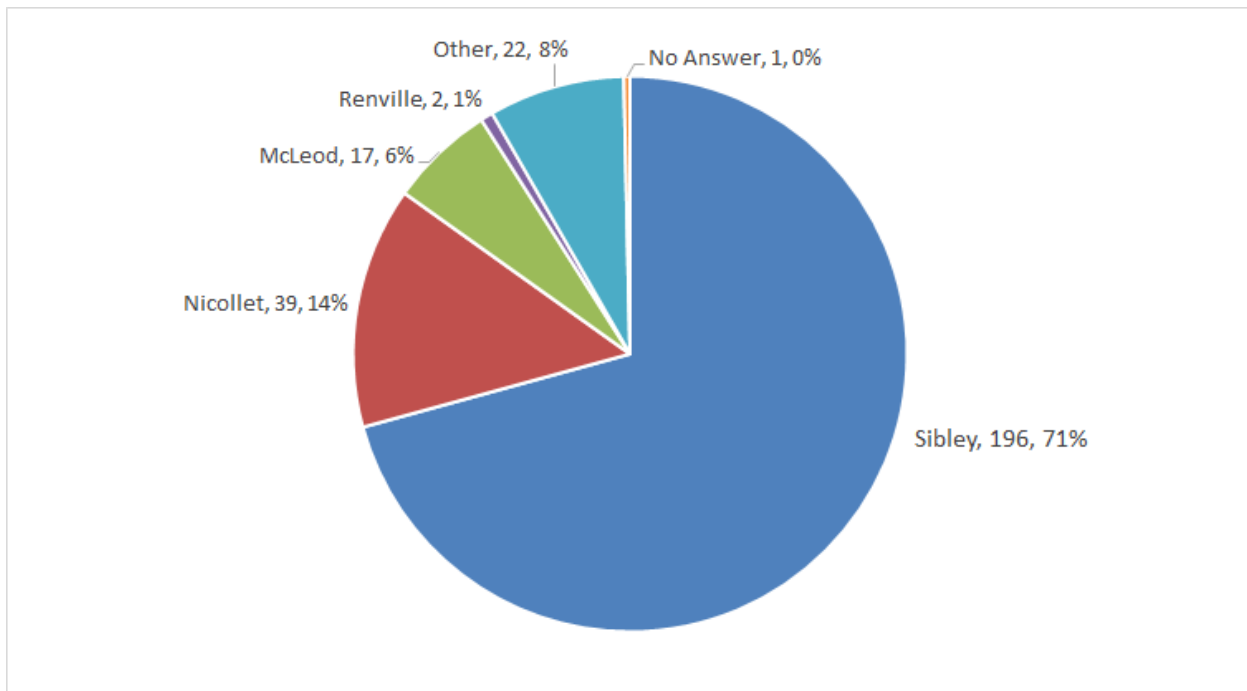


Memorandum

To: Lower Minnesota River West – Comprehensive Watershed Management Partnership Steering Team
From: Greg Williams, PE, Barr Engineering Co.
Subject: Results of the Lower Minnesota River West Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan public engagement survey
Date: February 22, 2021
Project: 23721014
c:

The Lower Minnesota River West Comprehensive Watershed Management Partnership (LMRWCRWMP) Steering Team developed and distributed a public engagement survey to understand the water and natural resource concerns of the people who live and work within the planning area. The survey included 10 questions. The survey was hosted online from mid-December, 2020 through February, 2021 and digitally advertised by the Partner organizations. Local lead staff also mailed the survey to approximately 2,500 residents. As of February 17, 2021, a total of 273 surveys (212 online, 61 mail) had been completed. This memorandum summarizes the results of the surveys submitted to date.

