

Drainage Work Group (DWG) Meeting

December 18, 2025

Following the welcome and introductions, Tom Gile, Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) gave an overview of the agenda. Information was provided about the following drainage-related events.

- MADI fall meeting – September 10 - 11 in St. Cloud
- Minnesota Watersheds Drainage Workshop – December 4 in Nisswa
- AMC Drainage Conference – January 27-29 in Alexandria
- RRWMB and FDRWG – March 17 and 18

Andrew Hillman announced that the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy (MCEA) is drafting legislation to create a mandatory Environmental Assessment Worksheet (EAW) for drainage projects with the highest potential environmental impact. The language, which will be introduced through EQB statutes rather than Chapter 103E, is not expected to pass this session but aims to keep drainage issues in legislative conversation. He is willing to meet with stakeholders to discuss scope, thresholds, and applicability.

MPCA Overview of Nutrient Reduction Strategy

Matt Drewitz gave a PowerPoint presentation regarding the draft update to the Minnesota Nutrient Reduction Strategy. He explained that MPCA is finalizing a major update to the state's Nutrient Reduction Strategy. While significant progress has been made in reducing phosphorus from wastewater, a 45% reduction in nitrogen is still needed to meet 2040 goals. The updated strategy incorporates new data and modeling to prioritize areas for action. The public comment period yielded 450 comments, with key themes including regulation, farmer incentives, and continuous living cover.

A primary challenge is documenting voluntary conservation practices, such as cover crops planted without cost-share funding. New efforts are underway to use satellite imagery for better trend analysis. Additionally, there is a need to better quantify the nutrient and hydrological benefits of water storage projects to guide strategic implementation.

Potential topics for DWG include better quantification and tracking of water storage projects, funding needs for water storage and drainage water management, research gaps (cold climates; tile water management; continuous living cover), and permitting streamlining.

Discussion was also held regarding the long-term viability of bioreactors, drainage water recycling, storage in the Minnesota River Basin, the LCCMR flood study project in the Red River Valley, and naturally occurring phosphorus sources.

Potential topics for next year

Tom Gile gave an overview of potential topics for the 2026 DWG meetings. Topics included:

- Road crossings related to drainage repairs and/or improvements. A small, focused team (AMC, MW, Rinke Noonan) will be formed to scope statutory ambiguities and payment conflicts between drainage and road authorities regarding culverts and tile systems to guide future discussion at the DWG.
- Notice streamlining. The group may explore streamlining notice requirements across 35 statutory sections as a separate effort to reduce administrative burden, without linking to a statewide registry. MCEA is interested in registry discussions but has limited capacity for notice streamlining; they will monitor to ensure changes don't morph into broader shifts they don't support. Tom will circle back with MCEA to clarify stance and participation boundaries.
- Drainage registry portal. MCEA continues to support the idea of a statewide registry.
- Viewing reports. There is interest in cleaning up statutory language to remove the 40-acre tract viewing report requirement, provided changes do not trigger broader viewer considerations.

- Minnesota Public Drainage Manual (MPDM). Updates to the MPDM are needed regarding the Wetland Conservation Act (WCA) rule changes and federal Section 404 processes but must wait until WCA rules are finalized. Minnesota has not assumed 404 responsibilities and will not proceed without legislative direction.
- Additional practices to include as eligible for the MDM grant.
- Outlet adequacy.
- Discussion on watershed district density, storage implementation, counties managing planning statewide, and water storage funds aligning with drainage-connected projects.
- Revisit whether all items in 103E.015 relate to adequate outlet.
- Some sort of an analysis of the Minnesota River Basin. Past Red River studies identified hotspots; similar basin-wide analysis would need significant funding and coordination.
- WCA changes for 103E and on-the-ground implementation; how rules or guidance are put together. AMC is working on this.
- Support for increased multipurpose drainage management funding and coordinated support via Clean Water Council.

DWG Process Summary Discussion

Tom explained the current DWG process and asked for input from new attendees. The consensus was that it is a good outline of the process. MCEA expressed concern that they are the only environmental group that gets a “vote”. It was pointed out that Minnesota Watersheds represents 42 watershed districts and AMC represents 87 counties. It did not appear that there was support for including additional environmental groups in the consensus process.

Discussion was held to review the group’s decision-making framework. Key concerns included inconsistent participation from member organizations, frustration when non-participating entities appear to halt progress, and a lack of a clear process for handling impasses. Suggestions for improvement included establishing participation requirements, using a third-party facilitator to help redefine the structure, and drawing ideas from more formalized models. The majority of attendees support maintaining the group’s historical structure and role as a sounding board. The majority of attendees wanted to avoid spending an entire year solely on process design.

Next Meeting

The DWG will not meet in January. Tom will circulate a 2026 meeting schedule.

Meeting notes by Jan Voit