

14th Minnesota River Congress Summary

157 participants signed in at the 14th Minnesota River Congress session held in Mankato at the Kato Ballroom on Wednesday, June 15th, 2022 .

The event was co-hosted by the Izaak Walton League Upper Mississippi River Initiative.

Opening remarks were offered by the Minnesota River Congress Coordinator/Facilitator Scott Sparllin. He provided a brief history on the congress and reviewed how the Water Storage Initiative was voted on as the current primary focus of our efforts. He shared that now that we have been successful at establishing the Water Storage Program in state statute, our collective work on it is only in the beginning demonstration phase. He stated that in order for the program to have a significant impact on the watershed it would need to be brought to scale with a considerable increase in funding for the program. He continued that accomplishing that goal would be the primary focus of the Minnesota River Congress until the sufficient funding for program success was in place. A list of all entities that have passed resolutions and signed letters of support for the Minnesota River Congress Water Storage Initiative was read aloud. It includes 14 basin cities along with 30 groups and entities. He went on to state that the Board of Water and Soil Resources had a pending Natural Resources Conservation Service RCPP grant of 8 million dollars for the new Water Storage Program. He then reported that he testified at the legislature this year and that two other bills were introduced to fund the Water Storage Program. One was a new state-wide bill and was for \$100 million with half going to urban storm water issues and the other was specific for appropriation of 5 million to the Minnesota River/Upper Mississippi program. He also stated that the Governor had \$15 million in his supplemental budget targeted for the basin.

Izaak Walton League past National and State President Dave Zentner, followed with additional opening remarks. He spoke to the importance of collaboration of groups and on a large inclusive scale. He also talked about how important and effective individual activism was. Mr. Zentner pointed out that the sediment coming from the Minnesota River was filling in Lake Pepin. He said it was also the primary source of other pollutants such a nitrogen, phosphorus, and e-coli

bacteria for the Upper Mississippi River. He then shared that a consortium of regional groups and individuals has been meeting regularly to monitor drainage projects currently being proposed in the Minnesota Basin. This was being done as an on-going effort to eliminate or mitigate negative impacts the projects may have on tributaries and the main stem. He highlighted the affect that cumulative impacts of more water coming from upstream has on the basin. One point he said was critical is that healthy food production, clean water, and healthy soil should be in harmony with our communities. Lastly, he emphasized that we need to support the good works of the state agencies, SWCD's and reach out to those we sometimes view as adversaries.

Former U.S. Congressman and Judge David Minge gave remarks next. He is currently the Minnesota River team leader of the Izaak Walton League's Upper Mississippi River Initiative. Mr. Minge alluded to the fact that we are all from different parts of the river system, but we are all working towards the collective goal of clean water. He mentioned that he was living and working in Montevideo back in the 1990's and became acutely aware of the flooding and water quality conditions which the river was experiencing. He then brought up that in 2015 he began looking into drainage improvement projects as a setting in which he and others could make a difference in conditions of the river. He explained that the IWLA Upper Mississippi River Initiative welcomed and encouraged this activity. So, with the blessing and support they assembled a diverse and talented team made up of professional water quality experts, lawyers, and other advocates to obtain, review and submit comment on preliminary and final engineer reports on proposed drainage improvement projects within the basin. Subsequently several projects were and are in the process of being challenged on the basis of design and potential increased outflow.

Next, Governor Tim Walz gave pre-recorded introductory remarks and mentioned that he included 15 Million dollars in his supplemental budget for the Water Storage Program. He stated further that he was in full support of our efforts and understood the need for more water storage capabilities on the land and that he would work with the 2 houses to see more funding and an environment bill be passed. He also said he was disappointed that the legislature did not pass a spending bill which would have advanced water storage along with a multitude of other critical environmental needs.

Minnesota Pollution Control Agency Commissioner Katrina Kessler gave remarks following the previous speakers. Congratulating all the attendees and positive remarks on the venue for our congress session opened her initial statements. She emphasized that the Walz administration was committed to increasing water storage for all its benefits. She explained the primary role of the MPCA was to assure that everyone has healthy air, soil, and water to live in the State of Minnesota. In fulfilling that role, they monitor, review, and enforce rules, laws, and activities that affect those conditions. They also take pro-active steps to assure clean water goals are met. She spoke of adaptation such as more water storage and need for it in accomplishing goals for clean water. She pointed to the added runoff coming from weather and landscape changes which need to be addressed more pro-actively. She spoke about the complexities surrounding water storage and the need to address them as we pick the best opportunities for that increase. She also spoke about what might be right for the Red River might not be right for the Minnesota River and that we have very diversified landscape. She mentioned that by 2030 the goal of a 50% reduction in sediment has been set by the MPCA. She also stated that we don't have all the answers, but we do have all the science to assist us. We need to recognize that this is an investment that will result in multiple positive by-products such as carbon sequestration, water quality improvements and less flooding just to name a few.

