

LEADERSHIP FOR MIDWESTERN WATERSHEDS #5

Sycamore, Illinois
January 21-22, 2015

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Leadership for Midwestern Watersheds (LMW) began in 2011 as a means to bring together watershed project directors and key stakeholders from five Upper Midwestern states to compare notes and share lessons learned about project design and implementation. LMW seeks to develop a “community of practice”—a core group of conservation professionals skilled and experienced at the practical means of improving water quality through improvements in agricultural land management at the watershed scale.

The theme of this fifth LMW meeting was “**Beginning Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Watershed Projects.**” Participants in the meeting—which took place shortly after USDA NRCS announced successful applicants for project funding through the new RCPP—explored ways in which new project leaders can lead, organize and sustain their work. The meeting drew on lessons learned from earlier watershed projects about such vital components as farmer engagement; examined coordination of RCPP projects with state nutrient reduction strategies; and addressed “leading without authority”—how to successfully lead the coalitions of multiple funding sources and project partners found in most new RCPP projects.

Sand County Foundation, American Farmland Trust, Iowa Soybean Association, North Central Region Water Network and The Nature Conservancy sponsor and organize LMW meetings. We use a facilitated discussion format, believing that connections among watershed project leaders are as important as information conveyed through formal presentations. The fifth LMW meeting, hosted by American Farmland Trust at the DeKalb County Farm Bureau headquarters, had 52 participants. They included many new to LMW and just starting RCPP projects in Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Also represented were several organizations that had applied unsuccessfully and plan to re-apply during the FY 2016 application period this spring.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program—Getting Started

A panel from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, featuring Director of Financial Assistance Programs Mark Rose, led off the discussion of new RCPP projects. Some key points:

- **Successful RCPP applications had several common characteristics.** These included well-thought through projects; compelling outcomes (relating the environmental problem to proposed solutions with a plan for monitoring progress); a solid understanding of NRCS programs through which agency funds must be spent; innovations, such as market mechanisms and non-traditional partners like municipalities and wastewater treatment plants; strong letters of support from active partners; and at least a 1:1 match of funds requested of NRCS.

- **The RCPP application process was extremely competitive.** This resulted in every approved project getting less money from NRCS than it had proposed.
- **Agreements between successful applicants and NRCS should be sent to national headquarters by March 15, for approval by March 31.** They will need to include downsized budgets, and maintain at least a 1:1 ratio between NRCS and partner financial contributions.
- **Project outcomes will need to be written into agreements.** Each deliverable should have a cost clearly assigned to it.
- Project leaders should plan on every request for reimbursement being audited and be prepared to explain and fully document the work covered by each invoice submitted to NRCS.
- **Reporting requirements may vary.** An annual progress report is required by law; more frequent reports may be required depending on project activities (e.g., projects reliant on EQIP may be required to report more frequently than easement-oriented projects).
- **Project leaders should not wait until contracts with NRCS are final to begin work.** In particular, financial assistance rates should be finalized and adjustments in terms discussed with each project's State Conservationists. This is important to avoid missing the 2015 crop planning/planting season.
- **State Conservationists should also be consulted on reporting metrics.** Conservation Initiatives Coordinator Meghan Wilson has developed templates for outcomes applying to various resource concerns that may be a useful resource.
- **NRCS funds for technical assistance are limited.** Projects should carefully consider how much technical assistance they will need over the next five years. In many cases, partners will need to fund much of this work.

Leading Without Authority

Because most watershed projects involve numerous partners, the individual or organization leading the partnership likely has no official authority over the work loads of other partners. It is important to consider where you have no authority/no influence; where you have influence; and where you have authority. Sometimes you can apply your influence to increase your authority. LMW participants endorsed a list of ways to exercise leadership without authority, including:

- Move beyond compliance
- Set clear expectations, roles and realistic time frames
- Build trusting relationships
- Establish accountability

- Maintain communication among project group and stakeholders (this includes active listening)
- Commit to adaptive management

Participants mapped out and discussed where they had authority or influence and where they did not, as a means to identifying how they could best expand their influence and apply the practices listed above.

The University of Wisconsin-Extension has a guidebook that provides some simple benchmarking tools and tips to improve all aspects of collaborative work:

<http://learningstore.uwex.edu/assets/pdfs/G3658-8.pdf>

State Nutrient Reduction Strategies

Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, Minnesota and Wisconsin state nutrient reduction strategies may be an important part of the context in which RCPP projects in each state will be judged.

Representatives from the development teams of each state's strategy participated in a panel discussion. A key item that each strategy has in common is that they all rely on voluntary adoption of conservation practices to help reduce the loss of nutrients from non-point agricultural sources. State strategies share some objectives, but are distinct in important ways.