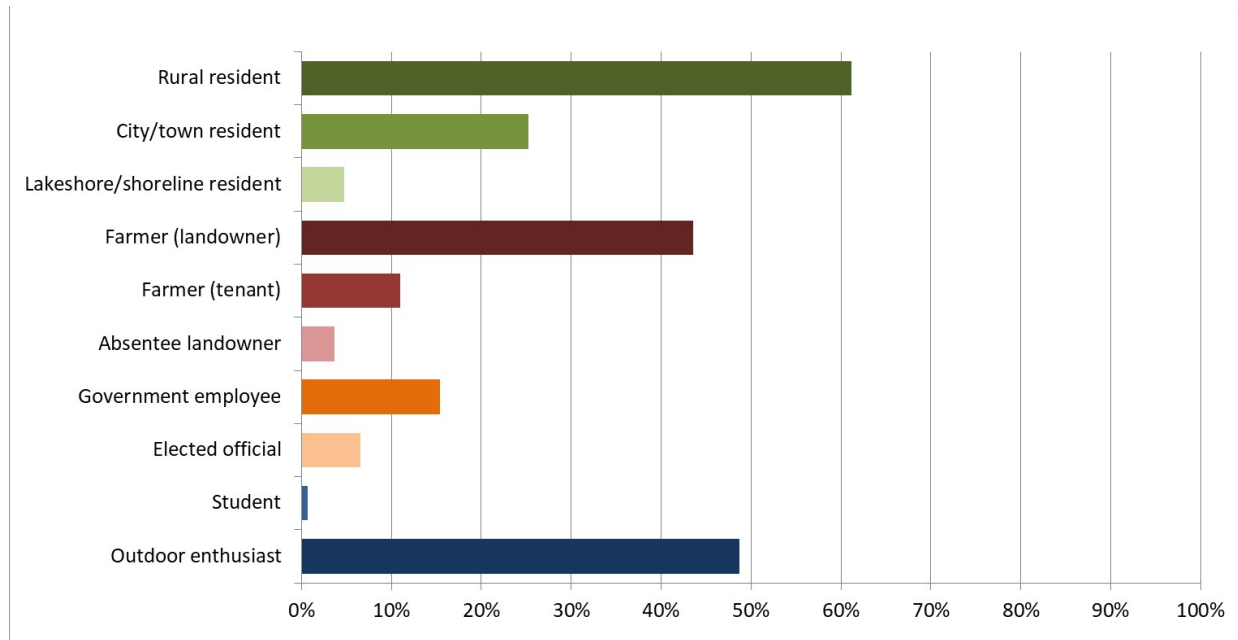
Question 1 – What is your County of residence?



Sibley, Nicollet, and McLeod counties are represented in proportion similar to their respective percentages of the overall planning area (70%, 18%, and 8% respectively). About 8% of survey

respondents identified a county outside the planning area. Other counties identified by multiple respondents included Le Sueur (5 responses), Scott (4 responses), and Blue Earth (3 responses).

Question 2 – Please select all of the following items (e.g., occupation, location of residence) that apply to you.



Question 2 asked survey respondents to identify themselves with respect to occupation, location, and other factors. The majority of survey respondents (60%) are rural residents while about 25% identified as city/town residents. Over 40% of survey respondents are landowner farmers and 10% are tenant farmers. Several respondents identified as both landowner and tenant farmers. About 15% of respondents identified as government employees. Very few students (2) responded to the survey. Nearly half (47%) of respondents identified as being outdoor enthusiasts. Sixteen survey respondents listed additional unique “identifiers” (e.g., business owner, drainage contractor, beekeeper).

Question 3 – Do you identify with any special interest groups in the area (e.g., farm organizations, church groups, fish/wildlife groups)?

Question 3 asked survey respondents to identify special interest groups with which they are involved. Such groups may provide potential connections for engaging residents in future actions. Approximately 40% of respondents (108) belong to a special interest group. Special interest groups most commonly cited included:

