

Themes from Focus Groups with MPCA External Stakeholders: Perceived Opportunities and Threats Regarding the MPCA Strategic Plan

October 2012

Executive Summary

In September and October, three focus groups were conducted with MPCA external stakeholders. Participants were asked to identify threats and opportunities to the MPCA moving forward with the strategic plan. Sessions were held in St. Paul on September 17, Mankato on September 27, and Brainerd on October 3. MPCA Senior Managers generated a broad list of invitees, including regulated parties from various sectors, units and levels of government, and environmental groups, from across the state, although few members of environmental organizations attended.

In general, the conversations evolved to a general critique of how the agency is doing its work. Yet, clear perceived threats and opportunities emerged. They can be characterized as **four** two-sided, overlapping issues. The generally held view was that if we address the issues well, *opportunities* are created for us to fulfill our mission and strategic plan. If we do not address them well, the consequences would go beyond simply missed opportunities. The issues threaten to undermine our success. The issues are listed below, and then explained. They are generally characterized as recommendations, because that was the way they were presented.

- Communicating
- Partnering, especially as it coincides with stakeholders' moves toward *sustainability*
- Developing MPCA employees, especially helping them understand the context in which partners and stakeholders work
- Linking our actions in these areas to agency strategies, while streamlining the Strategic Plan

The issues are perceived to overlap in some of the following ways:

- Many examples of successes and competence on the part of MPCA employees were cited by participants. But there was a perception that our performance—and even our “style” and “philosophy”—are inconsistent. Setting expectations and policies in the strategic plan should help reinforce them, e.g., setting a customer satisfaction objective.
- Participants requested more transparent partnering in all areas of agency work, especially earlier on in projects and processes that involve regulated parties and other government organizations. “Partnering” refers to the nature and the tone of the relationship, but in practice it is the same as the *communicating* point.

- Areas of development stakeholders would like to see for agency employees include: (1) “soft skills” that invite cooperation; (2) orientation to the cultures and operations of the industries in questions; (3) approaching nonpoint-source pollution with unregulated parties in a way genuinely distinct from a point-source approach; and (4) better alignment with agency management and with one another regarding the tone, assumptions about focus and scope, and conduct brought to interactions with regulated parties. Employee development is therefore linked to the other three issues.

I. Communication (especially regarding the context for actions)

Themes within the general issue of *communication*:

- A. Evaluations of progress on our strategies demonstrate success, especially over time. But our success is not widely known. It is in the interest of the environment, our partners (including regulated parties and other government organizations), and ourselves to **broadcast our success**. Failing to do so is a potential *threat*; better telling our story is an *opportunity*. We can *partner* with others who possess more experience and expertise in this area.
- B. For some time, the agency has been concerned with issues that have not been as resonant with the general public as they perhaps once were. But now there is an *opportunity*, as we communicate with various stakeholders, to **place our work in the context of sustainability and nonpoint sources**. It would be a *threat* to our success to communicate within the narrow confines of scientific specialties, and as if “the data speaks for itself.”
- C. Whether the news on the state of the environment in a given situation is “good” or “bad,” it is in our interest to **communicate clearly, in perspective, in a way understandable to a broad audience**. When our actions seem arbitrary or punitive or out of proportion to the perceived problem, our relationships with stakeholders are *threatened*. When stakeholders understand why we are taking a given action, and how the parts in a system work together, there are more *opportunities* for mutual understanding.
- D. A better understanding of the context for our actions (why we are doing what we are doing) would help ameliorate some of the difficulties that our staff experience working with external stakeholders. If we **communicate rationale and context better**, there will be fewer *threats* from opposition—general and specific—and more *opportunities* associated with mutual understanding and cooperation.
- E. **Engaging stakeholders earlier in the process of implementing our pollution management strategies and actions** would create additional *opportunities* for understanding and compliance, increase sustainability, and lead to fewer perceived *threats*. Projects would be less resource-intensive and contentious for both the agency and its partners. With a better relationship, transactions costs are lower.

- F. Our website features strengths and weaknesses. Frustration navigating the website and using the search function *threaten* our relationships with stakeholders. There is an *opportunity* to create a more cooperative environment in which stakeholders take more responsibility for managing their roles in executing our strategies if we **improve our technological resources for stakeholders, including the website, online training and data access.**
- G. Some stakeholders wonder if employees consistently stay focused on the task before them. The stakeholders wonder if—for example, in the middle of a permitting process—some employees “conduct a science research project” and/or look for additional factors to include. Perceived “scope creep” is a *threat* to cooperation. There is an *opportunity* to **clarify and follow the focus and scope of projects.**

