

Executive Summary
Leadership for Midwestern Watersheds #4: Project Organization and Governance
November 12-13, 2013
University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin

The Leadership for Midwestern Watersheds (LMW) meets once a year “to advance toward success in improving water quality in the context of a healthy farm economy, through communications among watershed leaders.” On November 12-13, 2013, we met for the fourth time to compare and explore ways of organizing and sustaining watershed-scale nutrient management projects.

Boone River watershed case study

First we reviewed a case study (the Boone River watershed) and then discussed various options for watershed organization. Boone River is a HUC8 watershed containing 30 HUC12s. The Boone River project has all the components of a successful project but has yet to achieve wide scale adoption at the HUC 8 scale. However adoption levels have been trending up in HUC 12 watersheds where efforts have been focused and targeted (e.g. MRBI, 319, etc.). The successful HUC12s have active coordinators who get out and knock on farmers’ doors - and they may have to go back five times before they make the “sale.” The project monitors tile lines and also generates personalized data to provide feedback to farmers so they can understand whether practices are working. Soil data has been important to farmers but the water quality data is posted as raw numbers and remains difficult for farmers to interpret and realize that they are part of the problem. The project is trying to engage more agronomists who have direct contact with farmers, reach out to absentee landowners and find ways to make strip till equipment more widely available. They are now considering ways to improve governance and may establish an independent nonprofit or a steering committee or ask one of the collaborating organizations to take the lead.

Getting to Governance

Governance is defined as a set of procedures that use decision-making processes at different levels and among different sectors, stakeholders and jurisdictions. Before deciding on a governance structure, groups should first decide what their goals are, who should be involved and in what way, what information will be used and how, how will decisions be made and implemented, how accomplishments will be measured and what provisions will be made for learning and adaptations. It is easier if partners have complementary strengths, similar goals and sufficient resources.

Examples of governance

The Iowa Watershed Management Authorities are one example of a governance structure. They are formed through agreements between two or more cities, counties or SWCDs formed to promote cross-jurisdictional coordination. A board of directors divided among the political subdivisions comprising the authority governs the WMA and members usually assume the role of project and fiscal administration. Drawbacks

include little to no room for other partners (e.g. NGOs and state/federal government) and no means to generate revenue. Minnesota has watershed districts similar to WMAs but these also have taxing authority. Where they exist, they work but are only in some areas within the state. In Dane County, Wisconsin, local municipalities, the state and NGOs are cooperating to govern the Yahara-WINs phosphorus pollution reduction project via a Memorandum of Understanding in a steering committee. Yahara-WINs is a multi-year effort to reduce phosphorus levels in the lakes around Madison as part of the Madison sewerage district's Clean Water Act compliance plan. The Upper Sugar River watershed group in Wisconsin, established in 2000, is a good example of a watershed group that is trying to stay relevant by engaging the farming community, involving farmers on their board, achieving tangible outcomes (e.g. removal from the 303D list in 2004), diversifying their funding base and investing in education and outreach.

Elements of success for projects and current gaps

LMW participants identified several elements that set projects up for success including:

- Counties or districts with committed leadership;
- Establishing partnerships prior to funding;
- Partners who play to each other's strengths and bring their own expertise to the table; and
- Non-jurisdictional agreements (MOUs) and convening strong quarterly multi-stakeholder group meetings.

Examples of gaps that projects currently face include:

- Getting the message out that good things are happening;
- Translating data into potential actions;
- Communicating scientific information so it is understandable;
- Getting enough of the right kind of adoption to see improvements in water quality;
- Processing monitoring data quickly so farmers can use it to make decisions;
- Doing advanced watershed planning to better use funds; and
- Hiring a solid coordinator.

Sustainability of efforts

Aside from deciding on a governance structure, organizing for sustainable watershed management also includes a mission, vision, programs, people and diversified funding. Projects may be able to link their interest in water to other issues their communities care about: e.g. local economy (Chambers of Commerce and importance of clean water in bringing in jobs and sustaining local businesses); job training (stream restorations); rural enterprise grants to launch new businesses (native plant nurseries); youth education and the arts; renewable energy (manure digesters); public health; recreation; reducing costs for water treatment; and protecting wells.

Innovative approaches

The participants heard about a Pay for Performance project in the West branch of the Milwaukee River watershed to reduce phosphorus run-off. The practices being proposed include 4R nutrient management, cover crops, contour cropping, buffers and filter strips diversified rotations and tillage methods. The project will calculate the results of management change, plot cost per unit of pollution reduction (cost-effectiveness) and assess which changes would be profitable at various incentive levels. Farmers will then be able to contract for a phosphorus-reduction payment.

Improving the MRBI projects

LMW participants also discussed recommendations for improving the Mississippi River Basin Initiative. For Stakeholders: provide additional time for project leads to form partnerships, gain stakeholder buy-in and prioritize applications with producer support; for Leveraging: formalize relationships with more partners to leverage funding, technical assistance and monitoring and provide more time to submit applications; for Goals: tie goals more closely to impacts on Gulf Hypoxia; for Monitoring: engage EPA, USGS, state water quality agencies, universities and NGOs to develop monitoring protocols, modeling protocols, interim metrics and train project partners on using models; for Evaluation: require watershed based planning (EPA's watershed planning guidelines) and train project partners; and for Cost-effectiveness: prioritize projects that quantitatively demonstrate cost-effectiveness, better incorporate cost effectiveness into ranking system and structure conservation payments to reflect performance.

The North Central Regional Water Network

More resources will shortly be available to ND, SD, NE, KS, MN, IA, MO, WI, IL, IN, MI, and OH through the newly formed North Central Region Water Network. The Network has a regional coordinator (Rebecca Power), administrative support and an evaluator and will have network staff, regional initiatives, a regional administrative council (extension directors, agencies, industry, NGOs and water experts) and state points of contact. Seed funding of \$90K annually can be used for planning grants. The Network plans to have a website up in Feb. 2014, seed grants by May 2014 and a conference in June 2014.

MRBI and CIG update

The new NRCS MRBI coordinator (Megan Wilson) hopes to do a project evaluation for MRBI in the next few months. For 2014, the NRCS Conservation Innovation Grants will be focused on initiatives (like the MRBI) and preliminary topics include tools and techniques to identify priority areas (targeting), conservation systems, outreach and education efforts, market-based mechanisms, and quantification tools.

Next steps

The group agreed the meetings were valuable (particularly the interactive discussions) and one participant suggested using "survey monkey" to figure out a few topics to focus on for the next meeting. One potential topic that was offered involved the agricultural

certainty programs (MN is about ready to release its program and IL is developing a program). In addition, participants suggested including some farmers who are involved in watershed projects and inviting agricultural retailers and businesses.