

Strategic Planning: Round 1 Analysis

Current to 30 August 2023

DRAFT

Prepared by:

Strategic planning consultant Anne R. Carroll

Team members Ron Harnack, Lisa Hanson-Lamey, Shane Lázaro Marshall



Carroll,
& Franck
& Associates

1357 Highland Parkway
Saint Paul, MN 55116 USA
651-245-3702
carrfran@gmail.com
www.carrollfranck.com

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Strategic Planning Overview.....	1
Purpose and objectives	1
Process and timeline	1
Round 1 Input.....	1
Questions.....	1
Participants.....	2
Methodology, Presentation.....	3
Analysis of Input by Question	2
1. BWSR currently works primarily with local governments. As BWSR advances its statewide commitment to equity, who else should BWSR work with to improve and protect natural resources?	3
2. BWSR focuses on strengthening local capacity. What could BWSR do better or differently to further enhance local capacity and improve outcomes?	5
3. What are some critical emerging issues that BWSR might be uniquely suited to address?.....	8
4. As individuals, groups, and BWSR as a whole, what are more meaningful and relevant ways to measure the results of our collective work to improve and protect natural resources?	12
5. Thinking about the barriers you face in your work, what improvements to BWSR systems, structures, or processes would help overcome those barriers and yield better results? (<i>BWSR staff and board only</i>).....	15
6. What criteria should BWSR use to decide which initiatives to pursue, reduce, or eliminate? (<i>BWSR staff and board only</i>)	18
7. Other thoughts about BWSR's strategic direction?.....	20
Appendix A: Prospective Partner Organizations	22

Introduction

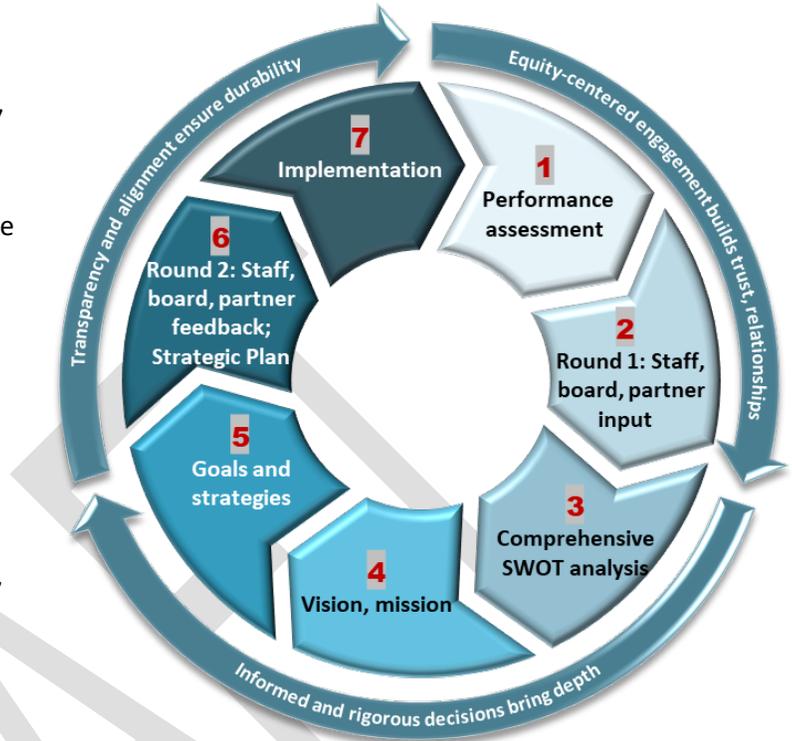
Strategic Planning Overview

Purpose and objectives

BWSR's current Strategic Plan was created in 2017 as a five-year plan, so by early 2023 it was time to evaluate progress and ensure that BWSR has identified and updated goals and priorities to guide the work going forward. BWSR is committed to an inclusive, participatory process (see graphic) that involves staff, board, and partners around the state. Learn more at the project [website](#).

Process and timeline

- **Spring 2023:** Assess performance against the current strategic plan; share results
- **Summer 2023:** Gather input from staff, board, and partners around the state; compile, analyze, and share results
- **Late summer 2023:** Conduct comprehensive SWOT analysis
- **Fall 2023:** Using results from staff, board, and partner input and the SWOT analysis, draft agency core values, vision, mission, long-term goals, and mid-term strategies
- **Winter 2023-24:** Gather staff, board, and partner feedback on draft agency vision, mission, long-term goals, and mid-term strategies; use results to finalize and share strategic plan, and begin implementation



Round 1 Input

Questions

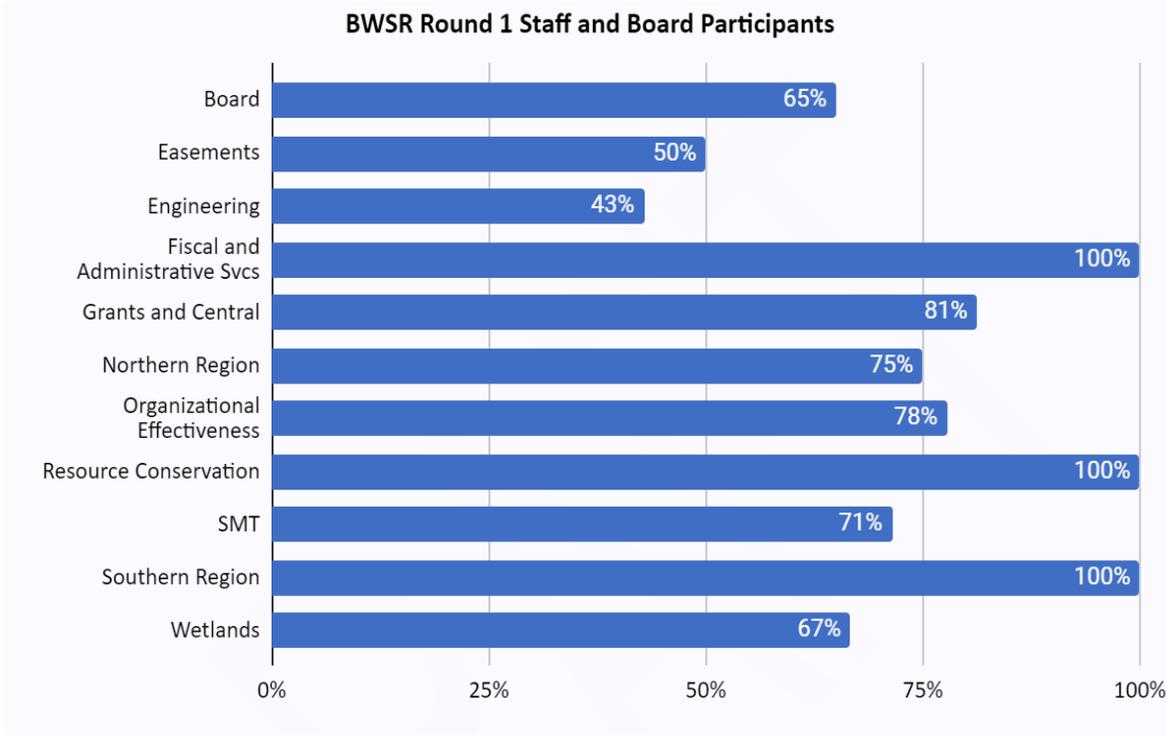
Below are the questions asked of board, staff, and partners via virtual, in-person, or online methods. Results are compiled in the following section.