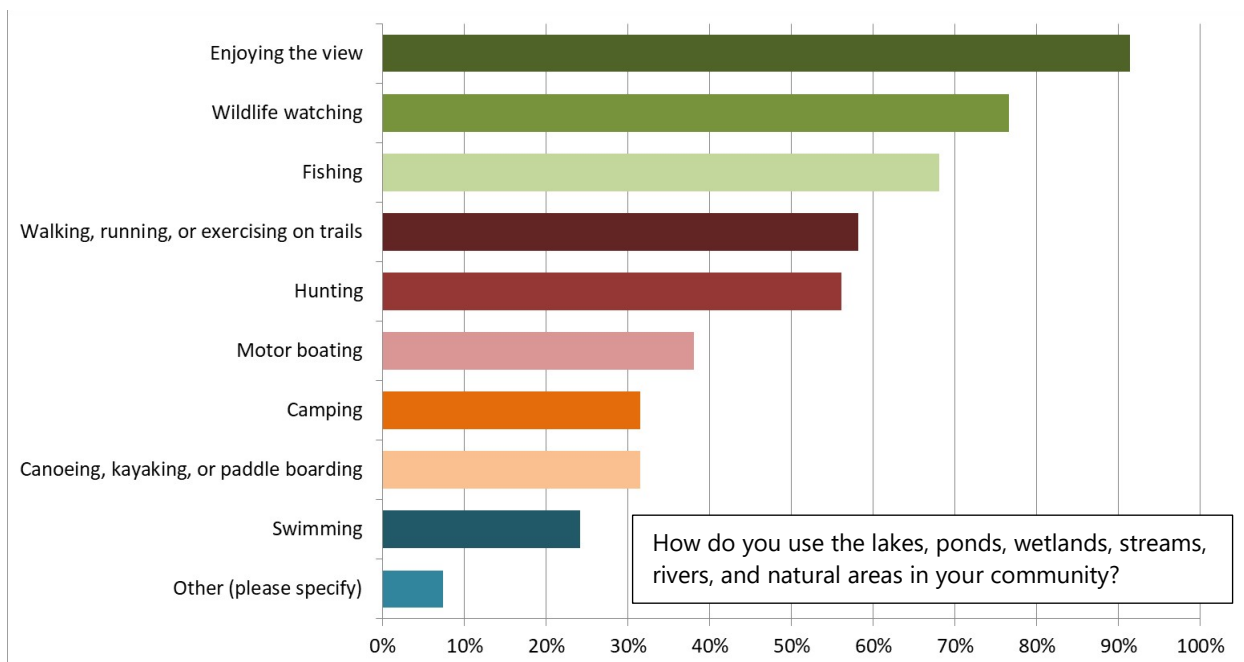
- Conservation/sporting groups (e.g., Ducks Unlimited, Friends of Rush River) – 51 respondents
- Church groups – 33 respondents
- Agricultural groups (e.g., Farm Bureau, Corn/Soybean Growers) – 20 respondents

Question 4 – How do you use the lakes, ponds, wetlands, streams, rivers, and natural areas in your community?

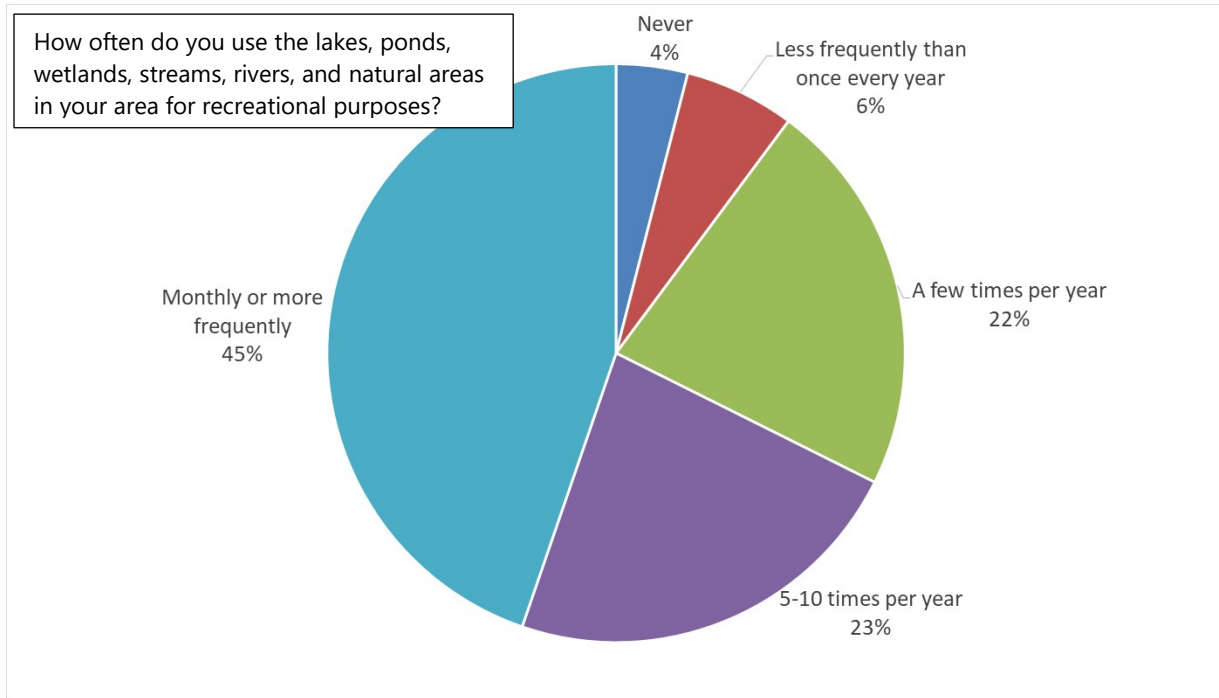
Question 5 – How often do you use the lakes, ponds, wetlands, streams, rivers, and natural areas in your area for recreational purposes?

