

Vermillion River Watershed Management Plan Update

Final Public Engagement Plan

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1. Introduction

The Vermillion River Watershed Joint Powers Organization (VRWJPO) will be conducting stakeholder engagement as part of the Vermillion River Watershed Management Plan update. The public engagement process will provide the VRWJPO with timely, relevant, and candid feedback on public concerns and strategies proposed to be included in the Watershed Management Plan.

The Vermillion River Watershed encompasses 335 square miles in Dakota and Scott counties. The current 2016-2025 [Watershed Management Plan](#) and subsequent updates and amendments include a range of actions to protect and improve surface water and groundwater quality in the watershed. The Watershed Management Plan also provides an overview of the watershed's physical and biological conditions and water quality.

The Watershed Planning Commission (WPC), a citizen advisory committee, will be VRWJPO's primary advisory committee. Consulting services will be secured for development and facilitation of the Public Engagement Plan. The consultant will work closely with VRWJPO project team to develop, facilitate, organize, and summarize the public engagement process to inform the revision of the Watershed Management Plan. Public engagement efforts are projected to beginning in 2023 to support completion of the Watershed Management Plan update by the anticipated deadline.

This Public Engagement Plan guides the public engagement by involving all affected stakeholder groups and creating effective and inclusive engagement methods tailored to each group to motivate and involve stakeholders who may not normally be engaged. A successful Public Engagement Plan will produce meaningful and pointed feedback to guide the development of proposed Watershed Management Plan strategies.

2. Background

The VRWJPO was formed through a Joint Powers Agreement between Dakota and Scott counties in September of 2002. The purpose of the VRWJPO is to “exercise leadership in the development of policies, programs, and projects that will promote the accomplishment of the purposes found in Minn. Stat. § [103B.201](#), including the preparation, adoption and implementation of the plan required by Minn. Stat. § [103B.211](#) for the Vermillion River Watershed” and “guide and assist Dakota County and Scott County in acting jointly and individually to take actions that will promote the goals listed in Minn. Stat. § 103B.201 and fulfill their responsibilities under Chapter 103 B.”

The Vermillion River Watershed Joint Powers Board (VRWJPB) consists of one county commissioner from Scott County and two county commissioners from Dakota County. The VRWJPB is responsible for preparing, adopting and implementing a Watershed Management Plan that meets requirements of Minn. Stat § [103B.231](#). The WPC consists of eight members from Dakota County and one from Scott County. The WPC is responsible for advising the VRWJPB, which includes the review, comment and recommend upon the proposed Watershed Management Plan.

The Watershed Management Plan framework and goals are influenced by Minn. Stat. §[103B](#), and Minn. Rules [8410](#). The ten-year plan update is a comprehensive update of the Watershed Management Plan done not less than five years and not more than ten years after approval of the current plan by the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR). The current Vermillion River Watershed Management Plan was approved in June 2016. The revised Watershed Management Plan is anticipated to be completed in February 2026. The following are Minn. Statute and Rule requirements to be incorporated into the public engagement and plan review process:

- Before development of a plan or ten-year plan amendment, the VRWJPO will send notifications to the plan review agencies, counties, cities, townships, soil and water conservation districts, and to known stakeholders, of plan initiation and request input on local water-related issues and information, water management goals, official controls, and programs. This step was completed by the VRWJPO April 3 to June 5, 2023.
- The VRWJPO will hold an initial planning meeting presided over the organization’s governing body to receive, review, and discuss input. This meeting is scheduled for October 12th, 2023.
- Upon completion, but before final adoption of the Watershed Management Plan by the VRWJPB, the VRWJPO will submit the draft plan for a 60-day review and comment period to all counties, the Metropolitan Council, the state review agencies, the Board of Water and Soil Resources, soil and water conservation districts, towns, and statutory and home rule charter cities having territory within the watershed. The VRWJPO will hold a public hearing no sooner than 14 days after the 60-day review period of the draft plan.
- After the review and comment period and any resulting changes to the document are incorporated and approved by the VRWJPB, the Watershed Management Plan will be submitted to the Metropolitan Council, the state review agencies, and the Board of Water and Soil Resources for final review. The VRWJPO will adopt and implement the plan within 120 days after approval by the Board of Water and Soil Resources.

