the aerial seeding of cover crops in Olmsted County done in August. Several Fillmore County farmers, including one in the watershed, aerial seeded winter rye about two weeks after the news clip aired on KTTC.

The meeting adjourned at 8:35 p.m.