- BWSR currently works primarily with local governments. As BWSR advances its statewide commitment to equity, who else should BWSR work with to improve and protect natural resources?
- BWSR focuses on strengthening local capacity. What could BWSR do better or differently to further enhance local capacity and improve outcomes?
- What are some critical emerging issues that BWSR might be uniquely suited to address?
- As individuals, groups, and BWSR as a whole, what are more meaningful and relevant ways to measure the results of our collective work to improve and protect natural resources?
- *Staff and board only:* Thinking about the barriers you face in your work, what improvements to BWSR systems, structures, or processes would help overcome those barriers and yield better results?
- *Staff and board only:* What criteria should BWSR use to decide which initiatives to pursue, reduce, or eliminate?
- Other thoughts about BWSR's strategic direction?

Participants

Board and staff

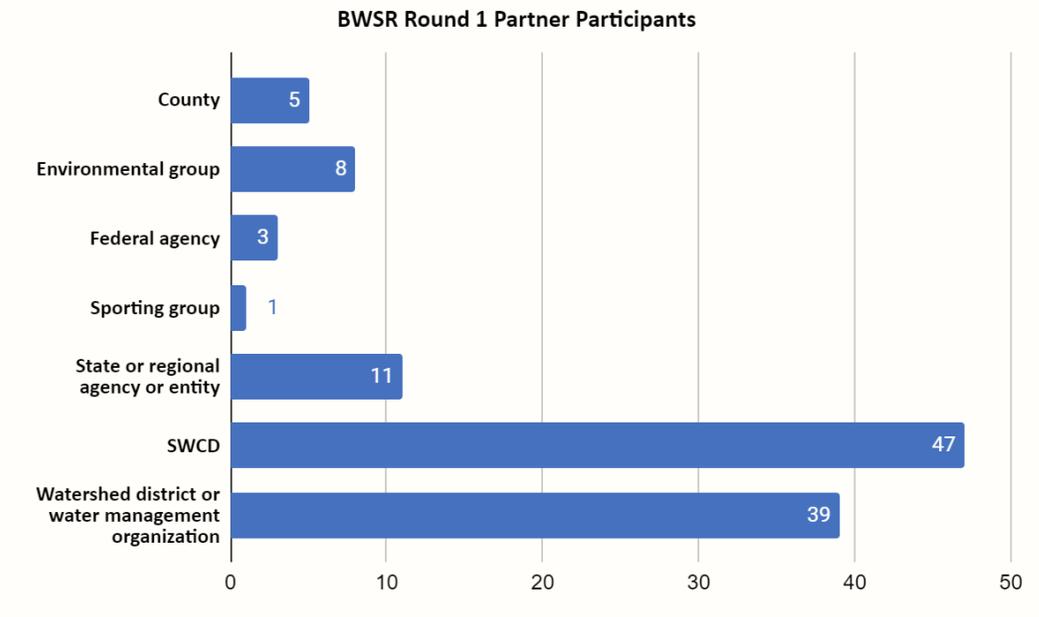
For Round 1, 100 staff and board members participated, 54 via in-person or virtual sessions and 46 via the online survey. Some may have participated more than once, such as to add more ideas to the online survey following a virtual session. The chart below shows the percentage of participating staff and board members from each of the groups listed; one staff member declined to respond to this question.



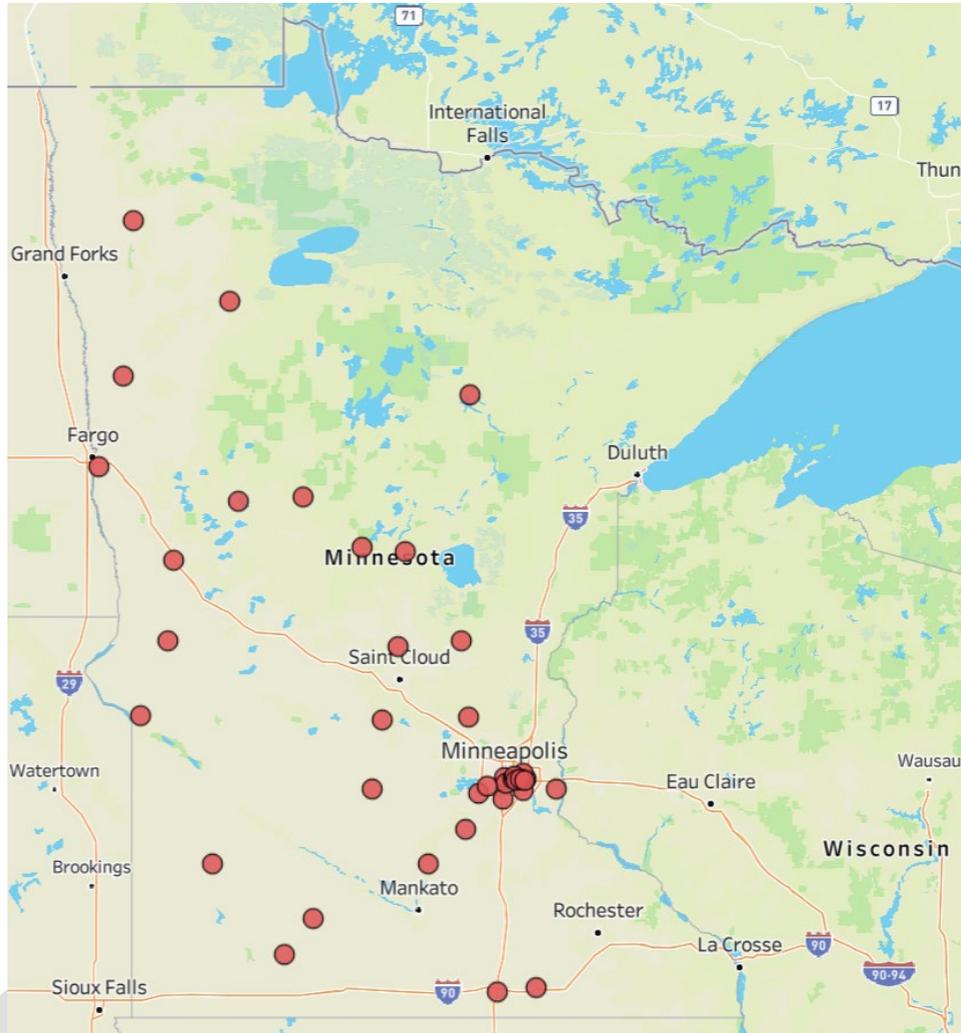
Partners

For Round 1 input, 116 partners participated, 47 via in-person or virtual sessions and 68 via the online survey. Race was asked only for partners contributing via the survey and was optional; all of the 34 who answered the survey question were white/Caucasian.

The chart at right shows their participation by group or organization type; below is a map of partner locations.



The map below shows the location of Round 1 partner participants.



Methodology, Presentation

Participant ideas were gathered and coded separately for BWSR staff/board and local partners. Responses to the same questions were similar within and between groups, however, so this analysis combines them while calling out distinctions when relevant.

All participants contributed in writing via in-person or virtual sessions, or online. The quotes in the analysis include attributions by group -- board, staff, or partner.

