

# ASWM State Wetland Program Integration Case Study: Minnesota

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## “One Watershed, One Plan”: An Initiative to Leverage Data to Get Better Results for Clean Water in Minnesota



### State Wetland Program Information

This case study<sup>1</sup> examines the integration efforts of the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) through the “One Watershed, One Plan” (1W1P) program.

Established in 1987 BWSR is the state soil and water conservation agency for “90 soil and water conservation districts, 46 watershed districts, 23 metropolitan watershed management organizations, and 80 county water managers. It administers programs that prevent sediment and nutrients from entering Minnesota’s lakes, rivers, and streams; enhance fish and wildlife habitat; and protect wetlands. The 20-member board consists of representatives of local and state government agencies and citizens. Core functions include implementing the state’s soil and water conservation policy, comprehensive local water management, and the Wetland Conservation Act as it relates to the 41.7 million acres of private land in Minnesota.”<sup>2</sup> The BWSR’s 2018-2019 biennium budget is \$181,177, with most of its revenue coming from

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<sup>1</sup> Project Case Study Criteria: The Association of State Wetland Managers (ASWM) conducted interviews with representatives from state wetland programs actively integrating with one or more additional resource management programs operating within their state. Criteria for case study inclusion required eligible programs to demonstrate direct or indirect impacts of integration on watershed-level planning, implementation and/or outcomes documented using formal or informal performance measures. Further consideration was given to integrated programs with the ability to provide cost-benefit insights.

<sup>2</sup> BWSR - Wetland Regulation in Minnesota Overview, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, [www.bwsr.state.mn.us/aboutbwsr/index.html](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/aboutbwsr/index.html).

the Clean Water Fund. Ninety percent of this budget will be used to fund grants to local government units and ten percent will cover operating costs.<sup>3</sup>

The 1W1P program was initiated in 2014 with the goal of aligning local water management along major watershed boundaries. Currently the program is administered by one full time coordinator along with a 4.7 FTE support staff. Additionally, twenty-five regional field staff work within one or more watersheds, to support watershed plans through the development and approval process. The 1W1P program brings together the state's two wetland regulatory programs - DNR (public state permitting law – lakes, streams, rivers and large wetlands) and BWSR, as well as local governments working to address wetlands through the wetland conservation act. Between 2014 and 2019, the BWSR has designated 9.1 million dollars to the 1W1P program.

### **Type of Integration Effort**

1W1P supports partnerships of local governments in developing prioritized, targeted, and measurable implementation plans. Key principles include planning at the major watershed scale and aligning local plans with state strategies. Plans created through the 1W1P program are called “comprehensive watershed management plans”<sup>4</sup> and encompass surface water quality and quantity, groundwater, drinking water, habitat, recreation and other issues covering both rural and urban areas. The program offers many guides and resources to help facilitate the development of these plans and ensure all required components are included as outline in the statute.

### **Scale of Integration Effort**

1W1P is a statewide program providing implementation grants to fund voluntary projects and programs outlined in comprehensive watershed management plans<sup>5</sup>. These grants are intended to incentivize local municipalities to collaborate in the development of a comprehensive plan which identifies and prioritizes resources and issues on a watershed level. Soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs), counties, and watershed districts are required to participate in the development of comprehensive watershed management plans. Participation is voluntary for local governments in the seven-county metropolitan area<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, there are some size exemptions as smaller municipalities are already subject to more robust requirements.

### **Integration Goal(s)**

The BWSR mission is to improve and protect Minnesota's water and soil resources by working in partnership with local organizations and private landowners. The 1W1P program supports this

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<sup>3</sup> “BWSR Budget.” BWSR - Wetland Regulation in Minnesota Overview, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, [www.bwsr.state.mn.us/budget/index.html](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/budget/index.html).

