

Testimony to the Lower Minnesota River Watershed on

1-8-25

From Scott Sparlin, Executive Director, Coalition for a Clean Minnesota River, and  
Coordinator/Facilitator for the Minnesota River Congress.

My name is Scott Sparlin, I live in the heart of Minnesota River Valley in New Ulm, Brown County. The organizations I work for (The Coalition for a Clean Minnesota River-The Minnesota River Congress) have been advocating on behalf of clean water and our state's namesake river watershed for the past 36 years.

We are recommending two critical actions for consideration by the Lower Minnesota River Watershed District that when accomplished will improve multiple natural and scientific conditions in the river for both the short term and the long term.

The first of the two recommendations is to join with others who are currently legislatively advocating for appropriations for our new state Water Quality and Storage Program. We ask that you urge your Legislative Advisor to seek out and work with others who have engaged in this effort already. Also the Legislative Advisor should aggressively work on behalf of the Watershed District specifically, emphasizing the role the district plays in keeping the lower 25 miles of the river open to barge traffic related businesses via dredging responsibilities and expenditures. The Board of Water and Soil Resources will be recommending 50 million dollars over the next biennium and that is the amount others are initially working with.

The Second of the two recommendations is for the Lower Minnesota River Watershed District to join efforts currently underway in creating a Minnesota River Basin Commission/Management Board. We advise the board to support the effort in every way appropriate including directing your Legislative Advisor to collaborate with those supporting entities and organizations who seek to see this action come to fruition. Since the dissolution of the former Minnesota River Board in 2014, we, along with a growing group of others, feel this has become a very apparent missing component needed in order to address the multiplicity of systemic issues that affect the river's general conditions. The following testimony lays out how this initiative to create the entity we are recommending you become part of, came to be.

In 1988 an extensive study of the Minnesota River began at the direction of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) called the Minnesota River Assessment Project. After 2 years of comprehensive scientific study it revealed what firsthand observers had already intuitively anticipated, a severely polluted river system.

Subsequently in 1990 Minnesota Governor Arne Carlson directed the MPCA to begin a two-year planning process called the Minnesota River Implementation Project. This

process was designed to create and develop actions which would result in the improvement of water quality conditions in the main stem and thirteen tributary watersheds. Those assembled by the MPCA represented a diverse cross section of stakeholders and citizens called the Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC). After 2 years of scientific presentations and extensive debate the committee produced a set of 10 recommendations for action.

One of the ten recommendations was to establish a Minnesota River Commission whose charge would be to ensure government accountability and citizen participation in meeting Minnesota River cleanup goals. The first charge of the new commission would be establishing goals for the cleanup effort. Here is the actual wording from the report, (It is hoped that this report and the work of the Minnesota River Assessment Project will guide and expedite the planning efforts of the Commission.) The board would also provide a broad oversight of major agency activities related to the Minnesota River and facilitate inter-agency cooperation. Further the board would evaluate the effectiveness of expenditures. They would also advocate for and educate people about the river and the restoration effort. Another responsibility would be to hold an annual event on the state of the river. The Commission would not be involved in the day-to-day operations of agencies but would have access to information and the decision-makers within those agencies. In addition to being accountable to the citizens of Minnesota, the Commission would also report to the Governor and the Legislature.

In 1994 Senator Dennis Frederickson introduced a bill in the Minnesota Legislature of which I testified on behalf of, to establish the Minnesota River Commission. The components of that bill are reflected in the Citizens Advisory Committee recommendation which accompanies this document. Although it has been 30 years since that time, many of the elements and components from that bill need to be options under consideration today.

During that same session of the Legislature of which that bill was introduced, another bill had been introduced to create a different entity of which membership consisted exclusively of one County Commissioner from each of the 36 counties of the Minnesota River Basin.

The state was quite willing at the time to turn the responsibility over to counties to see what they would do about the pollution challenges the river had at the time. Subsequently the county entity structure idea passed and the Minnesota River Commission bill failed. The Minnesota River Basin Joint Powers Board was then created and signed into law.

Fast forward to 2014, after 20 years of existence, 2 years of planning and even providing a way forward with funding options, the counties decided to call it quits and turn the responsibility of reducing pollution and damages caused in the Minnesota River

Watershed over to the State of Minnesota. Since that time there has been no attempt by the State of Minnesota to comprehensively and collectively address the complicated diversity of issues that are associated with the watershed.

That brings us to today. We have reached a water management crisis in the Minnesota River Watershed. Due to land use practices both urban and rural we continue to experience increased losses to infrastructure, business, recreation and a host of other societal costs which are at an unacceptable rate and putting many Minnesotans at varying degrees of risk. Exacerbating this condition is the climatic trend and future prediction of increased rainfalls in short periods of time. Flood rates from Summer rainfall now contribute more to flooding than normal spiring snowmelt. The combination of all these factors leads first to small and medium sized tributary streambank erosion. Then the dislodged sediments combined with the increased rate flows enable even more sediments and nutrients to be delivered to our lakes, major tributaries, and main stems where they then flow downstream to the Mississippi River, Lake Pepin and ultimately the Gulf of Mexico.