Acronyms in the text or quotes are defined below:

- BC: Board conservationists (BWSR staff)
- DEI: Diversity, equity, and inclusion
- LGUs: Local government units
- PFAS: per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, widely used, long-lasting chemicals, components of which break down very slowly over time
- NRCS: Natural Resources Conservation Service
- MASWCD: Minnesota Association of Soil & Water Conservation Districts
- SWCD: Soil and water conservation district
- WD: Watershed district
- WQ: water quality

Analysis of Input by Question

Readers may use the hyperlinks below and at the top of each question to jump to various sections within the document.

[Question 1](#): BWSR currently works primarily with local governments. As BWSR advances its statewide commitment to equity, who else should BWSR work with to improve and protect natural resources?

[Question 2](#): BWSR focuses on strengthening local capacity. What could BWSR do better or differently to further enhance local capacity and improve outcomes?

[Question 3](#): What are some critical emerging issues that BWSR might be uniquely suited to address?

[Question 4](#): As individuals, groups, and BWSR as a whole, what are more meaningful and relevant ways to measure the results of our collective work to improve and protect natural resources?

[Question 5](#): *Staff and board only*: Thinking about the barriers you face in your work, what improvements to BWSR systems, structures, or processes would help overcome those barriers and yield better results?

[Question 6](#): *Staff and board only*: What criteria should BWSR use to decide which initiatives to pursue, reduce, or eliminate?

[Question 7](#): Other thoughts about BWSR's strategic direction?

1. BWSR currently works primarily with local governments. As BWSR advances its statewide commitment to equity, who else should BWSR work with to improve and protect natural resources?

Some participants suggested BWSR should have a direct relationship with these organizations and groups, while others stressed working through local governments to these groups to boost collaboration and coordination. Ideas fell roughly into the following categories:

- [People from underrepresented groups](#)
- [Tribal communities](#)
- [Agriculture and forestry](#)
- [Environmental, climate, and conservation](#)
- [Other organizations](#)

People from underrepresented groups

There was strong support for reaching out to and engaging people with strong connections to the land and natural resources but who are not currently active or involved. Participant ideas and descriptions included historically underrepresented, minority, diverse, people of color, immigrants, urban or emerging farmers, young people, low-income people, and those from specific racial, ethnic, or linguistic groups. Participants offered strong arguments for better engagement and multiple examples of the barriers people face in learning about and joining efforts to improve and protect natural resources.

- A number of responses focused on farming or natural resource conservation groups and organizations that are specific to race, ethnicity, language, or gender; emerging/immigrant farmers; urban farmers; fruit and vegetable growers; and similar
- There were also some suggestions to focus on geographic areas with characteristics such as low-income communities located in flood plains, urban farmers, and similar – along with advice to deepen coordination with local governments to better identify underserved populations and collaborate to better support their successful participation

Efforts should be made to support conservation efforts and engagement for diverse community groups and non-profit organizations seeking to broaden the reach of conservation and resilience efforts. An emphasis should be put on providing resources and support to communities of environmental justice concern (i.e.: lower socioeconomic standing, lower green space access, lasting effects of industrial activity/ zoning disparities)

-- Partner

Tribal communities

Many participants noted the importance of BWSR developing or expanding strong and long-term relationships with tribal community members, groups and organizations, governments, and joint tribal organizations such as the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission. Some also encouraged BWSR to support stronger working relationships between SWCDs and tribal organizations.

Agriculture and forestry

A number of partners listed groups and organizations that BWSR already works with, such as commodity and grower associations; livestock organizations; groups like the Farm Bureau; foresters, municipal forestry departments, and timber mills; and similar. Additional ideas from across all participants included agricultural co-ops, seed suppliers, crop advisors, conservation agronomists, community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farmers, local food and grower groups, and farmers markets and associations.

Environmental, climate, and conservation

A number of partners listed groups and organizations that BWSR already works with such as Pheasants Forever, Ducks Unlimited, and similar.

Participants across all groups noted the many local, state, and national nonprofits with priorities that align with BWSR's work and have members / participants throughout the state. Examples included the following:

- Environmental and wildlife conservation groups
- Sustainability groups, including those that intersect with more than one BWSR priority such farming, sustainability, and diversity
- Climate advocacy and activist groups
- Environmental justice groups
- Lake, lakeshore, and river associations
- Trusted natural resource contractors, trade groups, and related private businesses (to help educate, provide discounts, etc.)

Other organizations

While BWSR already works with a number of these, some participants emphasized better coordination, convening, collaborations, and joint efforts.

- Educational institutions at all levels; students, faculty, and relevant programs; ideas included focusing on educational materials, opportunities to get involved, mentoring and internship programs, and efforts to increase diversity in related fields
- Relevant federal agencies (NCRS, USFWS, USFS, USDA, USGS, etc.)
- Townships and township associations
- State and local public health (drinking water and public water supplies)
- Economic development commissions
- Community development groups
- Large agriculture or natural resource employers
- Neighborhood and community groups

... cultural differences, particularly for first generation immigrants, can be extreme when it comes to natural resources stewardship. BWSR could work with cultural centers to reach audiences and hone messaging that could then be adopted by LGUs.

-- Partner

Organization list

In response to this and other questions, participants noted many new or different nonprofits that might be good partners for BWSR's work. See [Appendix A](#) for an annotated list.

2. BWSR focuses on strengthening local capacity. What could BWSR do better or differently to further enhance local capacity and improve outcomes?

While in some cases the ideas from partners and BWSR staff/board varied in the level of detail (e.g., related to staffing and programs), collectively they were quite similar and fell into the following broad categories:

- [Additional direct operational support and training](#)
- [Flexible, streamlined programs, funding, staffing](#)
- [Collaborations and efficiencies; listening](#)
- [Expanded local expertise and capacity](#)

Additional direct operational support and training

There was strong interest in BWSR providing additional direct support and training for local staff and boards to improve their operations and better support local partners' work with BWSR. For example:

- Education, outreach, community engagement, facilitation, communications (including social media and media relations) especially around awareness, understanding, and support for conservation efforts, successes, and challenges; audiences are local communities, local board members and other elected officials, current and prospective partners, and similar
- Ready-to-use content and guidance to educate and build awareness about local, regional, and staff successes, learnings, initiatives with local print, radio, TV, cable, social media, and other outlets
- Guidance on defining and implementing assessment methods focused on outcomes
- Support to meet increasing local needs to educate, partner, and share information across race/ethnicities and in multiple languages
- Training on strategic thinking / planning, leadership development, organizational effectiveness, policies and procedures, and related
- Board training on roles, responsibilities, authority; parallel guidance for staff
- DEI training for staff and local elected officials
- Funding, finances: Information, guidance, and training on funding options, grant writing, record-keeping, reporting, rules and regulations, budgeting and accounting

...help districts more easily quantify outcomes and how they may impact WQ and even impairments. Reading...documents [of] 100 pages isn't something SWCDs do a lot, because we have to pay the bills and are always chasing. Some assistance in guiding us to delivering better information to the public would benefit all of our work.
-- Partner

Some also urged BWSR to serve as a proactive statewide hub or clearinghouse for such content, training, and supports so people know about and can more easily access what they need, when they need it – rather than going it alone.