3. Public Engagement Objectives and Approaches

The primary public engagement objectives are:

1. Collect data to best inform the VRWJPO staff and Board throughout the Watershed Management Plan revision process, including attitudes, behaviors, and priorities related to the watershed.
2. Discuss and receive feedback on any proposed Watershed Management Plan strategies with relevant stakeholder groups.
3. Request feedback, ideas, and opinions from the stakeholder groups to:
 - Identify and assess challenges within the watershed for groundwater and surface water restoration and protection and determine strategies for addressing those challenges.
 - Identify opportunities for and barriers to implement and/or to follow proposed Watershed Management Plan strategies.
 - Understand the level of support for prospective Watershed Management Plan strategies.
4. Provide accurate, relevant, and timely information to help all of those involved understand the Plan revision process and prospective strategies for them to make informed comments and recommendations.

The VRWJPO’s public engagement approach is designed to solicit ideas, responses, feedback, and opinions from a varied group of stakeholders. The public engagement process will bring together multiple points of view to inform decisions, give legitimacy to the Watershed Management Plan revision process, identify potential problems and solutions, and articulate and clarify key strategies. The engagement process will connect the VRWJPO with new collaborators and foster relationships with existing partners to encourage change and raise awareness of the Watershed Management Plan revision. The VRWJPO’s engagement process will include visibility, transparency of the process, and appreciation for a range of viewpoints, and it will employ multiple communication methods to engage stakeholders.

The stakeholder groups affected by the plan revision are varied, with different and occasionally conflicting drivers and

desired outcomes. Therefore, the VRWJPO with support of the consultant will use a broad range of engagement approaches, including:

- Creating an inclusive engagement process to encourage participation that reflects the demographics of the watershed and its various stakeholder groups
- Establishing, renewing, and maintaining relationships with stakeholders
- Providing a variety of opportunities using multiple engagement techniques for all stakeholders to share diverse ideas
- Informing, listening, inviting, and responding to feedback from stakeholders
- Incorporating feedback into the revision process or addressing it in other ways
- Providing opportunities for ongoing communication with stakeholders
- Updating stakeholders throughout the revision process
- Recognizing and thanking stakeholders for the contributions during the revision process

Supportive Work Efforts: The Vermillion River Watershed Management Plan update will be written by VRWJPO staff and the Dakota County Office of Planning, with assistance from the Environmental Resources Department. HKGi will advise and facilitate the public engagement process and provide summary reports to the VRWJPO of the outcomes of the various stakeholder engagement sessions.

4. Major Groups to Engage

A holistic public engagement process requires a diverse group represented by various populations that are involved from start to finish. A process that involves diverse stakeholders assists in achieving a project that is reflective of the VRWJPO's diverse interests and ever-changing population. However, in order to effectively reach and involve various stakeholders, different types of specific engagement methods need to be used as their effectiveness can vary from one group to another. Major groups to engage include the following:

1. **Residents:** Over 167,000 people live in the Vermillion River Watershed, based on the 2010 U.S. Census
 - Single-family residents
 - Multi-family residents
 - Underrepresented residents, including non-native English speakers, low-income households, older adults, racial/ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities
2. **Business and Industry:**
 - Agricultural and farming type businesses, industry, and operations
 - Commercial entities
 - Industrial businesses
 - Construction businesses
 - Business owners
 - Landlords and commercial property owners

- Chambers and trade associations
- Real estate developers and homeowner associations
- High volume water users
- Golf course operators
- Other landscape irrigators
- Underrepresented businesses, including those owned or managed by Black, Indigenous and People of Color

3. Nonprofits, advocacy and special interest groups (list is not all inclusive):

- Friends of the Mississippi River
- Nature Conservancy
- Izaak Walton League
- Freshwater
- MN Environmental Partnership
- Hastings Environmental Protectors
- Trout Unlimited
- Ducks Unlimited
- Pheasants Forever
- Conservation Minnesota
- Sierra Club
- Minnesota Farmers Union
- Minnesota Farm Bureau
- Hmong American Farmers Association
- Lakeville Friends of the Environment
- Apple Valley Eco-Advocates
- MN Center for Environmental Advocacy
- Prairie Island Indian Community

4. Technical Advisory Group (TAG): technical stakeholder representatives from cities, townships, counties, state agencies, environmental consulting firms, universities, and other interested partners

5. Cities and Townships: 20 Dakota County and Scott County cities (11) and townships (9) that lie entirely or partly within the boundaries of the Vermillion River Watershed

Cities	Townships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apple Valley • Lakeville • Burnsville • Rosemount • Farmington • Hastings • Elko New Market • Vermillion (city) • Coates • Empire • Hampton (city) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Market Township • Nininger Township • Marshan Township • Eureka Township • Douglas Township • Ravenna Township • Castle Rock Township • Hampton Township • Vermillion Township