- **Iowa** developed its nutrient reductions strategy over two years, releasing it in May 2013. It is based on the belief that nutrient impairment is due more to historic changes in land use and hydrology than mismanagement of fertilizers and manures. Iowa seeks to: 1) Advance environmental stewardship while maintaining productivity; 2) Pair the best in field and off field practices together for cumulative effect; 3) Expand agribusiness consulting and advisory services; and 4) Accelerate conservation programs and development of new technologies.
- **Indiana's** strategy is still in draft form, with a science assessment in progress and a means of selecting priority watersheds and how to address water quality concerns in them yet to be determined. Indiana commodity groups have, independently, developed their own nutrient reduction strategies based on soil management.
- **Illinois** just released its draft nutrient loss reduction strategy in November 2014, basing it on a science assessment completed by the University of Illinois. Its greatest challenge is determining how progress will be tracked.
- The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency led the development of the **Minnesota** strategy and just completed their public comment period. They have a baseline check-in planned for 2025 and have developed specific strategies to the HUC8 level.
- **Wisconsin** built their strategy around existing programs, identifying and filling program gaps, enhancing coordination and implementation. Implementation of the strategy will be influenced by the use of phosphorus discharge permit compliance options in new rules on

phosphorus adopted by the Legislature in 2010. Wisconsin is now the only state in the region where this is a factor.

Discussion brought out the following key points:

- EPA Region 5 has asked the states to provide an implementation schedule for their nutrient reduction strategies by 2016 (all LMW states except Iowa fall under Region 5's jurisdiction).
- EPA has expressed a preference for setting interim goals (based on technologies on the farm) and long-term goals (based on new technologies not yet developed), as recommended by the Gulf Hypoxia Task Force.
- States in the region acknowledge the challenge of scale issues, but can offer no clear solutions except to build from local to larger needs.
- Funding the state implementation strategies is also a continuing challenge. Significant funding is available in Minnesota, with great results expected. Indiana's Department of Agriculture received a small budget increase, while Wisconsin is looking to fund projects in individual watersheds through non-traditional sources like wastewater treatment plants.

Review of Lessons Learned from Mississippi River Basin Initiative (MRBI) and Other Projects

Earlier LMW meetings focused on farmer engagement, targeting, scaling up, watershed project organization and how to sustain projects. Some key ideas from these meetings include:

- We think our projects represent significant change. The general public may take a different view.
- Watershed planning (including a baseline inventory, identification of key success factors and identifying key watershed concerns) should be incorporated into proposals.
- Projects should ideally be in the highest nutrient loading areas to have the greatest impact on water quality.
- Water quality monitoring data can engage farmers but is expensive to collect. Monitoring can take a long time to show results.
- Data confidentiality is important to farmers.
- Nutrient management planning is a big factor in many projects but it has limitations. It has been designed as a production tool, not a conservation tool.
- The use of remote sensing (e.g., Light Detection and Ranging (LiDAR)) to more precisely identify fields prone to runoff has potential, but is not available everywhere.

- In the scaling up of lessons learned, be aware of the changing face of agriculture. There are fewer but larger farms, more rented land and absentee landowners and more women landowners. Demographics are shifting with an aging farm population.
- Sustaining funding is a priority for many watershed projects. Three to five years may not be enough to show improvements in water quality.
- Interim metrics are needed by many projects to track progress.
- Projects need to make sure that watershed coordinators have the “people skills” to work with farmers.
- Projects and agencies should consider professional marketing training, or using professional marketing firms to communicate messages to a wider audience.

Farmer and Landowner Engagement

- Watershed councils, led by or at least actively involving farmers and employing performance-based tools or indicators (e.g., P index, soil conditioning index, cornstalk nitrate tests), can provide farmers with valuable information on how well they are doing and how they can improve.
- A strong core of four to five farmers who step up in a watershed and reach out to others is critically important.
- Many farmers need reasons, in addition to conservation, to adopt practices appropriate to each watershed project. **Production, profit and protection** all engage farmers.
- Project leaders should bring key stakeholders to the table, establish broad partnerships, set realistic conservation goals and make sure that all partners providing assistance are on the same page.
- Proximity of farmers to one another is important. Round watersheds centered around one or more lakes can be easier to work in than “skinny” watersheds on either side of a river.

Issues for the Future

Attendees discussed potential subjects for future LMW meetings, which will take place when the first group of RCPP projects has gained some experience and a second is preparing to begin. Suggested topics included:

- **The economics of conservation.** How do recent changes in the global agricultural economy affect watershed projects? Are higher or lower commodity prices better for conservation? What about price volatility (which some participants thought discouraged conservation

investments by incentivizing short-term thinking)? LMW attendees concluded that there may be a need to make a better business case for conservation, but as Iowa Assistant State Conservationist Marty Adkins observed, commodity market price fluctuation doesn't necessarily dictate whether conservation practices "sell."

- **Interim indicators to track progress in watershed projects** (a list of suggestions will be part of a forthcoming World Resources Institute/American Farmland Trust paper that will outline a recommended approach to evaluating the success of RCPP).
- **Response to impending Des Moines Water Works legal action** against three Iowa counties over nitrate pollution. A future LMW meeting (perhaps one held in Des Moines) could compare the results of voluntary approaches to agricultural nutrient runoff reduction to experience with regulation.
- **Coordination between federal conservation programs.** Suggestion was made that outside pressure might provide a needed incentive for federal agencies protective of their turf to cooperate directly.
- **Farmer participation.** Consensus developed about including at least one panel of farmers in a future LMW meeting, regardless of the main topic. Such a panel would need to include farmers from across the LMW states rather than just the local area around the meeting location.
- **LMW funding proposal.** Joseph Britt made clear that Sand County Foundation, which has absorbed most expenses for the first five LMW meetings, will be seeking an external source of funding for future events. Participants were invited to indicate their interest in joining an advisory group to help with future meeting subject matter and organization.