Flexible, streamlined programs, funding, staffing

- Focus program assessments more on outcomes, performance, benefits, SMART objectives; help identify more meaningful measures, outcomes, expectations, and ways to communicate that within and outside of organizations
- Increase focus on outcomes that are relevant and meaningful to the public and elected officials; help shape relevant measures and indicators that support reporting out on outcomes; think about outcomes relative to changing social norms around conservation
- Continue advocating for increased, stable, dependable support and public funding for local efforts; facilitate easier access to funds; better connect groups to funding opportunities; “More staff means tougher budgets.

BWSR should be working more closely with MASWCD and SWCDs to find more funding. When SWCDs are successful, so is BWSR and vice-versa. Project funds are there, but staffing is a major hurdle.” (Partner)

- Keep programs flexible enough to be tailored and meet local needs, while providing support and ensuring performance / accountability; consider fewer or bundled funding / program that could be more flexible
- Streamline the project management and reporting work for local staff as much as possible (as was done with grant applications and management)
- Improve efficiencies, expand expertise, and help LGUs succeed by encouraging them to consider shared positions and services; use contractors, consultants, temporary workers; pursue other creative staffing solutions to meet unique, time-sensitive, or other project or program needs
- Routinely assess BWSR staffing model and adjust as needed to meet changing priorities, needs, opportunities; monitor and refine; hire more regional staff to deliver programs around the state
- Help improve local recruitment and retention by supporting equitable, competitive local wages and salaries – such as by helping boards access data needed to support informed staffing decisions; continue building technical skills among local staff to improve their effectiveness and value
- Support more diverse staffing locally and within BWSR

Institute performance based, not output based, funding and evaluation...

-- BWSR staff or board



Keep programs as flexible as allowed by the funding stream, to allow local staff to run the program the way it best works for them and their organization/customers.

-- BWSR staff or board

Collaborations and efficiencies; listening

- Support LGUs to communicate, share, and learn from each other in various ways, such as different LGUs in the same geographic area, or those doing similar work or facing similar challenges in different locations; encourage and support informal and formal collaborations such as joint power agreements where appropriate
- Facilitate connections and collaborations between LGUs and tribal communities, groups, and governments
- Better support or help coordinate related work being done across multiple organizations (public, nonprofit, private) to better align efforts and optimize results; proactively coordinate related work organized or funded by multiple state agencies; streamline efforts across LGUs
- Help facilitate connections between universities and LGUs to advance natural resources and conservation research and education
- Facilitate more public-private partnerships that advance common priorities, projects, initiatives, and best practices
- Listen better and work more collaboratively with LGUs, in person and virtually:
 - Ask LGUs about their goals, needs, aspirations, and current plans; listen to local staff, landowners, elected officials
 - Work together on common priorities and be transparent when priorities don't align
 - Make programs more flexible while staying focused and ensuring rigor
 - Bring LGUs more directly into BWSR's committee activities, along with policy and advocacy work

BWSR can support and incentivize the formation (and continuation) of partnerships between organizations with local community influence (non-profits, community groups, etc.) and those with grant management and technical expertise (SWCDs, NRCS, local governments, etc.). These partnerships are incredibly valuable for reaching underserved populations or landowners with priority resources and connecting them to resources and expertise to manage resource concerns more holistically and effectively.

-- Partner

Expanded local expertise and capacity

- Provide data, findings, analyses across efforts; compile and share best practices; provide more learning forums
- Provide / support regional trainings to meet more needs, build important networks, and support peer learning; help local staff to become highly proficient in core competencies
- Build expertise and improve practice by developing and supporting regional or statewide “learning alliances,” affinity groups, or topic-specific groups
- Create more opportunities for LGU staff and board members to shape BWSR training content, format, access, timing, and similar
- Provide technical, program, and similar training for LGU staff, other professionals, funding applicants, landowners, and others working on joint or related projects, programs, or grants
- Expand access to BWSR academy courses and other training opportunities (wider variety of learners, additional learning opportunities); systematic, broadly available mentoring, technical training, and on-the-job learning
- Integrate training with mentoring, internships, peer supports and networking, and other learning and professional development opportunities
- Expand formats and vary content depth to build awareness, strengthen knowledge, and increase interest; examples include brief communications (tips, tidbits, highlights), social media posts, and similar that go out directly and can be locally shared and repurposed
- Expand direct work and communications with local boards to promote, share, explain, and advocate for BWSR programs and joint work; provide more ways for LGUs to present on their work, highlight advancements, and promote collective accomplishments; “...be ‘louder’ to ensure BWSR stays on their radar screen” (Partner); extend reach and increase frequency by using both in-person and virtual formats
- Help people understand emerging issues and trends, such as the impact of growth and development on soil and water systems
- Collaborate more systematically with post-secondary and secondary programs to increase interest in conservation and natural resource careers; help create collaborations that offer more flexible and tailored learning choices and pathways

Bringing people together isn't the solution, it's only part of it. BWSR current approach seems to be bring all to the table and state, “you folks figure it out” and support the position further “you'll know best what to do”. BWSR might better offer the how to facilitate when diverse large numbers of folks are at the table. How do entities facilitate such meetings, gain consensus, prioritize issues, with respect to others' frame of reference? Facilitating better conversations and relationships to get the work done should be more of a priority.

-- Partner

3. What are some critical emerging issues that BWSR might be uniquely suited to address?

Many participants highlighted specific issues important to them, while others focused on broader trends, challenges, or opportunities. Looking across the range of issues noted, most fall within BWSR's current or potential future purview (as expected given the question), often expanding on or exploring new content, processes, or approaches. Participants offered a wide variety of Ideas, falling into the following categories:

- [Awareness, understanding, support; individual and collective actions](#)
- [Holistic, aligned, system-level, accountable approach](#)
- [Specific issues including climate-related](#)
- [Inclusion](#)
- [Funding opportunities and risks](#)

Awareness, understanding, support; individual and collective actions

Ideas for BWSR's consideration include opportunities to educate, encourage, and publicize the importance and community benefits of natural resource and conservation efforts. For example:

- How individuals can make a difference; better understandings of human behavior and motivations
- Power of collective local action; collaborations between researchers/universities and local projects
- Taking new approaches and practices to scale
- Better education in schools and communities about conservation, natural resources, human interactions (development, agriculture, recreation, etc.) with the environment and resource demand; climate change; integrating issues around water, soils, habitat, and human uses
- Helping ensure that the new funding provides the highest value and impacts
- Continued strong policies; better policy training, awareness, and enforcement; more supports for positive actions and education

Holistic, aligned, system-level, accountable approach

- Agreed-upon vision for conservation and natural resources
- Holistic, collaborative approach that connects with community values, common good, landowner ethic, understanding and appreciation of science, land stewardship, and similar (in contrast to financial or other singular approaches or incentives)
- Watershed-level planning; watershed planning integrated into multiple systems such as drinking water, stormwater, wastewater infrastructure; One Watershed, One Plan was frequently cited as a positive example

Helping landowners and agencies to work together--through planning and project development to stitch together a landscape that functions in a more healthy way

-- Partner



Increasing options for private landowners to create positive money flow from properties while keeping a natural environment on the landscape.