The time to get serious about this at a state level is long past due. That is why we feel it is time to create a Minnesota River Management Board that reflects a true cross-section of greater public representation than what was attempted prior. The makeup of the management board is certainly up for discussion/debate; however our network believes strongly that citizen membership should make up at least half of the voting membership. This was clearly reflected in feedback we received from our 16<sup>th</sup> Minnesota River Congress event held in June of this year.

I will close my testimony today by adding that the Water Quality and Storage Program which is administered by the Board of Water and Soil Resources is receiving high levels of interest from landowners in the Minnesota Basin and is asking for 50 million dollars per biennium appropriations from the legislature. Our network urges the Lower Minnesota River Watershed District to advocate for support the program and the request to the fullest extent possible.

# ESTABLISH A MINNESOTA RIVER COMMISSION TO OVERSEE RESTORATION

## **Rationale**

A new institutional structure is needed to ensure government accountability and citizen participation in meeting Minnesota River cleanup goals. The Citizens' Advisory Committee proposes the creation of the Minnesota River Commission.

**Action Plan** The functions of the Commission will include:

- Establishing goals for the cleanup effort. (It is hoped that this report and the work of the Minnesota River Assessment Project will guide and expedite the planning efforts of the Commission.)
- Providing broad oversight of major agency activities related to the Minnesota River and facilitating inter-agency cooperation.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of expenditures.
- Advocating for and educating people about the river and the cleanup effort.
- Holding an annual conference on the state of the river.
- The Commission will not be involved in the day-to-day operations of agencies, but will have access to information and the decision-makers within those agencies. In addition to being accountable to the citizens of Minnesota the Commission will report to the Governor and the Legislature.

## **The following structure is recommended.**

**Citizens**—These members should be chosen to represent the diversity of interests in the river basin farmers, businesspeople, educators, and conservationists. These citizens should be knowledgeable about and actively interested in the Minnesota River. To convince the general public that the Commission is not just another government agency, it is essential that at least half the members of the Commission come from this group.

## **Local organizations**

These members should be elected officials or agency staff who have already been working to clean up the river and who have been cooperating with other local organizations in that effort.

## **State agencies**

These members should be the Commissioners or Deputies of agencies directly involved in Minnesota River issues, including MPCA, BWSR, MDA, and MDNR. In addition, one or more top representatives from Minnesota Extension Service (MES) or the University of Minnesota should be included.

## **Dakota communities**

Members should include representatives of the Shakopee Mdewakanton, Lower Sioux, Upper Sioux, and Prairie Island Dakota communities.

**Costs** The costs, estimated at \$100,000 per year, will include staff and administrative support as well as per diem expenses for Commission members.

Potential Operations Considerations for Minnesota River  
Management Board  
(what would/could it do/provide for?)

These are draft ideas

- A hearing communications setting and opportunity, to consider and identify basin specific systemic water management process changes needs. Subsequent policy change/modification considerations for recommendation to all accountable implementing state and/or local entities. A place to present high profile sets of circumstances as an example of what potential large scale actions need to be set in motion to affect a more desirable outcome.
- Coordination and up to date information sharing among all participants and provide for regular public outreach communications of all forms of public media.
- A potential for scale sized partnerships to accomplish basin-wide positive outcomes for multiple interests.
- The potential to collectively develop innovative basin-wide initiatives for needed major funding proposals.
- A chance for state agencies to show/report they can work together to accomplish a goal which has been a state focus of interest since 1988.
- A chance for innovations coming from the private sector to showcase outcomes related to water quality/quantity condition improvements.
- A place for the public to have truly relevant questions directed appropriately and answered.

# Potential Structure Makeup Considerations

## These are from the 1994 recommendations

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## Other potential member organizations to consider for inclusion (A list for discussion on membership makeup and size)

Minnesota State University Mankato, Water Resources Center

Minnesota Farmers Union

MN Corn Growers Assn.

MN Soybean Growers Assn.

MN Cattlemen's Assn.

Land Stewardship Project

Minnesota Soil Health Coalition

Izaak Walton League (UMRI)

Ducks Unlimited

Pheasants Forever

MN Fish

The Coalition for a Clean Minnesota River

Clean Up our River Environment

Friends of the Minnesota Valley

Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy

Lake Pepin Legacy Alliance

MN Conservation Federation

Anglers for Habitat

Mankato Paddling and Outing Club

Retired Land Engineers

Minnesota Watershed Dist. Mgrs.

County Commissioners

US Fish and Wildlife Service

Area 2 Joint Powers Board

Redwood Cottonwood Rivers C A

US Army Corps of Engineers

Conservation Minnesota

MN Well Owners Assn.

MN Wastewater Operators Assn.

Catholic leadership representation

Lutheran leadership representation

Faith Community representation

Districts 5 and 6 SWCD Reps.

**(Could these be categorized and specialized?)**