II. Partnering

- A. A number of stakeholders indicated that we are getting better at partnering, but **more partnering is needed.** Some examples of cited potential *opportunities* include:
- Wastewater treatment operators need more dialogue between permit writers and facilities.
 - Watershed partners need to come together to “address a manageable portion of the problem.”
 - There is more potential to enlist interns and volunteers. Water stewards could be established along the lines of the “master gardener” concept. Trade associations and academics are additional potential partners.
 - The MPCA needs to know when and how to work directly with stakeholders and when to allow partners to mediate. For example, SWCDs might be best suited to help the agency interact with farmers.
 - Better partnering with local governments would help with resource limitations.
- B. Although better partnering between all stakeholders would help, there is a special *opportunity* for government organizations at various levels to coordinate, in order to **provide more consistent messages and promote more consistent practices.** Perceiving various government organizations working at cross purposes *threatens* quality and breeds cynicism.

C. It was suggested that the agency could **look in perhaps unlikely places for examples to emulate**. Examples include:

- Collect data in conjunction with others, such as the Department of Health's Public Health Survey.
- The U of M's veterinary school hosting "Dairy 101" for regulators.
- OSHA's consulting function.
- Crow Wing County Planning and Zoning

III. Staff knowledge, skills and abilities

A. A number of stakeholders have experienced inconsistent treatment from agency employees. They believe there is an *opportunity* to better **train employees to consistently and effectively exercise "soft skills" when working with stakeholders**. They indicated that partnering earlier to help a business make corrections would prevent the need for many of our enforcement actions. Enforcement actions that could have been pre-empted are perceived as *threats* to partnerships.

B. Stakeholders offered a number of ideas that intended to help the agency **strike a better balance between nimbly assigning and reassigning employees as needed, on one hand, and cultivating individual expertise and stable relationships on the other**. New employees bring the *opportunity* of new skills and perspective, yet they need to be oriented well to the stakeholders' situations. Veteran employees possess valuable experience and expertise—and familiarity with particular situations—yet some bring a "point-source" approach to nonpoint-source work. A perceived narrow focus on "building a case" for future enforcement actions *threatens opportunities* for partnering. There is an opportunity to **devise a strategy to promote consistent, efficient, cooperative partnering**. Although concerns were expressed, a number of positive examples were identified, offered as examples upon which we can draw:

- On the anaerobic digester project, "a couple of staff sat down with" business people "up front," planning to develop business.
- "Agriculture needs to be respected as a business. Staff need to know that business." (One feedlot inspector was called out as a role model.)
- "Small business assistance people are very helpful and knowledgeable."

- C. A number of stakeholders believe that MPCA employees do not understand the resource constraints faced by various industries. One example is agriculture. Some suggested that we **provide employees an orientation to industries and other government units they will encounter working in a given program**. Partnership *opportunities* are *threatened* by a lack of understanding of each party's role and responsibilities in processes and projects.
- D. Some stakeholders indicated that it is difficult to track how their case/project is proceeding within the agency. They recommend that we **devise a system with more transparency regarding the status of—for example—a permit application**, and perhaps assign individuals to be the "case worker" or a "project manager" for each project. There is an *opportunity* to clarify roles and responsibilities. Trust and cooperation are *threatened* by a lack of clarity about what happens behind the walls at the MPCA.

IV. Specific ideas regarding the MPCA Strategic Plan

- A. Some stakeholders indicated that the Plan features too many diverse objectives, *threatening* focus, efficiency and effectiveness. One suggestion was to **take a more holistic perspective**, similar to the DNR. Some wondered if the Plan is too "aspirational"—a potential *threat* given the current political climate. One perceived potential *opportunity* is to "declare victory" on some initiatives and focus more on emerging issues.
- B. Some stakeholders perceived that an *opportunity* exists to **make the links between strategies and tactics more transparent**, for both employees and external stakeholders.
- C. There is a perceived *opportunity* to **better coordinate our various rules**.
- D. There were questions about whether MPCA employees can "see their work" in the Strategic Plan. A perceived *opportunity* is to **craft the Plan in such a way that it promotes "vertical" and "horizontal" alignment within the agency**.
- E. Some asked if the "first" *opportunity* to establish better partnerships is when the agency sets the goals for the Strategic Plan. For example, it was said Minnesota could **set the goal of becoming "the state of choice"—for example—for low environmental impact manufacturing**. All three focus groups indicated that *this* (external stakeholder focus groups) process was valuable and appreciated.
- F. Some stakeholders perceived that there is an *opportunity* for the MPCA to **set strategy in coordination with other State, federal and local government organizations**, to avoid contradictions.

Both these themes and specific comments from the focus groups have been shared with the media policy forums to consider as they update the Strategic Plan. The MPCA wishes to thank the focus group participants for taking the time from their busy schedules to provide input and listen to others.