-- Partner

Help create better statements of outcomes...not just outputs and measures of those

-- BWSR staff or board



Huge federal and state budgets and the capacity, ability of LGUs, private sector, NGOs to implement in coordinated fashion

-- BWSR staff or board



Public support for conservation efforts broadly, Minnesotans caring about the future of our soils and water, and what ways they can help Individually or as part of a community.

-- BWSR staff or board

- Coordinated, collaborative, and aligned programs, projects, education, advocacy, information, and initiatives with:
 - Federal, state, and local public entities
 - University faculty and students
 - Individuals and organizational partners
 - NGOs
- Need to challenge public entities that favor industries or groups at the expense of water or soil quality and health
- Finding common ground around natural resources and conservation across groups that otherwise may have different interests (e.g., environmental and farming concerns); address issues frankly and rigorously while using language that brings people together
- Monitoring, measuring, assessing, evaluating; focusing on outcomes; being accountable; staying current and educating people; aligning resources to support evolving best practices
- Continued transition to conservation-focused delivery
- Land use planning and standards that minimize future soil and water impacts
- Meaningful statewide policies on climate resilience and adaptation; better planning, development, and redevelopment controls for water, vegetation, and soils to address climate events

Emerging issue is the increasing need to work together collaboratively to address issues. Trust and relationship building is critical to moving forward and creating change.
 -- BWSR staff or board

CLIMATE! We COULD modify our requirements so that all state dollars are spent in a way that fits in the Climate Action Framework.
 -- BWSR staff or board

☪

BWSR should prioritize climate resiliency work as it relates to ecosystem restoration, water quantity, and drought resilience. Issues of water recharge and responsible usage should be top of mind...

Specific issues including climate-related

Participants highlighted a variety of specific issues for ongoing or new support, additional partnerships, strong(er) funding, adaptive responses, effective education, improved or streamlined regulations to protect or mitigate harm, and urgent or timely attention. Many also noted the need to focus on evolving best practices, rigorous monitoring and assessment, and accountability. Examples below are listed alphabetically.

- Carbon storage and sequestration
- Climate resilience
- Contaminants, microplastics, chemical pollutants in the soil and water; nitrates; chlorides; PFAS contamination in groundwater, seeds (used in foam marking the end of rows), and movement via stormwater
- Dairy cattle waste management
- Drought, including related to climate change
- Economic trends; inflation; land costs and property taxes that encourage short- vs. long-term economic return on new practices
- Environmentally friendly lawns, landscaping, edible yards
- Forestry and forest management; connections to climate change
- Green energy; coordinating wind and solar infrastructure with conservation easements, and similar
- Habitat loss, restoration as climate mitigation
- Increasing use of prescribed fire with little available training, technical advice, or planning support

Many of the critical issues are complex and no one entity can address on their own; issues emerging include climate change/adaptation, biodiversity and natural disasters
 -- BWSR staff or board

☪

Green infrastructure implementation. There is a significant need for green infrastructure beyond the regulatory minimum to cope with climate change and pollution. BWSR, as a state agency, is well positioned to help local governments implement regional-scale green infrastructure, which is more effective than a piecemeal, parcel by parcel approach.
 -- Partner

- Invasive and introduced species, impacts on ecosystems, and cost-effective controls where needed
- Land management practices
- Pollinators and habitat
- Shoreland, stream, and river erosion
- Soil health; diverse soil biome, invasive jumping worm, no-till strategies, cover crop management
- Urban agriculture
- Water issues and options:
 - Agricultural drainage
 - Agricultural water and human development nexus with climate issues
 - Culvert mapping and modeling
 - Drinking water, well heads; special issues in karst regions
 - Flooding related to altered hydrology, climate change; floodplain reconnection; communities needs around infrastructure planning, funding
 - Groundwater quality
 - Regional approaches
 - Sovereignty
 - Stormwater detention and retention
 - Water storage
 - Watershed-level source water protection
 - Wetland and peatland banking, protection, restoration

Climate rising temperatures, small water cycle, need to support healthy ecosystems, need for systems thinking instead of single-purpose goals.

-- BWSR staff or board



Assisting everyone (residents, local governments, elected officials, etc.) [to understand] that climate changes will affect the viability of Minnesota economy and way of life.

-- Partner



Climate change. From extreme rainfall to severe drought, temperature and precipitation regimes are dramatically shifting, and water resource management must adapt with it. BWSR is well-suited to coordinate local governments in responding to our changing climate.

-- Partner

Inclusion

There were various comments about new and more inclusive ways of thinking about the work; generational changes in land ownership; evolving understandings and perceptions around conservation and natural resources; environmental justice, Tribal communities, and evolving demographics throughout the state. Suggestions were:

- To include race, ethnicity, language, and gender
- Related to BWSR staff, LGU staff, landowners, partners, and the next generation of conservation and natural resource professionals, advocates, and activists
- For planning and program efforts, communications, education, recruitment, relationships, joint efforts

Funding opportunities and risks

- Influx of new programs and significant appropriations to advance them; need for continued and improved support and funding for LGU work advancing programs, monitoring impacts and outcomes, conducting additional and expanded research
- Need for:
 - Grants and other funding that support programs with multiple benefits (water, soils, habitats...)

I am really excited for BWSR to have a DEI plan and am looking forward to the outreach BWSR is going to do with that plan. Let's work together on this stuff!

-- Partner



It's great that BWSR has a tribal liaison. I think BWSR is suited to serve as a connector between local tribal gov'ts and local watershed gov'ts. Help WDs connect with tribal gov'ts so we can learn from them and ensure we're serving tribal community members with our work

-- Partner

- More stable, consistent, growing funding to meet needs
- Project-specific funding; larger amounts
- Targeted funding for critical issues, vulnerable situations
- State and local funds, because they are more flexible and timelier than federal funds and thus more helpful for landowners
- Resource and equity considerations around funding for this work in less (vs. more) well-funded counties
- Expiration in 2034 of the state Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment [with ~33% of those funds going to protect, enhance, and restore water quality in lakes, rivers, streams, and groundwater]; BWSR positioned to demonstrate the value and benefits of these critical, long-term funding sources and regulatory structures and work with other agencies to refine the program to enhance future public and legislative support

*State, and local, dollars can be more flexible than federal dollars and associated with less wait times for the landowner to get cost share. Be strategic, encourage staff to leverage.
-- Partner*

DRAFT

4. As individuals, groups, and BWSR as a whole, what are more meaningful and relevant ways to measure the results of our collective work to improve and protect natural resources?