Questions 4 and 5 are related to public use of the water and natural resources within the planning area. Responses to question 4 indicate that residents use the water resources and natural areas in the planning area for a range of activities. Enjoying the view (90% of respondents), wildlife watching (75% of respondents) and fishing (67% of respondents) were the most popular responses. Other uses identified by respondents included:

- Ice skating
- Horseback riding
- Trapping
- Pet recreation

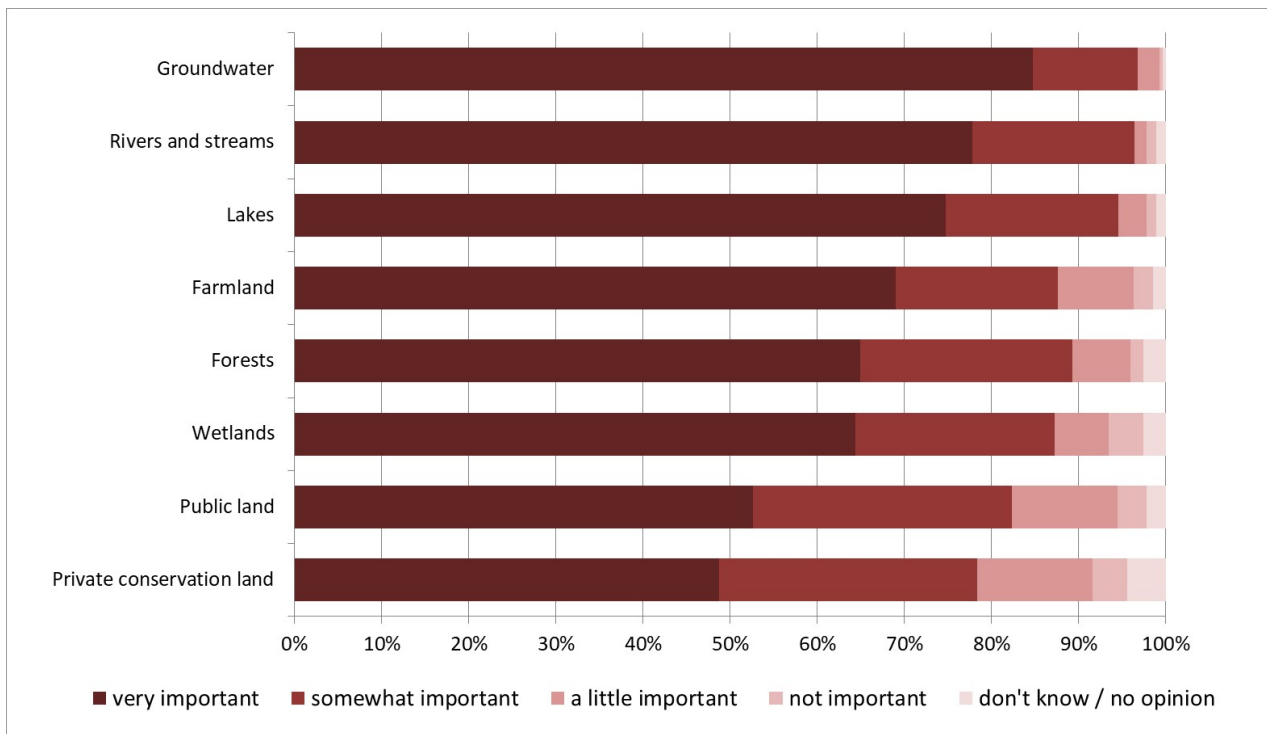


Responses to question 5 indicate frequent (monthly or more frequently) recreational use of resources in the planning area by nearly half of survey respondents. Few survey respondents (10%) indicated that they use the watershed’s water and natural resources for recreation less than once per year or never.



Question 6 – How Important are each of the following natural resources in your area?

Question 6 asked respondents to select how important each of eight natural resources are from a list of five choices.



Survey responses suggest that most residents consider *all* of the identified resources to be at least “somewhat important.” Many individual responses identified all of the resources as “very important,” limiting the ability for relative differentiation. Few survey respondents selected the “don’t know/no opinion” option (selected less than 10% of the time for any resource).