<sup>4</sup> What Is One Watershed, One Plan? - [Bwsr.state.mn.us](http://Bwsr.state.mn.us).  
[www.bwsr.state.mn.us/planning/1W1P/1W1P\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_2018.pdf](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/planning/1W1P/1W1P_Fact_Sheet_2018.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> The Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan is intended to replace the existing county water plans, watershed district plans, and Soil and Water Conservation District comprehensive plans for the entire planning boundary while leveraging and incorporating WRAPS, TMDLs, and other valuable data and information.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

overarching goal by working to establish effective and efficient management practices at the watershed level through integrated partnerships and strategic planning. As aquatic resources are not limited to county or other jurisdictional boundaries, watershed level management is the most effective way to improve and protect Minnesota's water. By bringing vested parties together from across the watershed 1W1P works to align local governments, state and federal agencies and the public towards a shared understanding of issues, priorities, and goals. This collaboration between upstream and downstream neighbors allows consolidated resources and expertise to target the most important issues at the watershed level.

Intended to replace existing county and district plans, 1W1P will transition the entire state to watershed level management of Minnesota's aquatic resources within a 10 year period. The program aims to create continuity by setting standards for plan content that "establish a systematic, watershed-wide, science-based approach to watershed management; driven by the participating local governments."<sup>7</sup> Plans focus on "prioritized, targeted, and measurable implementation of restoration and protection activities with clear implementation timelines, milestones, and cost estimates that will address the largest threats and provide the greatest environmental benefit unique to each watershed."<sup>8</sup> Finally, the 1W1P program will also increase planning and implementation expertise across the state by offering comprehensive resources to support development of these plans.

### **Integration Process Timeline**

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources was created in 1987 when the Legislature combined the Soil and Water Conservation Board with two other organizations with local government and natural resource ties: the Water Resources Board (established in 1955) and the Southern Minnesota Rivers Basin Council (established in 1971).<sup>9</sup>

Two preliminary events helped to lay the ground work for Minnesota's transition to watershed level management of its aquatic resources. In 2006 the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) began to shift towards watershed based assessment. A few years later in 2008 a constitutional amendment was passed increasing "the state sales tax three-eighths of one percent... in order to provide revenue to protect the natural resources of the state and to preserve Minnesota's arts and cultural heritage."<sup>10</sup>

"One Watershed, One Plan (1W1P) started as a policy recommendation [in 2011] from the Local Government Water Roundtable (LGWR) and was followed by legislation in 2012 that authorizes BWSR to adopt methods to allow comprehensive plans, local water management plans, or watershed management plans to serve as substitutes for one another; or to be replaced by a Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "One Watershed, One Plan Guiding Principles" BWSR - [http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/planning/1W1P/1W1P\\_Guiding\\_Principles.pdf](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/planning/1W1P/1W1P_Guiding_Principles.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> "About the Board of Water and Soil Resources" BWSR, [www.bwsr.state.mn.us/aboutbwsr/index.html](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/aboutbwsr/index.html).

<sup>10</sup> Minnesota Sales Tax Increase, Amendment 1 (2008). (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://ballotpedia.org/Minnesota\\_Sales\\_Tax\\_Increase,\\_Amendment\\_1\\_\(2008\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Minnesota_Sales_Tax_Increase,_Amendment_1_(2008))

<sup>11</sup> "One Watershed, One Plan FAQs" BWSR - Wetland Regulation in Minnesota Overview, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, [http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/planning/1W1P/1W1P\\_FAQs\\_General.pdf](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/planning/1W1P/1W1P_FAQs_General.pdf)

In 2014 BWSR “launched the One Watershed, One Plan pilot program, allocating up to \$900,000 in Clean Water Fund grants to fund five pilot projects to address water quality on a watershed basis.”<sup>12</sup> The five pilot areas were Lake Superior North watershed, North Fork Crow River watershed, Red Lake River watershed, Root River watershed, and Yellow Medicine River watershed.