6. State and Regional Agencies:

- Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR)

- Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA)
- Minnesota Department of Health (MDH)
- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR)
- Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT)
- Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA)
- Metropolitan Council

7. VRWJPO staff will have responsibility to directly engage the following organizations:

- Vermillion River Watershed Joint Powers Board (VRWJPB): will be responsible for approving the Watershed Plan
- Watershed Planning Commission (WPC): will be responsible for providing committee advice and recommendation of issues, goals, and strategies to the VRWJPB
- Dakota County government leaders and County Departments
- Scott County government leaders and County Departments
- Dakota and Scott County Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD)

Type of Engagement	Target Audience						
	Technical Advisory Group (TAG)	Watershed residents	Cities / Townships	VRWJPO Boards, County, SWCD	Under-represented Groups	Stakeholders (businesses, industry, non-profits)	Partner agencies
WPC and VRWJPO Meetings				✓			
City /TownshipBoard Meetings		✓	✓				
Electronic media (Project Website, Questionnaire, Social Pinpoint)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Community Conversations		✓		✓	✓		
Stakeholder Listening Sessions/focus groups	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Public events/pop-up meetings		✓			✓		

5. Engagement Methods

Electronic and Paper Questionnaires: Electronic and paper surveys for residents and stakeholders to provide opinions and ideas about the watershed, providing a framework for strategies. One questionnaire will be posted per round electronically, and hard copy surveys will be provided at local libraries in Farmington, Lakeville, Hastings, and Elko New Market to be collected and results tallied and compiled along with the digital surveys.

Map-based Online Engagement (Social Pinpoint): During Phase 1, an interactive online map will be embedded into VRWJPO’s website in order to collect comments about issues and opportunities tied to geographic locations throughout the watershed and within the subwatersheds. An “idea wall” will also be posted on the VRWJPO

website to provide a place for people to offer up thoughts related to the plan.

In-person Community Conversations: The public will be invited to attend 2 community conversations per phase to share thoughts on the Watershed Management Plan revision, and to provide comments on proposed issues and strategies. Multiple events are anticipated to cover the geographic area of the watershed.

Virtual Stakeholder Meetings: Six virtual meetings will be offered each phase to inform and fully engage stakeholders (businesses, NGOs, non-profits, agency partners, the TAG, underrepresented groups, and City/Township representatives) in the revision process, by inviting participation of all contributors while the draft strategies are being formed. A variety of meeting times will be offered, and meeting content/questions can be customized based on attendees, once representatives select a meeting to attend.

Intercepts at Existing Events/Meetings: Two opportunities to engage stakeholders at existing VRWJPO or County events will be scheduled per phase.

Two rounds of stakeholder engagement are anticipated to (1) receive input on perceptions of issues and thoughts on potential opportunities and solutions; and (2) receive feedback on draft plan goals and strategies.

6. Tools to Promote Participation in Stakeholder Engagement

Effectively promoting and advertising the engagement opportunities will be crucial to their success. Tools for promoting the plan engagement opportunities may include email marketing, social media, direct mail, counties' print newsletters, newspaper notices, direct outreach to community leaders, community events, etc. VRWJPO staff will help develop and distribute materials to explain the Watershed Management Plan revision process and potential strategies.

Type	Outlet	Contact/Distribution	Timing/Number
In Person	Community Conversations	Advertised on website and via press releases (2 weeks before events)	Phases 1 & 2 (2 per phase)
	Pop-up Intercepts	Advertised on website	Phases 1 & 2 (2 per phase)
	WPC and VRWJPO Meetings	Travis to attend (HKGi to provide engagement summaries as needed for updates)	Throughout project
	City and Township Board Meetings	Travis to split attendance with Matt Belanger (who attends two township meetings/month) and provide updates	Goal to interface with each at least once throughout the process (supplemented by email notification of engagement and invites to the stakeholder meetings).
Electronic	Stakeholder Meetings	6 separate meeting options emailed to stakeholders each phase to select one meeting to attend.	Phases 1 & 2 (6 per phase)
	VRWJPO Website	Brita to update with materials/notices (staff or HKGi provided)	As needed