About 95% of survey respondents identified the following resources as very important or somewhat important:

- Groundwater
- Rivers and streams
- Lakes

Question 7 – Are there specific waterbodies or natural resources you are worried about?

Over half (153, or 54%) of the survey respondents answered “Yes” to the question asking if there were specific resources they are concerned about. Some responses were general (e.g., wetlands) while others identified specific waterbodies or areas (e.g., High Island Lake). Resources referenced most frequently in the responses to question 7 include:

- Minnesota River (41 responses)
- High Island Creek (16 responses)
- Rush River (17 responses)
- Wetlands (9 responses)
- High Island Lake (6 responses)
- Buffalo Creek (4 responses)
- Silver Lake (4 responses)
- Lake Titlow (3 responses)

A follow-up to question 7 asked survey respondents to identify their specific concerns. Responses were varied. The most frequently cited concerns included issues related to:

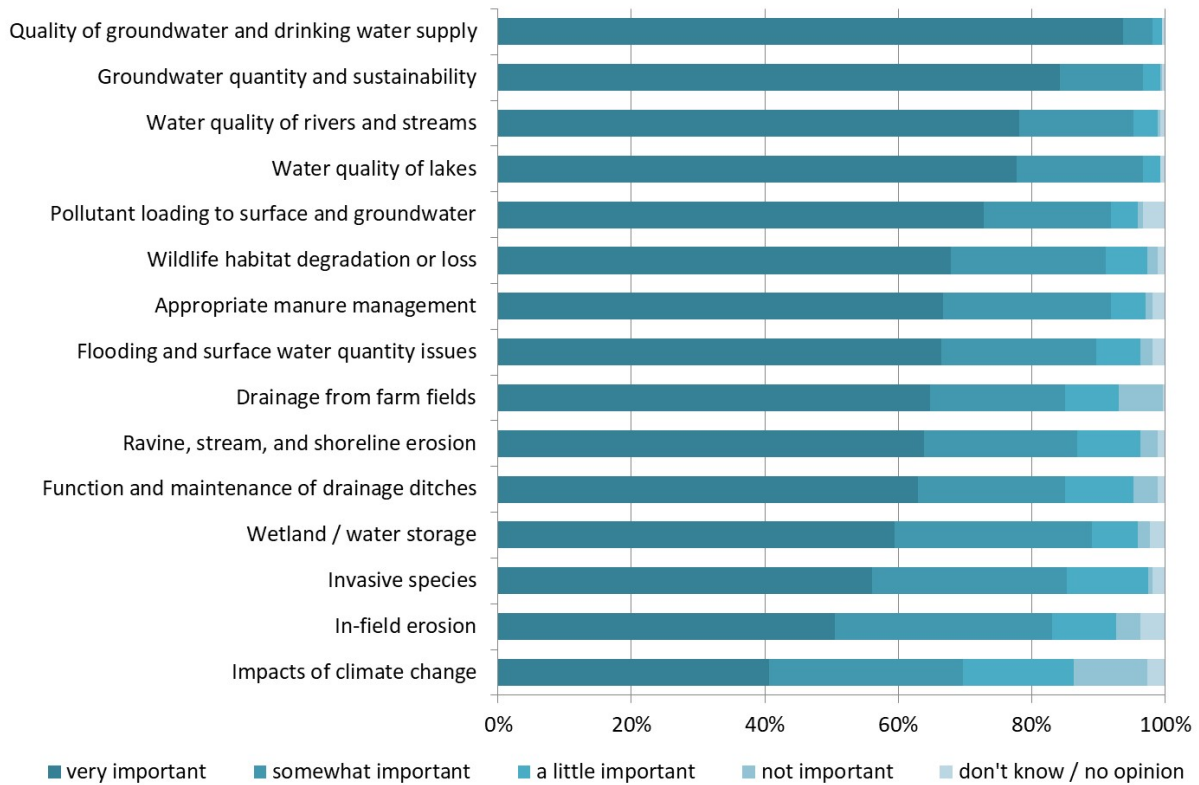
- Water quality degradation and/or pollutant loading (29 responses)
- Too much tiling (26 responses)
- Excessive erosion (23 responses)
- Flooding (23 responses)

