DECEMBER 2008 LISTENING SESSIONS

ON THE CLEAN WATER AND OUTDOOR HERITAGE FUNDS

Local government conservation officials and staff from Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs), Watershed Districts, and Watershed Management Organizations contributed their **ideas for making the most of dedicated clean water and habitat funding** during a listening tour conducted by the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR).

Each of the seven forums attracted 25-60 participants, including regional staff from BWSR, DNR and PCA. A typical 2 1/2-hour session started with a 10-minute overview of the Constitutional Amendment provisions (parks / trails and arts funds were not explored), and the remainder of the time was spent listening to opinions and fielding questions. Attendees were also encouraged to describe their **vision of how Minnesota will look in 25 years**.

COMMON THEMES WE HEARD

Honor and build upon existing foundations. Local boards, councils, commissions, and citizens have devoted time to prioritizing efforts that target their limited funds to the most beneficial uses. Plans have been vetted locally, reviewed by the state, and adopted in a purposeful public process. Continue watershed-based focus. Fund some base needs first, but then open competition for on-the-ground work.

Ramp up the delivery pipeline. Local capacity has been strained in recent years and there is a clear need to hire and train local staff to meet with landowners, design projects, and oversee construction -- basically a conservation sales force, which leads to a more-informed customer base. While building local capacity over two years, the state should fund point-source commitments and tools like LIDAR to deliver precision conservation.

Augment, supplement, and leverage. All three of these terms were heard repeatedly. Significant progress can be made in the next 25 years only if Heritage and Clean Water funds are matched by significant dollars from the USDA, local government, and participating landowners. Minnesota is in a strong position for competitive federal conservation funds.

Focus on on-the-ground improvements. The state/local partnership needs to keep its eyes on the prize of creating real-world improvement via multi-benefit projects. Education, advertising, research, and planning have a role, but should be primarily accomplished with base funds with only a small percentage coming from the new dedicated funds. Instead, focus on on-the-ground projects.

Provide Transparency and Accountability (and less packaging material). Instead of receiving small grant amounts for a dozen different programs with different rules and restrictions, many attendees stated a desire to receive multi-year (four to ten year) commitments for money that arrived with less packaging. With flexibility to adjust to local practices and market conditions, the state could then fairly judge them by their results and adjust future grant amounts accordingly.

Increase citizen watershed awareness. The day-to-day actions of citizens make a huge difference in the quality of our habitat and waters. Social norms will drive conservation behavior changes where incentives and disincentives don't directly reach. As the results of the efforts accumulate there should be a way to fully tell the story of what worked, and what did not, in ways citizens can understand and value.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS AND COMMENTS

- Concern was expressed in several sessions over the timing of the funds. Specifically, anticipated cuts to local budgets in calendar year 2009 could deplete staff capacity right before the dedicated funds become available.
- Both funds should be cognizant of their crucial role in addressing clean water, but the funds should not be construed as being exclusively for restoration. It is more cost-effective to protect a threatened area before it becomes degraded. For example, not allowing feedlot grants to address operations outside of already impaired watersheds is short-sighted.
- Centers for shared technical staff should be stressed. The engineering centers used by SWCDs need more capacity to deliver designs for landowners. Other non-engineering specialties (native veg, limnologist, accounting, communications) should be considered.
- Reinforce the work of formal regional or local prioritization bodies and task forces where they exist (for example, the Red River Valley basin board). They have scoring criteria and can undertake nuanced sub-granting that acknowledges important sequencing considerations.
- Public lands are a minority portion of the state and generally in good condition. But some money should be available to improve public lands.
- Local EQIP work groups are a good model for regional coordination and maximizing the leveraging of USDA funds. Ditto the potential for “County Conservation Plans” that could be pulled together from several other local plans and carried out by a county / SWCD task force in Greater MN.
- The Army Compatible Use Buffer around Camp Ripley and a state WHIP program could both increase habitat while providing an entry point for landowners needing assistance.
- Conservation plans for land parcels (whole farm or forest stewardship) take staff time but get landowners in the door. They leave with a menu of conservation alternatives and a sequence of actions they can take to improve their land for multiple benefits. (Individual stewardship plans.)
- Forest and woodland management has both habitat and water quality benefits
- Reasonable haying or grazing of riparian buffers would lessen long-term maintenance needs and make such practices more compatible with landowner operations.
- There are landowners out there who don’t know how to manage their hobby properties or maintain their easements properly. Reach them and we magnify the work force.
- Establish a regular stream of funding for RIM; could sell more of this program if it was fully funded; also consider menu of different conservation alternatives and payment rates
- Need to be realistic with incentives; rental and commodity prices are competition
- Pay for permanent CRP buffers– it makes no sense to pay for them more than once
- Currently eLINK doesn’t track everything local government units build, just those with state funding
- Concern of legislature supplanting, of course, but how will the state make sure the money is supplementing and not supplanting at the local level?
- Any research funds should be directed, not a competitive process.
- Concerns that language in the appropriation could (inadvertently) prohibit MS4s (large cities) from being eligible for funding.
- Encourage the grant review process to be opened up to include stakeholders
- LGUs should demonstrate ability & commitment to follow through with O&M or funded projects.
- Old structures need attention too as they approach end of lifespan
- Get citizens involved in conservation and clean water via connection to their local governments, local media and local associations.
- Multiple benefits projects should be given priority, for example, wetland restorations can be expected to provide fish and wildlife habitat, improve water quality, sequester carbon and prevent flooding.
- Funding the whole projects should be the norm even if it takes several years to complete.

- Projects should be prioritized based on a local water or conservation plan.
- Targeting tools should be utilized to maximize results.
- Results should be measurable and accountable and accessible.
- Need to accomplish behavior changes and land-use practices in combination with other projects.
- Projects should be prioritized based on both science and local citizen input. County-scale local water or conservation plans can be the bridge between science and citizens.
- County-scale conservation and clean water plans and task forces should be used to connect with citizens and local groups.
- Establish biomass for energy production
- Use cover crops in erosive ag areas and rain gardens on urban properties
- Restore wetlands to a minimum of 10% of total watershed acres for multiple uses, nitrogen decreasing in drinking water sources, and knowledgeable citizens
- Improve water storage on agricultural lands and buffer sensitive features
- Create runoff storage in small (40-acre) drainage areas to keep soil and water and nutrients in upland areas
- Treated tile discharge, crop diversity, and restored prairie parcels in agricultural areas
- A streamlined process where conservation dollars go from the pot to the local level and on the ground with federal and state governments providing funds, and technical and fiscal oversight