The intent of this question was for participants to add to the traditional outputs and technical measures with more expansive or flexible approaches – anchored in rigorous technical data but within the context of outcomes, impacts, and value that are meaningful and relevant to everyone. Participants contributed a number of these, along with many ideas for detailed technical measures. This analysis focuses on the broader approaches and notes examples of broadly resonant measures, in the following categories:

- [Community perception, understanding, support](#)
- [Outcomes, stories, support – with a local angle](#)
- [Meaningful, rigorous assessment – and change](#)
- [High-level measures and mechanisms](#)

Community perception, understanding, support

With the strong commitment to watershed-level efforts and movement toward reporting short- and long-term outcomes (vs. only technical data / outputs), participants flagged the obligation to make content relevant and meaningful to community members. To support this:

- Clear and meaningful outcomes must be collectively determined, shared, and used
- Work must be firmly grounded in best management practices, and technical monitoring and evaluation results (outputs) compiled and aggregated across projects, programs, partners, and geography to report out on those outcomes
- There must be direct and easily understood connections between projects and programs, partners, staffing, funding, education, information, advocacy, outputs, and outcomes

Participants further stressed the importance of the following:

- Ask values-based questions, such as: Do you feel you have the same access to safe, healthy drinking water that your parents did? Healthy spaces for recreation and wildlife? Would you swim in that lake?
- Understand what people care about and are willing to invest in – and jointly determine how to measure that
- Understand community perspectives on the health of natural resources in their area
- Educate to close gaps between perception and reality, actions and impacts, and opportunities to help; explain issues, impacts, and actions in ways that encourage others to join the efforts
- Assess changes in community awareness of issues, challenges, and opportunities, support for improvements, desire to help, and actions

Communicate/translate highly technical, science outcomes into simple narratives. "Clean water: healthy communities"
-- BWSR staff or board

☪

More focus on social impact instead of water quality/other environmental outcomes. We will never buy our way out of environmental issues.
-- BWSR staff or board

☪

Communications about the measures/measurements is essential; too often, the stories are lost; take the existing measurements and communicate them in ways that are meaningful to the public, public officials, NGOs
-- Partner

There are a lot of BWSR programs and some of them have names that sound like they were invented in a military lab. It is hard for the public to know what things mean, like "multi-purpose drainage management" and "watershed-based implementation funding." A one-page graphic showing the type of projects supported by BWSR and their program names would be really helpful.
-- Partner

Outcomes, stories, support – with a local angle

- Focus on outcomes, results, and stories that explain results in ways that people understand; articulate desired future conditions; “outputs help tell the story, but we don't do projects just to do projects, and we don't spend money just to spend money; we do projects in order to achieve the outcomes.”
- Use a story narrative to “help encourage and attract people that have an interest in green spaces and turn them into new partners/advocates”
- Make clear connections between issues, actions, technical results, and people’s daily lives and priorities; include bigger, longer-term impacts including economic, fiscal, employment, and others; “Look at impacts as well as measurable results. Calculating phosphorus reduction is important in a report, but calculating economic potential through implemented projects shows impact that elected officials like to read about.”
- Provide accessible, meaningful information more often, broadly, and consistently; work through a wider variety of local organizations; add web-based information that looks at cumulative impact, is relevant to more people, and easier to find
- Present information and show change / impacts in varied ways, such as photos, graphs and charts, stories, audio and video, different languages, etc.; make content meaningful to a “large and diverse audience”
- Align measures with community values, quality of life, what makes life better for Minnesotans
- Tie results to communities and geographic areas that people understand, rather than by program or funding source
- Work with LGUs to develop trust and long-term relationships; open communication; more local training
- Consider how awards and recognitions might help make the work more locally relevant and meaningful

Social measures that include building individual, relational, and organizational capacity to improve water quality. Social measures monitoring system.

-- Partner



Work with community members to identify these goals rather than solely with our state agency partners. What is locally important and are we meeting that need?

-- BWSR staff or board



BWSR should evaluate the effectiveness of education programs, outreach initiatives, and stakeholder involvement. ... gauge the attitudes, knowledge, and behavior changes within communities...

-- Partner

Meaningful, rigorous assessment – and change

Many participants stressed the need to routinely and rigorously assess results from projects and programs to determine what efforts are achieving intended outcomes, e.g., “Are we getting anywhere with the practices...we do?”

That meant going beyond whether the work is meeting specific targets to pulling together results from across multiple topics, geographies, and over time, and using those analyses to improve technical efforts, guidance, public education, and communications accordingly.

Participants were also clear this is a both-and situation, for example: “Ensure that new programs include both qualitative and quantitative measures with equal weight...as new practices are employed, keep the technical results and cost-benefit analysis along with the local stories, who’s participating, what they’re doing, what’s happening; both dimensions are important to increase attention, participation, and success.”

Increasingly, projects we do as an SWCD seek multiple benefits for habitat, water quality, soil health, and more. We consistently find that we do not have the staff time to monitor, evaluate, and maintain previously installed practices. Shifting greater emphasis on year 2 and 3 establishment and maintenance will be crucial for making lasting progress on projects. Investing on reflection and evaluation of project benefits will help inform better work.

-- Partner

There was also strong support for directly measuring community understanding, perceptions, values, and beliefs, and how those change over time as a result of better education, communication, outreach, engagement, collaboration, actions, and other intentional efforts.

In addition, some participants noted the importance of teaching BWSR staff and partners how to measure and evaluate progress on outcomes and make clear connections to issues and topics that community members care about and make a difference in their lives.

High-level measures and mechanisms

- **Behavior**
 - Changes in perception, awareness, understanding, and behavior / actions, and what caused them; tap into work done by others, such as the Center for Changing Landscapes at the University of Minnesota and Minnesota State Mankato, which look at changes in behavior/attitudes, best management practice adoption rates, and similar
 - Behavioral metrics and correlations to infer water quality and soil health impacts, e.g., changes in sales for commercial fertilizer or certain tractor implements
 - **Equity, priorities; projects and programs yielding positive results...**
 - In areas with significant percentages of people in poverty or of color (environmental justice)
 - Designated as critical or priority
 - In underserved or underfunded areas
 - **Cumulative, systemic, technical**
 - Changes in watersheds *and* across multiple watersheds; statewide or multistate changes
 - Impact of efforts done across multiple agencies
 - Healthy ecosystems; species diversity and lack of invasives; “number of dead bugs on windshields as indicator of improvements in natural resources”
 - Drinkability of well water; fishable, swimmable water in agricultural areas; “happy loon populations :-); fish kills
 - Listed and delisted endangered species, impaired water bodies, and similar
 - Diversification of landscapes, variety of crops, number of acres in soil health practices, diversity of farmers
 - Prevention and harm avoidance
 - Changes to and value of carbon footprint, storage, and sequestration
 - **Return on investment**
 - Extent to which technical assistance leads to implementation that can be sustained without additional funding (“long-term, sustainable conservation”), and ways that landowners are managing land on their own to protect resources
 - Cost effectiveness or benefits realized for resources expended (financial, human, time)
 - Money saved, e.g., less for mitigation or infrastructure, reduced fertilizer or fuel, water treatment (nitrates)
 - Durability, sustainability of changes
- Going into the next session, how can BWSR work with other agencies to put forth equity-oriented recommendations that reflect the new, more equitable strategic priorities and benefit new constituencies; blend new strategic priorities into Clean Water Fund conversations*
-- Partner
- Plan the work - but show that as a whole working the Plan and not random acts of conservation*
-- Partner
- I am hopeful. With BWSR, I am making a positive impact, and that's more than I can say for much of the other work I do.*
-- BWSR board member

5. Thinking about the barriers you face in your work, what improvements to BWSR systems, structures, or processes would help overcome those barriers and yield better results? (BWSR staff and board only)

The majority of these are related to staff and work with local partners and communities. Those that are specific to the BWSR board are noted as such. Ideas are organized into the following categories:

- [Collaboration, communication, shared decision-making](#)
- [Flexible, responsive, efficient programs, processes](#)
- [Human resources: Aligned, flexible, efficient](#)
- [Accountability, improvement](#)
- [Professional development and other supports](#)