Other issues cited less frequently included:

- Groundwater/drinking water quality
- Habitat loss and/or degradation
- Maintenance and repair of dams/ditches

Question 8 – How important are each of the following water- and natural resource-related issues to you?

Question 8 asked survey respondents to judge the importance of 15 specific water and natural resource issues:



All of the 15 issues listed in question 8 were considered very or somewhat important by at least 70% of survey respondents. Issues related to groundwater/drinking water quality and supply were considered the most important by survey respondents. Water quality of rivers and streams, water quality of lakes, and pollutant loading were also identified as highly important. This is noteworthy because groundwater quality within the planning area is very good, while many of the lakes and streams are impaired. Thus, surface water quality issues may warrant greater emphasis in the Plan, despite the perceived importance of groundwater issues. In additions, efforts to address surface water issues may focus on restoration, versus protection-focused efforts to address groundwater issues.

Excessive erosion was frequently cited as a specific concern in responses to question 7. Results of question 8 suggest that ravine, streambank, and shoreline erosion is generally perceived as a more significant issue than in-field erosion (note: this is consistent with sediment loading source data presented in the Lower Minnesota River Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategies (WRAPS) report (MPCA, 2020).

Impacts of climate change was the only issue identified as “very important” by less than 50% of survey respondents; this issue was the only issue considered “not important” by more than 10% of survey respondents.

Question 9 – Please share any additional comments you have regarding water and natural resource management in your area

Question 9 provided an opportunity for survey respondents to submit comments and/or suggestions in an open-ended response format. One hundred twelve respondents (41%) responded to question 9. Responses included more detailed discussion of specific issues as well as suggestions for implementation actions and strategies to address problems.

Some common themes included:

- Regulating, limiting, or otherwise dis-incentivizing tiling within the watershed
- Maintenance of degraded dams and ditches
- Balancing protection and restoration with management and utilization (e.g., “Don’t hug the tree so tight as to kill the tree”)
- Need for more storage and slower conveyance of water from upstream areas in the watershed
- Protection of remaining natural areas and high quality resources
- Increases in flood frequency and severity observed in recent history

Question 10 – Please indicate your interest in being contacted regarding BMP implementation opportunities and future Plan development meetings

Question 9 asked respondents to provide their contact information if they would like to be contacted regarding best management practice (BMP) implementation opportunities and future meetings related to the development of the Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan (Plan). Sixty-eight (25%) of respondents said they would be interested in BMP implementation opportunities. Seventy-eight (29%) of respondents said they would like to be contacted regarding future meetings. Fifty-one (19%) of survey respondents were interested in both.

Conclusions

The responses to the survey indicate strong public interest in the quality and management of water and natural resources in the planning area. Survey respondents are generally representative of the planning area and represent opinions of farmers and non-farmers, as well as rural and town/city residents. Open-ended responses indicate that many residents are well-informed about issues in the watershed as well as the factors driving these issues. The survey also indicates that there is interest in continued participation in the Plan process, either as part of Plan development or practice implementation.

The results of the survey, including open-ended comments, will be used as input in the issue and resource prioritization decisions of the Policy Committee.