“Additional legislation was passed in 2015 providing the purposes for and better definition of Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans. The 2015 legislation also requires BWSR to adopt a transition plan for moving to Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans, with a legislative goal for statewide implementation of 1W1P by 2025”.<sup>13</sup>

In December the first two pilot plans completed through the BWSR’s 1W1P program were approved: the Root River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan and the Yellow Medicine River Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan. “The plans each identify priority projects and programs for the designated watershed over the next ten years. For the Root River plan, those priorities include drinking water, stream and river health, and more. The Yellow Medicine plan has priorities that include minimizing flooding, improving water quality through sediment and nutrient reductions, and protecting groundwater. As part of the planning process, local partners commit to working together and will check-in on a regular basis to track progress and periodically update the plan.”<sup>14</sup>

Following a successful two year pilot period the BWSR began to ramp up its rollout of 1W1P in 2016 with the board approving the program’s plan content and procedures. In October of that year the board allocated up to \$1,700,000 in Clean Water Fund grants to fund seven planning projects to address water quality on a watershed basis.”<sup>15</sup> The seven new planning areas were: Cannon River watershed, Cedar River watershed, Lake of the Woods watershed, Leech Lake River watershed, Missouri River Basin watershed, Pomme de Terre River watershed, and Thief River watershed. On June 28, 2017 the board allocated up to an additional “\$1,500,000 in Clean Water Fund grants to fund six more planning projects.”<sup>16</sup> The six planning areas were: Buffalo-Red River watershed, Lower St. Croix watershed, Mustinka/Bois de Sioux watershed, Pine River watershed, Sauk River watershed, and Watonwan River watershed.

## Project Leadership

In overseeing the 1W1P program the BWSR works with three main partners through the LGWR: the Minnesota Association of Soil & Water Conservation Districts (SWCD), the Minnesota Association of Watershed Districts (MAWD), and the Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC). Additional partners are determined at the watershed level. As watershed management plans are developed locally, each plan has its own policy committee and advisory committee consisting of staff from local government and state

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<sup>12</sup> “BWSR Launches Statewide Water Initiative” - BWSR, 2014,

[http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/news/newsreleases/06-26-14\\_One\\_Watershed\\_Release.pdf](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/news/newsreleases/06-26-14_One_Watershed_Release.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> “One Watershed, One Plan FAQs” BWSR - Wetland Regulation in Minnesota Overview, Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources, [http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/planning/1W1P/1W1P\\_FAQs\\_General.pdf](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/planning/1W1P/1W1P_FAQs_General.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> “Minnesota Approves First-Ever Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans for Yellow Medicine and Root Rivers” BWSR – 2016 [http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/news/newsreleases/12-22-16\\_1W1P\\_release.pdf](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/news/newsreleases/12-22-16_1W1P_release.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> “Innovative approach to water management takes next step” – BWSR, 2016.

[http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/news/newsreleases/10-06-16\\_1W1P\\_release.pdf](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/news/newsreleases/10-06-16_1W1P_release.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> “Local Governments Join Forces to Plan for Water Management” BWSR – 2017

<http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/news/newsreleases/2017-07-11-Release-Water-Mgmt.pdf>

water agencies along with representatives from other stakeholder groups. Depending on the local landscape this can include AG producers, recreation industry, local businesses, city and tribe representatives and Federal partners such as Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), United States Forest Service (USFS), and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

## Resource Investment

The BWSR allocates resources to fund the 1W1P administrative costs along with the local planning grants. Local government units can use approved grant funding to hire consultants to draft plans, conduct modeling and help facilitate the process. Costs not covered by planning grants must be funded at the local level. The program is intended to be a shared process with co-ownership between the BWSR and the stakeholders of each watershed. However, local government units are not required to raise match funding in order to utilize these planning grants. Rather the BWSR considers the substantial amount of time and effort required by local partners to successfully develop and implement a watershed level management plan an in-kind investment. This approach recognizes the value of local participation which often requires attending ongoing meetings, overseeing ongoing information gathering and analysis, and developing documents and processes.

## Impact on Watershed-level Planning, Implementation or Outcomes

### How Success Has Been Measured

While Minnesota's 1W1P program is still new, the following metrics have been identified to gauge their success.

#### *Integration Outputs:*

- Since the launch of the 1W1P program in 2014, hundreds of watershed planning meetings have been held across the state engaging stakeholders in the watershed planning process.
- To date there are twenty-seven watersheds participating in the program
- Five comprehensive watershed plans have been completed and approved by BWSR.
- Plans include specific outcomes (e.g. Root River plan will reduce sediment by 15k over ten years. Which represents 21% of the needed progress).

