

Summary

Report to the Legislature

Water Governance Evaluation Report



What is the issue?

Water governance in Minnesota is a complex, multi-faceted system that, while effective in many respects, often leaves citizens and local units of government confused or frustrated. Legislation, rules, and programs have existed for more than 100 years; opportunities exist for improvement.

Topics

- Minnesota's water governance structure
- Sustainable water management

Why is it important?

Minnesota has made significant progress in cleaning up point source pollution, such as sewage and industrial waste. Still, too many of Minnesota's lakes, streams, and wetlands remain impaired or are trending toward impairment. Today, the state's greatest water challenges are loss of water storage due to development and drainage, overuse of groundwater supplies, and pollution from smaller, dispersed sources.

Report page 10

State agencies are charged with distinct but interactive water management roles (public health, natural resource conservation, pollution prevention, etc.).

Each has its own responsibilities and professional skills. Report pages 18-19

These agencies collaborate effectively; however, the complexity of programs and permit requirements can make the system difficult to navigate for landowners, developers, local units of government, and other organizations. Report pages 10, 38

Key points

State agencies involved in water management recognize the need to use resources (staff and money) efficiently and establish a user-friendly governance structure. This study is an effort by these agencies to turn the spotlight on ourselves and identify ways to streamline, strengthen, and improve sustainable water management, including many opportunities that the agencies themselves are ready to pursue.

Report pages 3-4

Under the leadership of the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, the study was completed with collaboration among five state agencies engaged in water management, along with the Metropolitan Council, and in consultation with the University of Minnesota Water Resource Center. Report page 14

As part of the study, the group reviewed 40 years of previous studies, surveyed knowledgeable staff, and discussed strategies with local government organizations.

Report pages 14, 27-33

The group has developed a suite of recommendations. Some of this report's recommendations will require legislative action to implement. Others are actions that can be initiated by state agencies themselves, including some reforms that are already underway. Report pages 3-9

Recommendations

Water governance strategies

The report describes three strategies that focus on organization and delivery of water management services at the watershed, state, and regional levels.

- Implement water management at a watershed scale across all levels of governance. This strategy includes establishing the 2012 “one watershed–one plan” legislation as the preferred option for local watershed management in Greater Minnesota and defining essential watershed management services for defined watershed outcomes (Laws 2012, c. 272, s. 32; 103B.101). Report pages 36-38
- Synchronize state agencies’ water management programs into a Water Management System: a more formal mechanism for lateral coordination among agencies, and a basis for continuing improvement, streamlining and realignment of water programs and services. Report pages 38-39
- Improve the delivery of water management services at the regional scale: explore regional organizational models for existing state agency programs and staff, drawing on successful models such as the Red River Watershed Management Board and the St. Louis River Estuary recovery effort. Report pages 39-40

Water resource-based strategies

The report defines four strategies organized around specific water resource topics.

- Improve the alignment of statutes, rules, and regulatory processes that pertain to public waters/wetlands. Clarify the boundary between wetlands managed as Public Waters and those managed locally under the Wetland Conservation Act, and streamline the permitting process. Report pages 41-42
- Complete an interagency framework to promote consensus on groundwater management, and develop usable quantity-based standards for groundwater withdrawal. Groundwater availability and use varies across Minnesota; withdrawal of groundwater should be managed proactively at the system level. Report pages 44-45
- Strengthen the linkage between land use and water management practices, by creating incentives for local government units to combine and integrate their water and land use plans. Report pages 45-47
- Support and strengthen landowner and land occupier efforts to stem nonpoint source pollution and soil loss, both through voluntary best management practices and by strengthening existing statutes relating to soil loss and soil health. Report pages 47-48

Full report

Water Governance Evaluation report: <http://www.pca.state.mn.us/zihy1414>

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