Collaboration, communication, shared decision-making

Internal

- Support better collaboration *across* sections, programs, projects, geography, roles, positions, etc.
- Provide specific and easily accessible information so staff can identify and reach colleagues to answer questions, provide information, solve problems, or explain/teach how to do something
- Provide flexibility and support for BWSR field staff to make local decisions
- Allocate more time for the board to discuss issues and options to support more informed decision making
- Look for ways to better locate/co-locate BWSR staff with LGUs across the state
- Give BWSR coordinators access to complete program and budget information for work they manage; involve statewide coordinators in relevant regional decisions
- Better communicate the rationale and reasoning behind decisions (internally and externally, as appropriate)

External

- Gather input, listen – and allocate sufficient staff/time to:
 - Routinely seek LGU staff input on programs, projects, initiatives, and efforts
 - Routinely seek guidance from LGUs on outcomes and work toward those, rather than focusing on outputs and processes
 - Collaborate and partner with LGUs, “instead of [being] a dictator”
 - Include more public/community input in decisions
 - Better engage municipalities, counties, tribes, community members
- Attend more specifically to local boards’ needs and issues; support stronger relationships, provide more information, build local awareness, deep understanding, and tangible support
- Provide more relevant and easily accessible information for partners, community members, NGOs, and others; regularly publicize; keep updated
- Provide canned information, webinars, videos, graphics, etc., that can be easily shared with key stakeholders
- Work more with NGOs to accomplish common goals

Respect the input from constituent groups; they are out there listening to those who can make a difference in water quality



In pursuing more voices at the table, consider whether the voices are based in reality and science not just good intentions



Better understand the other areas of BWSR and look to more collaboration between geographical areas local partnerships are the critical link to implementing conservation.



Anything we can do to foster and expand those partnerships and their web would be beneficial.

Flexible, responsive, efficient programs and processes

- Flexible processes that still follow rules and regulations; better balance between regulatory enforcement and common-sense implementation; administer programs more consistently while remaining flexible for partners
- Flexible programs that are rigorous *and* support local innovation and creativity
- Shift back to having staff provide more local assistance and support rather than primarily managing programs and funding
- Reduce implementation barriers:
 - Streamline financial and administrative steps and layers for programs, projects, grants, contracting, hiring, invoicing, expenses, and similar
 - Make contracting process faster and more consistent
 - Create more options for contracts vs. grants where appropriate
 - Make it easy and fast to use state facilities for training, events, and activities throughout the state

Increased flexibility with our programs that allow local governments to be creative in their local conservation delivery system.

☞

Since the legislative audit there has been a push to formalize procedures and controls that in my experience tend to result in a paper exercise with little effect on operations

Human resources: Aligned, flexible, efficient

- Transparently align and allocate people, time, and expertise to meet defined needs, priorities, and workload; better support LGUs; be more flexible about staffing – then monitor, discuss, and refine/adjust
- Clarify, refine, align staff numbers, locations, roles, and responsibilities as programs and projects emerge or close out and as efforts move from development to implementation and beyond
- Provide sufficient staff to support field work with partners, local boards, etc. (grants, reporting, communications, education)
- Resolve issues around employees working out of class; address at section level
- Expedite hiring and improve human resource responsiveness
- Increase transparency and choice when creating staff teams
- Clarify and better differentiate roles and expectations for staff and BWSR board members

Accountability, improvement

- Align BWSR work to strategic plan priorities; embed objectives and outcomes in teams and projects; regularly report out and refine the work
- Ensure staff respond to questions, issues, opportunities, and concerns quickly, respectfully, and helpfully
- Improve eLINK processes to ensure items are being updated on time and correctly

Simply having more employees may help. Our programs and scope continue to expand, but our staffing does not so it often feels like we are just surviving rather than thriving.

*MUCH more thoughtfulness about adding tasks to already full plates.
New programs = more work.*

Professional development and other supports

- Staff:
 - Improve, increase staff development around project management, personnel management, collaboration, partnering, and engagement; administrative processes and procedures
 - Do more cross-training to ease staff changes, transitions, time off
 - Prioritize staff retention

- Provide relevant, current technology and technology supports
- New employees: Provide more structured and ongoing training and support; mentoring; cohorts
- Board: Jointly explore board development needs, then organize, deliver, and support accordingly
- Partners: Provide additional, accessible, and consistent training for LGUs on conservation topics; use varied formats

Institute a culture of improvement to allow value of lessons learned and other innovative ideas of merit to bubble up; boots on the ground vs top down as a barrier

DRAFT

6. What criteria should BWSR use to decide which initiatives to pursue, reduce, or eliminate? (BWSR staff and board only)

Responses clustered in the following categories. For all, multiple participants noted the importance of rigorous and collaborative decision making. That included sunsetting programs as needed, saying no if something doesn't fit or isn't possible, creating collaborations, and finding other creative solutions to solve problems, meet needs, and advance strategic priorities.

- [Strategic priorities, unique role, measurable impacts](#)
- [Local priorities, needs](#)
- [Human and other resources](#)
- [Accountability, alignment](#)

Strategic priorities, unique role, measurable impacts

- Work that advances BWSR's strategic priorities; relevance to BWSR's niche around conservation of private lands; aligned with laws, statues, guidance
- Efforts that have demonstrated, measurable, and positive impacts and focus on meaningful outcomes; statewide and watershed-level impact
- Efforts that advance equity, are inclusive of more groups, and are open to more diverse partners and participants
- Projects with multiple, relevant benefits; focus on "trends, not fads"
- Collaborations with state, federal, or local agencies, groups, and organizations
- Reduce, eliminate, or sunset activities that have not resulted in measurable progress, have not contributed to key priorities, or if the work has been addressed to the best of our ability and resources
- Differentiate between needs and wants; ask why; determine what and who is really needed to start to develop, implement, and sustain the effort; explore who else can or should do it; focus on relevant topics or issues where other agencies are not meeting the needs

Does the initiative align with existing programs and policies? If so, move forward. If not, additional thought should be given to outcomes vs. funding amount vs. workload requirement.



Is there citizen interest in the initiative? Demonstrated need for the product/outcome? Align with our mission?



...futurists can bring a new way of thinking to the room

Local priorities, needs

- Ask, listen, and work to align with local priorities, interest, investments, and resources; communicate, coordinate, and listen to private landowners through local partners
- Efforts that meet both BWSR and local priorities; use respectful terms, language, and framing that will be heard, understood, and appreciated
- Look for projects where LGUs and community members are "motivated to be part of solutions (pollinators, climate, water quality, etc.)"; sufficient interest in funding applications
- Collaborate and support local partners to be invested and enthused

What is working locally and of local interest? For example, climate change might not be locally acceptable but there may be topics such as resilience that might be.



Listen to your constituent groups. They are out there; they are your "man on the street." They know what people are thinking.