#### *Integration Outcomes:*

- The 1W1P program has led to a paradigm shift in how local governments think about managing their aquatic resources.
- The project has increased collaboration among the partners.
- The project has led to more strategic allocation of funds.
- Project plans are able to tackle more complex issues.

One example of this can be seen in the Lake Superior North watershed. This watershed, which encompasses two counties, was part of the initial pilot phase of 1W1P. After completing the planning process one implemented change was to move to a single stormwater management system located in one city. Other examples include Red Lake Watershed and Cannon Watershed.

## **Cost Benefit Insights**

No information provided.

## **Information about Policy Related Issues**

Once a comprehensive watershed-based plan is adopted, local planners no longer need to have an additional local (county) plan. In Minnesota, this arrangement meets requirements in the state statute.

## **Challenges & Lessons Learned**

One of the biggest challenges the BWSR faced in launching the 1W1P program was getting local jurisdictions to work together and think at the watershed level after decades of managing at the local level. This was further complicated by initial confusion of the program's intentions, with many under the misconception that 1W1P would add another level to existing regulation and planning. Considerable effort was required to communicate the programs true intentions and engage stakeholders in constructive dialogue. Developing these key relationships and partnerships was challenging but essential to gain buy-in at the local level.

Additionally, the internal capacity of watershed partners to execute planning and implementation of watershed level projects vary greatly depending on the expertise and skills of the local staff. Setting measurable goals to monitor environmental improvements also presents a challenge.

Finally, many metrics that can be used to evaluate an effort to improve water quality are also affected by a range of factors beyond the control of watershed management, such as land uses and climate change. Understanding the limitations of attributing changes to a specific project should be encouraged, while still pursuing the activities.

## **Next Steps**

As 1W1P continues to move towards the goal of statewide watershed level management by 2025. BWSR is dedicated to the ongoing implementation and growth of this program. The 1W1P program is designed to conclude at the end of this period. The program conducts five-year updates and the plan has been kept up to date since its inception. In addition to increased participation and the expansion of watershed partnerships, BWSR hopes to continue to support local staff across the state to increase their skills and expertise. This increased internal capacity will help watershed partners become less reliant on consultants in the planning and implementation of watershed management plans resulting in cost-savings.

## **Transferability**

Two relatively unique circumstances contributed to the development of the 1W1P program in Minnesota and shaped its implementation. First is the 2008 constitutional amendment increasing the sales tax and designating the funds to protect natural resources. The second is the state's long history of water management by local governments. Without either of these factors the 1W1P program may not have

evolved into the current model. However, the formalized documentation of BWSR's work to launch the program along with the many resources they have created to help facilitate the development of watershed management plans can offer guidance to other states interested in watershed level management. With some necessary adaptations this is a highly replicable integration program.

Fortunately, the 1W1P Program has developed a forty-page guidebook that breaks down each element of plan writing – prioritizing, target implementation program, outreach, etc. This documentation will serve as a valuable resource for those interested in learning about or adapting the approach in other contexts. The guide is planned to be available at the end of Summer 2019.

## Contact Information

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[www.bwsr.state.mn.us/planning/1W1P/index.html](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us/planning/1W1P/index.html)

## Additional Resources

- [Wetlands Regulation in Minnesota Summary](#) (06/2016)
- [BWSR One Watershed, One Plan](#)
  - [Plan Content Requirements-Policy](#) (March 28, 2018)
  - [Operating Procedures-Version 2.0](#) (March 28, 2018)
  - [Guidance for Committees and Getting Ready to Plan](#) (March 28, 2018)
  - [Frequently Asked Questions about Plan Development](#) (November 2015)
  - [Lessons Learned from Pilot Watersheds](#) (May 2016)
- Local Government Water Roundtable Policy Papers
  - [Comprehensive Water Planning and Management Policy Paper](#) (November 25, 2013)
  - [2016 Funding Workgroup Policy Paper](#)
- [MN DNR Water Permits](#)
- [Minnesota Water Management Framework](#)