BOARD OF WATER AND SOIL RESOURCES

One Watershed, One Plan

Identifying and Prioritizing Resources and Issues

Supporting information for Section III.C of the 1W1P Plan Content Requirements (version 2.0)

The following document provides suggestions for identifying and prioritizing resources and issues that will be addressed in your comprehensive watershed management plan. The intent is not to prescribe a particular process, but rather to stimulate ideas that lead to a robust discussion around priority issues and potential solutions. When designing your process, ask: What outcome(s) do we want? Who participates, and what is each participant's role in the process? What technique(s) will we use?

Identifying and prioritizing issues lays the foundation for the rest of the plan. The process should:

- Be thoughtful, inclusive, defensible, and documented
- Build on priorities established through other local and state planning efforts
- Be limited to, and focused on, creating and prioritizing issue statements and identifying geographic priorities (setting measurable goals and targeting strategies/actions will happen later)
- Use group decision-making techniques that keep the process moving forward
- Result in issue statements that clearly articulate real and actionable problems, risks, and opportunities that are connected to local values

Definitions

Prioritize – determining the relative importance and precedence of the resources and issues you have identified in your plan. This includes not only agreeing upon which items will be tackled **first**, but also those that will not be included in your plan.

Resources – natural features on the landscape that can be grouped into categories for management activities (e.g., unimpaired lakes, shallow groundwater aquifers, stream riparian corridors, productive soils).

Issues – problems, risks, or opportunities for your watershed's priority resources (e.g. flood damage, groundwater contamination, protect unimpaired waters, etc.) that will be addressed in your plan (see example issue statements below).

Setting the Stage

It's important that you make sure participants understand the process your group will use to identify issues and set priorities, and their role in that process. Transparency about the process before you start can help mitigate conflict later on. Note that the concepts below apply in the other stages of plan development, too.

Set Expectations

Clearly communicate the process design and goals to the participants. What are you trying to achieve? Who will be involved? How long will it take? Who will make the decisions and how? When will you know you are done?

Clarify Roles

Ideally, people who are interested in the planning effort or who may be affected by the resulting plan get a chance to *provide input* in identifying and/or setting priorities. While a large and diverse group of people will give a good base of information about local values, a smaller set of people who are more intimately engaged in the process (e.g., policy or advisory committees) will *make decisions* about the priority issues that go into the plan. Participants should be clear about their role and how their input will be used. The IAP2 spectrum offers a framework for thinking about goals for public participation (Inform, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, Empower), and the "promise to the public" that is associated with the opportunity to provide input.

You may want to consult with a **skilled facilitator** who has expertise in designing and leading a group decision making process.

Identify and Group Resources and Issues

Once the process is set, generate a list of resources and issues. The "Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans" section of the 1W1P Plan Content Requirements has a list of "issue areas" that must be addressed in the plan plus additional items that may enter the discussion. Priority resources and issues may also be aggregated from existing local plans, studies, and reports, and the Land and Water Resources Inventory.

Planning kickoff meetings are a good venue to gather information and feedback from a **broader group of watershed citizens and stakeholders**. Going into the community, instead of asking them to come to you, is often the best way to reach audiences that don't normally participate in water conversations (but who may be important implementation partners).

The information you collect should be organized and summarized in two main ways. Your consultant, BWSR staff, or partnership development coach may recommend techniques, such as Zonation or other spatial models for mapping and prioritizing **resources**, and "affinity mapping" or other methods for grouping **issues** by theme.

Asking participants, especially those who will play a role in implementing the plan, to **share their values and concerns** around water resources will help in writing clear, meaningful, and actionable issue statements. That information will also be valuable in the process of prioritizing and targeting. You may want to provide maps where people can indicate the resources that are most important to them.

Map and prioritize resources

Which water resources will become the focal point of the planning effort? In all likelihood, your plan won't be able to address all waters in the watershed at one time so it will be important to identify those that the community wants to protect and restore first.

Group issues by theme

The problems, risks, and opportunities faced by the priority resources must be well understood in order to move forward with effective planning and implementation. You may identify dozens of issues as you aggregate across existing plans and other sources of input, and those issues may relate to multiple resources. Review to see if there are opportunities to "lump" common statements (e.g., describe multiple contaminants for groundwater in one statement). Allow themes to emerge based on your watershed – and your partnership's – unique

"personality." It is best to narrow your list to as few themes as possible to ensure your prioritization has the desired focus.

Examples of clear, meaningful issue statements:

- Groundwater is at risk of being depleted because of overuse and loss of recharge.
- Water clarity in lakes is threatened by increased runoff and associated pollution from potential new development.
- Flooding is causing damage to homes and businesses located near the river.
- Trout populations in the watershed are highly sensitive to increased water temperatures and flashy peak flows resulting from loss of forest cover.

Prioritizing Issue Statements

There are a number of prioritization techniques your group can use to determine which of the issues will be addressed in the plan (and which will not). As part of this process, your plan should consider the high-level state priorities identified in the state's Nonpoint Priority Funding Plan:

- Restore those impaired waters that are closest to meeting state water quality standards.
- Protect those high-quality unimpaired waters at greatest risk of becoming impaired.
- Restore and protect water resources for public use and public health, including drinking water.

Your group may decide to further prioritize issues (e.g., A, B, C) to help you focus implementation efforts.

Keep in mind that the value of prioritization not only lies in agreeing upon what you work on FIRST, but also in clarifying which activities will NOT be addressed in the plan (the plan should include an explanation of why certain priorities were rejected).

"Sticky dots" are often used as a method for voting on priorities. While they can be useful for taking the temperature of a group (provided you are working from well-crafted issue statements), other more robust techniques for prioritization may be appropriate for setting plan priorities. Check with your partnership development coach for ideas.

Apply local knowledge and consider the following factors to prioritize issue statements:

- Science and data generated through modeling, monitoring, and WRAPS, TMDLs, or equivalent
- Anticipated future impacts or land use changes that may provide an opportunity or escalate a risk if nothing occurs
- Understanding of precipitation frequency as per National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Atlas 14
- Understanding of trends and/or tipping points for individual water resources

These priorities will drive the next steps in the planning process, which are setting measurable goals and targeting strategies and actions. During those future discussions, you can consider other factors:

- Feasibility of the actions required to address the issue
- Cost effectiveness of actions/return on investment
- Landowner willingness to adopt the right practices in the right places
- Limitations from lack of data or modeling
- Time/resources available or anticipated to complete implementation actions

If you find during the next planning steps that you need to revisit and adjust your priorities, do so. This process is not linear and you may need to revisit and adjust your priorities as more information and data are provided.

Getting to a Quality Plan

At the end of this part of the planning process, you should have: 1) a prioritized list of issue statements that clearly conveys the most pressing problems, risks, and opportunities facing the watershed and 2) maps depicting locations of priority resources. The list can indicate those issues identified during the process that are not priorities for the plan, but that could be priorities for other groups. Keep in mind: your plan should guide you to work on the things that are MOST important - in the locations that are most important. "Opportunistic" plans will not serve your partnership when it comes to deciding where to invest your limited implementation resources. The measurable goals, targeted actions, and overall implementation plans and program in the rest of the plan should relate directly to the priority issues.