Type	Outlet	Contact/Distribution	Timing/Number
	Social Pinpoint & SurveyMonkey	Posted on website and advertised on project materials. Brita to notify project partners and encourage them to distribute opportunities to their network.	Phase 1: October 12 th -December 2023
	Konveio	HKGi to provide link to draft document for review by stakeholder groups & the public	Phase 2 (summer-fall 2024)
Social Media	VRWJPO Social Media- Facebook, X, Instagram, etc.	Brita	As needed, in advance of open houses/events/on-line input
Print	Hardcopy Survey	Local libraries (Hastings, Farmington, Lakeville, Elko New Market). Have librarians collect and coordinate periodic pickup.	October-December and for Phase 2 (June-August)
	Mailed paper surveys	Business reply postage. Identify distribution to farmers/large landowners based on acreage	As needed (if rural resident response is lacking)
	Dakota county rural newsletter	Brita to prepare post each year	Once per phase

Type	Outlet	Contact/Distribution	Timing/Number
	Poster displays at parks: Spring Lake Park Reserve, Whitetail Woods	Katie Pata for distribution in DC parks	Once per community engagement phase
	Poster display at select churches, township halls, farm bureau and/or farmers union as needed (if participation is lacking)	TBD (reach out to Watershed Planning Commissioner who is part of Farmers' Union)	As needed
	Poster display at Libraries:	Local libraries (Hastings, Farmington, Lakeville, Elko New Market)	October-December and for Phase 2 (June-August)
	Press release	Brita to coordinate	2 weeks before Community Conversations

7. Key Questions to Ask

Asking the right question is exceptionally important in ensuring that the engagement of stakeholders leads to information that is valuable for the planning process. A mix of open-ended and quantitative questions will be asked of stakeholders through the various engagement methods described above, striving to answer these broad, overarching questions:

- Discuss mission of the VRWJPO and the plan update
- What goals and priorities exist around groundwater and surface water issues in the Vermillion River Watershed?
- What are perceived major issues in the Vermillion River Watershed, and what is the level of concern? What perceptions and misperceptions should be addressed?
- What are challenges and suggested changes to existing official controls and Standards?
- What are the barriers and opportunities to protect groundwater and surface quality and quantity (policy, legal, technical, operations, etc.)? What tradeoffs are willing to be made?
- What strategies could address challenges and support work toward goals? What are potential strategies

to overcome identified barriers?

- What financial, regulatory, and educational approaches should be considered to reach goals?
- What are the opportunities for collaboration and coordination?
- How much should be invested in watershed restoration and protection in the next 10 years?

These questions will be asked of all stakeholder groups in some form through both in-person and online opportunities. Where specialized knowledge or skillsets need to be called on (such as surface water management, economic development, natural resource preservation, etc.), additional questions will be asked.

8. Action Plan

The below are key project phases and milestones. Approval and adoption of the revised Watershed Management Plan should be completed by February 2026.

1. **Start-Up and Project Organization:** March – August 2023

- Receive authorization from VRWJPO to initiate Plan update process (Completed March 23, 2023)
- Provide notification of Plan update to review agencies, counties, cities, townships, soil and water conservation districts, and known stakeholders (Completed April 4 – June 5, 2023)
- Develop Draft Public Engagement Plan
- Post Request for Proposal (RFP) for public engagement consultant; and select preferred consultant to support public engagement

2. **Research on Issues and Stakeholder Needs:** September 2023– February 2024

- Meet with consultant and finalize the Public Engagement Plan and the implementation structure/schedule; develop engagement materials
- Hold Watershed Management Plan Update initial planning meeting per Minn. Rules 8410 (October 12, 2023)
- Conduct Round 1 Public Engagement to receive input on perceptions of problems and thoughts on potential opportunities and solutions (October 2023-February 2024 timeframe)
- Analyze and summarize technical research findings and stakeholder engagement sessions to inform development of the Watershed Management Plan goals and strategies

3. **Draft Goals and Strategies for the Plan:** February – December 2024

- Review technical research and stakeholder engagement findings with the TAG, WPC, and VRWJPO
- Develop draft goals and strategies based on stakeholder, TAG, WPC, and VRWJPO feedback
- Conduct Round 2 Public Engagement to receive input on draft goals and strategies (start July 2024 timeframe)

4. **Draft Plan Review and Adoption:** May 2025 – February 2026

- Present Plan to WPC and VRWJPB, seek recommendation on plan release for public review and comment (60-days)
- Conduct 60-day review with notification to all stakeholders (May – July 2025)
- Compile and summarize comments; identify needed changes; complete public hearing
- Present Plan to WPC and VRWJPB, seek recommendation for release for Metropolitan Council, the state review agencies, and the Board of Water and Soil Resources for final review and approval.
- Complete 90-day state review period (August – November 2025)
- Achieve Board of Soil and Water Resources approval and VRWJPO Final Plan adoption (February 2026)