

Public Kickoff Events Summary

Rum River One Watershed, One Plan

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INTRODUCTION

The Rum River. Mille Lacs Lake. The watershed’s forests, parks, and natural areas. These spaces define so much of what people value about living and working in this region, and right now, several communities in the area that drains to Mille Lacs Lake and the Rum are working together to identify challenges and opportunities for protecting these resources—now and into the future. It is incredibly important to local staff working on this plan that it is informed, from the beginning, by the insights of the people closest to the landscape and natural resources.

To begin the process for developing the Rum River One Watershed, One Plan (1W1P), three identical workshops were held by local staff for the purposes of hearing from community members throughout the watershed about their concerns, opinions, and ideas regarding the watershed. To make it easier for people from across the watershed to participate, they were held on separate days in different locations: Anoka City Hall (July 31), Princeton Library (August 1), and Onamia Rolf Olsen Center (August 3).

Each workshop began with an overview of the 1W1P process, followed by guided small group conversations where participants answered the following three prompts:

1. What are some qualities or characteristics you value and care about when it comes to your community and the natural environment? What hopes do you have for these resources in the future?
2. What do you think are the major issues or concerns facing our natural resources today?
3. What strategies or future actions make sense to you to address these challenges and get to our desired future conditions?

By using open-ended questions, a wide range of comments could be received. Comments included in the analysis for this report were written by participants themselves, and maintained verbatim throughout the analysis. Several of those comments are included in blue text boxes throughout the report as well.

While the questions were open ended, the categorization of those comments was done using pre-set categories and subcategories offered by RESPEC in order to help connect the comments from stakeholder engagement with the State Agency comment letters, local plans and reports, and other technical documents. This report is largely organized using those pre-set categories, and the outcomes from all of the kickoff events are included. Where there is a notable difference in the responses from the different workshops, that difference is discussed. For clarity, this report is organized by the themes which emerged across the three questions.

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GROUNDWATER

Access to clean, reliable drinking water for human consumption is important to workshop participants from across the watershed. They want to know that pollutants (with specific mention of septic systems and fertilizer) are being managed with care given to protecting groundwater quality in general and near wells specifically.

"We must remember that we should be concerned with what we are doing to aquifers (groundwater)."

Participants in the Princeton workshop additionally noted the rate of use of drinking water sources, with concern about the impact of continued growth on the future availability of groundwater. They also mentioned a lack of water retention and the need to find ways to help water soak into the ground through rain gardens and/or holding ponds in order to help increase recharge.

Strategies

It is important to mention that the comments for the groundwater category fell entirely under the first two questions, meaning that no comments were provided for next steps or strategies (even though there were a couple of comments that reference possible strategies at a broad level). This may indicate a lack of awareness about what strategies exist or could help protect groundwater—something that should be taken into account in developing the implementation table for the Rum River 1W1P.

SURFACE WATER

"I care about the lake clarity and how safe the water is for humans and wildlife"

Participants acknowledge that, by altering the natural hydrology of and vegetation on the landscape in both urban and rural settings, the amount of runoff has increased. They are concerned about both the impacts to groundwater through the loss of recharge as well as the rate and quantity of runoff and the pollutants runoff carries to surface water bodies, especially agricultural and lawn fertilizers. The summaries below should be read as additional to this baseline understanding conveyed by many participants of how land use impacts water quality.

Participants' concerns fell into two broad subcategories of surface water quality and quantity. Each will be addressed below.

Quality

Both mitigating sources of pollution and addressing pollution already in lakes, rivers, and wetlands were frequently mentioned by participants across all three workshops. For sources, septic systems, agricultural runoff, and stormwater were mentioned most extensively. Not as frequently mentioned but still prominent was concern about urban sources of fertilizer, trash, and chlorides. For what is already in the water bodies, participants want to see less algae, increased clarity, healthier conditions for aquatic plants and wildlife, and the ability to fish and recreate on and in the water for generations to come. Additionally, there is a desire to see protection of those water bodies in the watershed that are not currently impaired.

Quantity

Citing excess erosion and sedimentation, the breaking loose of bogs, flooding, and increased wave action impacting banks and shorelines (possibly caused in places by boat speeds), participants noted several visual examples of the impact of higher rates and of runoff and higher lake levels.

In addition to these basin-wide recognized challenges facing surface water in the Rum River basin, there were some geographic distinctions and other highlights that should be mentioned as well:

- General concern about existing altered hydrology is not heavily reflected in the northern portion of the basin.
- Concerns about ditch maintenance and mitigation of drainage system impacts reflect the portions of the watershed that are more agricultural, with only one mention in the Anoka workshop. However, concern about nitrogen from agricultural sources in general was shared across the basin, with concerns about animal agriculture specifically mentioned in both Princeton and Anoka.
- Tiling is noted as a concern for both quantity and quality considerations in the Onamia and Princeton workshops, but is also mentioned as something valued by one participant in the Princeton workshop for its utility in managing excess sheet erosion and runoff.
- Concern about high lake levels and the impacts of both manmade and beaver dams was brought up specifically in the Princeton workshop.
- Climate change is equally and specifically identified as a challenge equally in each workshop. While not significantly identified, many of the effects made worse by climate change (heavy rainfall, flooding, etc.) are still discussed at length.
- Aquatic recreation concerns were predominantly shared at the Anoka workshop

Strategies

To improve surface water health, participants encourage efforts which would restore or mimic natural hydrology, including:

- Bio-retention projects and wetland protection
- Protection and maintenance of floodplains and riparian habitat
- Streambank and shoreline restoration and the use of natural buffers
- Reduced boat speeds and limits on horsepower of motors
- Green infrastructure
- Requirements for new developments
- Education and cost share for property owners and managers
- Cover crops, perennial agriculture, and low-till practices

NATURAL RESOURCES

In addition to the water quality comments summarized under surface water, participants discussed the need for healthy aquatic *habitat* for healthy fisheries, and the need for that habitat to be connected so fish can move throughout the river system. That said, there is also concern about the arrival of invasive fish species and the spread of other aquatic invasive species. Managing these invasive species is seen as an important part of restoring, managing, and preserving aquatic habitat—for fish and other aquatic wildlife.

