



LOWER MINNESOTA RIVER WATERSHED DISTRICT

Executive Summary for Action

Lower Minnesota River Watershed District Board of Managers Meeting
Wednesday, June 18, 2025

Agenda Item

Item 7. J. - Revised Process for Citizen-initiated EAWs (Environmental Assessment Worksheets)

Prepared By

Linda Loomis, Administrator

Summary

On May 28, 2025, the Board of Managers was informed that the Environment Omnibus Bill working group had reached an agreement to include language in the bill specifically addressing a revised process for citizen-initiated Environmental Assessment Worksheets (EAWs).

In response, President Barisonzi prepared a letter intended for Hennepin County, which was circulated to the Board for review. The letter is now presented for Board approval and authorization for distribution. The Board may also identify and designate additional entities to receive the letter, beyond Hennepin County.

Attachments

Letter dated May 29, 2025 – A Deeply Flawed Change to Citizen-Initiated Environmental Review – Our Voice is being removed.

Recommended Action

Motion to approve letter and authorize distribution to appropriate agencies

May 29, 2025

Subject: A Deeply Flawed Change to Citizen-Initiated Environmental Review – Our Voice Is Being Removed

Dear Board Members,

Following the recent update from our legislative representative regarding the environment omnibus agreement, I want to raise a serious concern about one provision that I believe significantly weakens local environmental oversight.

Specifically, I'm referring to the revised process for citizen-initiated Environmental Assessment Worksheets (EAWs). This change was apparently negotiated between legislative leadership, the MPCA, and the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce—but without meaningful input from watershed districts like ours.



Under the proposed new process, occupants of this home would have no ability to petition for environmental review of upstream county actions—even when those actions directly contribute to the erosion threatening their property.

As President of this Board, I feel obligated to call attention to how this language undermines both our authority and our ability to protect the communities and ecosystems we serve. Here's why I believe this provision is deeply flawed:

1. Geographic Limits Silence Key Stakeholders

Only allowing residents or landowners in or near the project area to sign a petition excludes many stakeholders, including people who might be affected downstream, recreational users, and environmental experts who live elsewhere.

The policy would effectively ignore regional interdependence. Downstream towns, tribal governments, and scientific institutions outside the petition boundary may have critical expertise or be directly impacted, but are locked out of the process.

2. Watershed Districts Are Shut Out

Most concerning to me: this process bypasses local watershed districts like ours. Even when we are directly impacted by a proposed project—whether through increased runoff, habitat degradation, or water quality risks—we are not automatically consulted or empowered to call for an EAW. Our technical expertise and local knowledge are completely left out of the process. That's a serious problem.

And yet, we're still expected to deal with the consequences. If a project leads to erosion, flooding, or water contamination, it's our local taxpayers—our residents—who will pay for the clean-up, the mitigation infrastructure, or the loss of ecological services. We're being stripped of the ability to advocate on behalf of our constituents while being left with the costs. That's fundamentally unfair and fiscally irresponsible.

3. 100 Signatures Is Unreachable for Many

Requiring 100 people from within the county or an adjoining one sounds reasonable in theory,

but in rural or lower-population areas, this is an enormous hurdle. Organizing that many people, especially before a project is finalized, is no small task, particularly for marginalized or under-resourced communities.

4. It's Still Up to the Government Agency to Decide

Even if a petition meets the threshold and provides credible evidence, the responsible governmental unit (RGU) can still deny the request. There's no guarantee of an EAW—just a promise to consider it. That leaves far too much discretion in the hands of agencies that may be under political or financial pressure to greenlight projects.

5. Short Timelines Undermine Thorough Review

A 15-day window (extendable to 30) is too short for an RGU to seriously evaluate whether a project might have significant environmental effects, especially in complex or controversial cases.

6. It Discourages Citizen Engagement

The process places the burden of proof on the public, often requiring “material evidence” that ordinary people aren't equipped to provide without lawyers, consultants, or scientists. It's a system that favors developers and disadvantages the very communities we're supposed to serve.

In short, this provision gives the illusion of accountability and public input, but in practice, it makes it harder, not easier, for residents, communities, and even local watershed boards to raise legitimate environmental concerns before it's too late.

As a board tasked with protecting our watershed, I believe we should be advocating for a more accessible, transparent, and community-centered process. We need to make it easier for the public—and for local governing bodies like ours—to raise the flag when projects could harm our shared environment.

I recommend we consider issuing a formal position to the EQB or legislature urging reform of the EAW petition rules—specifically, to expand who may petition, reduce the threshold, and ensure that local watershed boards are notified and empowered to participate in the review process.

Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joseph Barisonzi". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Joseph" being more prominent.

Joseph Barisonzi
Board Member, LMRWD