The next speaker to talk about water storage was **the Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Sarah Strommen**. She stated that the Walz administration was in concurrence that water storage was and is a priority and that we were on the same wave link with our initiative. Multiple benefits of water storage were emphasized like wildlife, natural diversity, reducing flooding, lessening the risks of infrastructure damages and more. She also emphasized how we need to look at the entire watershed approach to water storage and how we need to think long term when implementing projects. She offered that the upper reaches of the watershed need to be included in storage, not just the lower ends where the water ends up. The need to put back and enhance wetlands was also an area she and the MNDNR staff felt were critical to focus on. Ms. Strommen also said soil health had a big role to play in storing water in the soil profile that had multiple benefits. She pointed out that drainage projects should have a water storage component included before

construction begins. Having everyone at the table expressing their goals she felt was critical in moving forward and that DNR staff wants to make sure that happens.

John Jaschke, the Executive Director for the Board of Water and Soil Resources was the next speaker to talk about the new Water Storage Program and water storage in general. He stated that they were in the process of considering where and how to maximize the results of project dollars and demonstrate the many benefits of various types and sizes of projects. Other state agencies have provided analysis to them to help assist project selection. What we do for water storage needs to co-exist with what we have on the landscape. He said we are not going back to the days of Bison roaming the wild landscape. Agriculture is here and will always be here and we need to work with that to accomplish our goals. He brought up that the CREP program took those lands that were not desirable for agriculture and took them out of production accomplishing a benefit to society which affected ag production little. He talked about how we need to design projects that hold water and have a timed release. He also talked about lengthening the time water is delivered to an outlet by lengthening the distance it needs to go before arriving there. Another way he said water could be held back is through infiltration and that takes increased organic matter in soils. Cover crops can also slow water intake by evaporation and intake at the roots he said. John also mentioned a treatment train for clean water where different connected systems do complimentary improvements to the water before moving down stream. He closed by thanking all the participants of the Minnesota River Congress for not just pointing out the problems but offering solutions.

The next presentation from **Rita Weaver, Chief Engineer for the Board of Water and Soil Resources**. She gave an overview of the new Water Storage Program and how selection of projects would be done for now. In order to meet the requirements of state statute, flow reductions would have to be the cornerstone of the program. She said there are many and complex conditions to consider when scoring a project such as site history and topography. She displayed a talked about a number of scenarios where water storage can happen. However, for now, picking those which will demonstrate a significant reduction in outflow and have multiple resource and economic benefits would be the most eligible. BWSR held listening sessions to assist in development the components for the

program and incorporated much of the input into the program. Her presentation was detailed, comprehensive and thorough.

The next speaker of the evening was **Mark Dittrich Ag Marketing and Development Specialist with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture**. He opened saying it was an honor to be with the Minnesota River Congress. He stated that after the 1997 flood he helped put together a group to address flooding and learned of the complexities of the drainage system in the Minnesota River Watershed. He spoke about early projects from the 1990's involving ditch design meant to impede water but still drain it in a timely manner for the producer. Wetlands were also designed at the Lamberton station to hold water and purify it as well. Mr. Dittrich also spoke about how the climate has changed and how we need to adapt. He said one of those ways was with additional water storage. He stated that moving forward was going to have to include improving the trust among all of us especially towards the farmers and care takers of this earth. Then we can truly work together for a more sustainable set of communities. We will be able then to respect our differences and live with our compromises, because we need each other to accomplish what we need to continue producing food. And at the same time have a healthy environment that we can all live in and be proud of.

The last speaker was **Mark Schnobrich, Area 6 SWCD President**. He pointed out that SWCD's are the front-line implementers of conservation throughout Minnesota. He identified that water storage is a top priority of Area 6 and as well as at the state level and especially in the greater Minnesota River Watershed. He said that SWCD's work directly with landowners on a number of practices that benefit water quality that also address water quantity issues such as wetland creation and enhancement of existing ones. They also have soil health identified as a priority and can get landowners assistance to implement practices that ultimately lead to better soils. He stated that SWCD's need to start with smaller projects and work their way up to the bigger ones. The one watershed one plan is a good starting point he said. Some plans have been approved and are in the implementation process. Mark stated that finding willing landowners to participate will be a challenge, but one that they are able to meet. SWCD's are also working with private business to spread the word on practices and available funding assistance for landowners. Mark cited a 1943 Soil Conservation Service

publication that emphasized how important it was to work on the watershed scale and not just on single farms. It stated that if everyone adopted a practice in the entire watershed goals could be easily met compared to if only some participated. He stated that SWCD's are communicating about water storage among each other and highlighting success stories. He also said that upcoming meetings planned have water storage as the primary topic of information sharing.