The same is true for riparian, wetland, and upland habitats, including forested areas. The rich natural environment and rural character is highly valued by participants throughout the watershed and something that they want to see protected, appropriately managed, and enhanced. More frequently mentioned than the aesthetic qualities and benefits to overall quality of life also cited by many participants (such as dark skies, quiet, and a sense of peacefulness), participants want to protect and restore the ecosystem functions and water quality benefits of these different habitats.

“Forests as habitat and water quality protection”

This value and desire, though, creates a series of tensions participants pointed out in their comments. They recognized the challenge of balancing between conservation needs and:

- Agricultural production and farmer livelihoods
- Development and population growth
- Recreational use

Strategies

Participants offered a wide range of strategies that, largely, account for the tensions identified above as well as the varying quality and integrity of different kinds of habitat across the watershed. Their comments for how to conserve these ecosystems are divided below using a few types of natural resource management, described broadly at first followed by individual examples of suggested strategies or general approaches:

Preserve

Recognizing the potential for development pressure to eventually degrade or fragment existing habitat, participants encourage purchasing or otherwise preserving undeveloped lands and—especially—areas that are of high ecological value. Likewise, there is desire to protect habitat or species that are especially sensitive to changes in the environment.

- “Purchase undeveloped land/woods that can protect water and preserve habitat--along lines of Nature Conservancy and public ownership--but not to develop into formal/open parks”
- “Preservation of wild rice on Onamia lake.”
- “Demonstrate effectiveness of natural resource preservation. Quantifiable metrics (ex nutrient measures)”
- “Cooperation of land owners in forest stewardship plans”

Enhance

Participants encourage the management of existing habitat to manage invasive species and ensure the development and maintenance of healthy and functioning ecosystems.

- “Wildlife habitat corridors: maintain the ones in place, work to establish connections where they are lacking.”
- “Maintain natural habitat environment--share with wildlife (habitat?), access for many to enjoy”
- “Develop more incentives to improve habitat for native species”

Restore

Participants want to restore habitat or ecosystem function where it has been lost.

- “Build capacity for County's to help fund wetland restorations shoreland buffer protection as part of plats”
- “There should be more conservation acres with incentives to the landowner such as property tax abatement but PILT payments to the township or city”
- “Explore dam removal/replacement with arch ladder”

STRATEGIES AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR SOCIAL SYSTEMS

“Preserving what we have and focus on problem areas (targeted) ”

In addition to structural projects that can protect and improve the resources of the watershed, participants overwhelmingly are also interested in education, technical assistance, policies, and other strategies that influence behaviors and priorities. While not a specific resource category like surface water, groundwater, and natural resources, the extent to which comments in all of the workshops fell under this broad category merits the inclusion of this section in this report.

Several of the specific comments are already referenced in the other sections in this report. Instead, this section will focus on the types of strategies that participants offered:

Research

Multiple times, participants noted where there was uncertainty about causes of a problem, and the need identify the root causes and risk multipliers so as to better understand what actions are needed—whether structural or nonstructural.

Public Awareness and Education

One of the most often cited strategies is that of personal or community actions that can reduce harm to local water bodies. While many comments mentioned awareness or education as broad concepts, the general feel of comments on the whole is that efforts in this arena should be focused on individual behavior change and the involvement and leadership of community groups.

Incentives and Technical Assistance

Even if preferred courses of action have been identified and there is sufficient interest in taking personal actions (e.g., a willing landowner in a priority location), additional financial or technical support may be needed to actually make a project happen. Once strategies are identified in the plan, incentives and design and installation assistance are encouraged to support implementation.

Policy

When the above will not suffice or urgency calls for faster action, participants were not shy about asking for new or changed ordinances and requirements, especially where mitigation of impacts from new development is possible. Participants also encouraged the streamlining of existing regulations and cooperation between different layers of government and across the watershed.

Given the number of comments which addressed these nonstructural strategies, it will be important to make sure the implementation programs developed through the Rum River 1W1P process also includes nonstructural strategies.

SUMMARY

“Preserve what we have and focus on problem areas (targeted).”

This one participant’s comment sums up so much of what has been discussed in this report. The parallels are clear. Preserve high quality water bodies and ecosystems, and protect these as well as groundwater sources from contamination and degradation. Identify the problem areas and sources of pollution, and focus efforts there. Likewise, identify the threats and concerns on the horizon, like increased development, invasive species, and climate change, and prepare strategies to address those challenges as well.

Additionally, *how* this happens is also important to the participants in the three workshops. They want to see a wide variety of structural and nonstructural strategies incorporated into the Rum River 1W1P. They want to know that the strategies are data driven, provide support to the landowners that will be involved in implementation, and that policy solutions are a part of the menu of options.

NEXT STEPS

These comments, along with those collected through the online survey or submitted by State Agencies, as well as information from existing plans, reports, and other technical documents have all been analyzed together to develop draft issue statements for use by the Technical Advisory Committee in the early stages of developing the plan. By incorporating these comments early in the process, they are now informing the narrative, issue identification, and goals of the plan. The comments that refer specifically to the strategies will be incorporated towards the end of the plan development process as appropriate when creating the implementation programs.

Participants from these three workshops as well as those who were unable to attend a kickoff event will be invited to offer feedback at several points during the development of the plan, in addition to participating in the official comment periods that are required after the full draft of the plan is complete.