Human and other resources

- Staff ideas, guidance, and recommendations on new work or streamlining existing work

- Availability of time and appropriate expertise from staff, partners, and collaborators
- Availability of funding, in-kind support, or shared resources to meet needs; funding limitations or constraints, such as focus / restrictions, duration, relevance, associated administration
- Willingness or ability to reallocate or restructure people, time, or expertise to do the work well

Accountability, alignment

- Roll up, present, and discuss the comprehensive suite of BWSR initiatives to support more informed and better decisions; consider multiple factors when balancing and aligning resources, attention, and effort; use approaches that can flex with changing issues, needs, capacity, and over time
- Routinely assess whether BWSR is meeting the needs and expectations of all key stakeholders
- Routinely and rigorously assess performance of staff and leadership; provide support and development; hold people accountable
- Seek funding and staff to align with priorities rather than the other way around; stay focused
- Use different criteria depending on BWSR's role
- Consider a transparent rubric to help guide these decisions

Critical to consider what role BWSR is working in the given initiative. Lead, support, partnering. Different criteria for each are needed.

7. Other thoughts about BWSR's strategic direction?

These ideas ranged significantly, and in many cases were follow-on thoughts directly related to earlier questions; in those cases, the responses were included there instead. Ideas fell into the following categories:

- [Strategic planning development, implementation](#)
- [Collaboration, focus, accountability](#)

Strategic planning development and implementation

- Ensure the plan is dynamic, flexible, and designed to adapt and change over time
- Routinely monitor performance against goals and strategies; align work, systems, and structures (programs, projects, staff, board); and update / refine the plan
- Ensure all staff and partners understand how their work advances our strategic priorities
- Hold ourselves accountable internally and externally
- Provide guidance and support to improve implementation quality and consistency within BWSR and with LGUs
- Bake equity into the strategic plan and implementation; think broadly about the diversity of people and needs throughout the state, including in more urban areas
- Fully integrate BWSR's DEI efforts into the strategic plan; "recognize that MN is becoming more diverse - which is a good - but BWSR plans/programs must be responsive to recognize MN diversity"
- Advance strategic priorities based on a "culture of improvement" that values lessons learned and supports innovative thinking throughout the organization

BWSR's historic core function has been to support local governments in their administration of conservation programs and practices. Various legislative initiatives have expanded BWSR's role into administrative and oversight roles that at times steers the organizational focus away from the historic core function. Emphasis needs to be placed in reestablishing this core function to the culture and operation of BWSR's organization, including routine engagement with the local governments they serve to identify needs that BWSR can provide support for
-- Partner

Collaboration, focus, accountability – and accolades

- Stay focused on working closely with and supporting LGUs and their priorities
- Reach out more intentionally to local boards to build relationships, trust, and support; directly address concerns such as, "My board doesn't believe BWSR cares about, will listen to, or incorporate any of their suggestions"
- Collaborate more closely with key statewide groups to develop, implement, monitor, and refine the strategic plan, programs, and projects
- Continue empowering LGUs and creating collaborative relationships at the state and local levels – "...essential for the work we do to preserve our natural resources"
- Work with LGUs to ensure they have the resources and staff with diverse and aligned backgrounds to advance strategic priorities, and the expertise and authority to make field-level decisions about necessary changes
- Appropriately monitor and support partner efforts to ensure they are meeting requirements and needs; make adjustments and corrections as the work progresses; report out thoroughly and accurately, and learn from both successes and failures

...BWSR is doing a great job honestly... BWSR has good leadership and we are headed the right direction. If we all keep working together, we will make large improvements.
-- Partner

As you have it laid out in your circle of strategic planning and improvement, the strategic plan is a dynamic document and can change. ...as a local gov. unit admin, I believe you are moving in the right direction.
-- Partner

- Share strategic priorities, actions, and impacts with key statewide groups

*BWSR has been doing a great job
keeping an open mind, soliciting input,
and evolving programs and policies.
Thank you, and keep it up!
-- Partner*

DRAFT

Appendix A: Prospective Partner Organizations

These organizations were identified by participants in response to one or more questions. They have been annotated with hyperlinks, descriptions from their websites, and some location information.

Groups	Description
Blue Thumbs	A network of clean water and native plant stewards creating change by bridging the gap between knowledge and action, offering resources and programs to Minnesotan residents
Clean River Partners; Northfield	Inspiring people and organizations to value, protect and improve the Cannon River Watershed's land and water.
Community Members for Environmental Justice	Addressing the environmental injustices occurring disproportionately in pollution-burdened neighborhoods in the City of Minneapolis.
Emerging Farmers Working Group	Identifies and breaks down barriers which have historically prevented existing Minnesota Dept of Agriculture programs from reaching underrepresented communities.
Friends of the Mississippi River	Engages people to protect, restore and enhance the Mississippi River and its watershed in the Twin Cities region.
Great River Greening; Metro, central, southern MN	Engage and lead local communities in conserving and caring for the land and water.
Hmong American Farmers Assoc	Through collective farm business development, education and advocacy, we are building paths toward a sustainable, fair food economy for all.
Latino Economic Development Center	Help Latino farmers in Minnesota both start and grow their farm businesses
Metro Blooms	Partners with communities to create resilient landscapes and foster clean watersheds, embracing the values of equity and inclusion to solve environmental challenges.
Minnesota Apple Growers	Dedicated to the continuing education of its members. We hold two events every year, a winter educational seminar, and a summer orchard tour.
Minnesota Farmers Union	Works to protect and enhance the economic interests and quality of life of family farmers and ranchers and rural communities
MN Center for Environmental Advocacy	Using law and science to protect Minnesota's environment, its natural resources, and the health of its people.
MN Conservation Federation	A coalition of individuals, groups, and communities dedicated to outdoor recreation and the conservation and ethical use of Minnesota's natural resources by all, for all, with all
MN Farmer's Market Association; Nerstrand	Provides services, programs and leadership that support and promote farmers' markets across Minnesota.
MN Soil Health Coalition; Luverne	Producer driven education, outreach, and adoption utilizing information exchange to promote the principles of soil health practices.
Regional Development Commissions	Promote and create economic prosperity in Greater Minnesota

Renewing the Countryside; Hammond	Rural renewal; building awareness and support for sustainable endeavors; connecting people interested in sustainable rural development to each other; providing practical assistance and networking opportunities
Responsible Ag in Karst Country; Mabel	A group of farmers, rural residents, business owners, Amish, and other citizens from southeast Minnesota who are deeply concerned about the proposed Catalpa LLC hog facility and clean water in Karst County.
Sharing Our Roots; Northfield	Advance a resilient agriculture system that demonstrates the power to heal our lands, nourish our communities and prepare aspiring farmers
Somali American Farmers Association	Train the next generation farmers with the focus of promoting healthy and sustainable agriculture in the state
Sustainable Farming Association	Advances environmental stewardship, economic resilience and strong, diverse communities through farmer-to-farmer networking, education, demonstration and research.
The Alliance	To advance strategic campaigns around the intersections of racial justice, economic justice, environmental justice, and health equity
The Food Group / Big River Farms; Marine on St. Croix/New Hope	An incubator farm where farmers have access to land, farm resources, and education to build their businesses, learn, and grow sustainable, organic foods.
The Nature Conservancy	Work with diverse partners to protect our waters, forests and grasslands; build sustainable food and water systems; and tackle climate change.
Upper Mississippi River Basin Association (UMRBA)	A forum for interstate water resource planning and management on the Upper Mississippi River
Voices for Rural Resilience	A deep engagement process to inform and improve climate policy, invigorate local action and public will.
Women in Agriculture Network	Provides educational opportunities and events that enhance leadership, management and production skills for women working in agriculture