BOARD OF WATER AND SOIL RESOURCES

Guidance for Assessing the Implementation of Comprehensive Watershed Management Plans

Supporting information for Section III.G.4-6 of the 1W1P Plan Content Requirements and Section IV.F of the 1W1P Operating Procedures

Purpose

This guidance document provides recommendations to plan implementation partnerships (local governments and/or local and tribal governments) for conducting implementation assessments of comprehensive watershed management plans. All comprehensive watershed management plans must contain a commitment to tracking, evaluating and sharing their work as required in the One Watershed, One Plan – Plan Content Requirements.

BWSR acknowledges that the transition to watershed-based planning and implementation is a dynamic and evolutionary process. We are committed to working with partners to achieve effective local implementation with measurable results. The One Watershed One Plan program aims to strike an appropriate balance of local and state resource priorities accomplished efficiently and with a level of accountability expected by funders and the public.

This guidance was developed because some partnerships have asked BWSR to articulate requirements for carrying out plan implementation assessments. Because there is no mandated assessment process specific to comprehensive watershed management plans developed under Minnesota Statues §103B.801, BWSR considers the actual locally-led assessment a best practice (and not a requirement). Furthermore, the various elements of assessment happen at different time scales and should be used as part of an ongoing adaptive management approach. BWSR will conduct a plan implementation assessment through the PRAP program once every ten years, which will be based on this guidance document.

By assessing plan implementation, partnerships and BWSR can demonstrate the benefits of the transition to collaborative, watershed-based local water management as envisioned by the Local Government Water Roundtable's 2013 Comprehensive Water Planning and Management Policy Paper.

Assessment results can be used to:

- Show the value of these public investments
- Reinforce targeted implementation that addresses the highest priority resource needs
- Demonstrate progress toward watershed goals
- Promote effective and efficient resource management on a watershed basis
- Identify ongoing challenges and document partnership successes

Scope

This guidance is for assessing implementation of comprehensive watershed management plans developed under the One Watershed, One Plan Program (see M.S. §103B.801). Assessing implementation progress will NOT be limited to a subset of goals (e.g., water quality goals) or funding sources (e.g., BWSR funds), and will examine both activities (outputs) and progress toward goals (outcomes).

Approach

This guidance is intended to help partnerships collect, organize, and examine information to accomplish the bulleted items in the Purpose section. The approach envisions four elements: tracking, reflecting, evaluating, and sharing. The elements operate on different time scales and build on one another, starting with tracking implementation actions taken and ending with sharing the results of that implementation.

Elements of Plan Implementation Assessment: Definitions

Plan Implementation Assessment includes four main elements:

- **Tracking:** gathering and compiling data about implementation actions (outputs; projects, programs, policies) by plan implementers (local and tribal governments) and their partners that contribute to reaching goals in plans. Done on an ongoing basis.

- **Reflecting**: comparing the work activities (projects, practices, or programs) the partnership completed with the work activities they set out to accomplish in a specific time frame. This generates feedback to the partnership about staffing, skills, or other capacity issues that affect getting the work done. Typically done on the same time scale as work planning (could be annual or biennial).

- **Evaluating:** comparing the resource results associated with projects, practices, or programs to the stated resource goals/outcomes in the plan. Evaluation is a holistic analysis (higher level, longer time scale, outcome-oriented) that may examine modeling estimations and monitoring data. It may also consider factors outside the partnership's control that affect resource goals. Through evaluation, partnerships determine if the work they are doing is achieving their resource goals and decide whether to shift their activities or amend/update their plan. Evaluation should take place sometime during years 4-6 of plan implementation and be revisited as the plan nears the ten-year mark.

- **Sharing** Maintaining support for local work through communications about local watershed implementation geared toward the public and specific stakeholders.

Tracking

BWSR recommends that partnerships track and share data with each other about implementation efforts that contribute to plan goals. BWSR will receive this information through existing grant reporting channels (eLINK data for activities funded by BWSR grants).

Definition: gathering and compiling data about implementation <u>actions</u> (outputs; projects, programs, policies) by plan implementers (local and tribal governments) and their partners that contribute to reaching goals in plans. Done on an ongoing basis.

Why: Consistently tracking implementation information and sharing it among partners allows for a holistic picture of work completed to implement a shared plan. The implementation information will then be used for reflection and evaluation of progress toward plan goals. It should also be shared with funders and stakeholders.

When: BWSR recommends that partnerships agree on a regular schedule (between quarterly and annual) for sharing implementation information. Shorter intervals may be easier to compile and will keep information fresh and current.

Who: Each planning and implementation partnership is made up of multiple individual government units. The work they do (alone, together, and with their individual and collective partners) contributes to plan goals and can be included (see below).

BWSR recommends that partnerships agree on a common approach to tracking and sharing data about implementation actions that each partner contributes to in a consistent manner. Partnerships may wish to designate a single "coordinator" who maintains a shared set of data about implementation actions and who regularly reminds partners to contribute implementation data and may play a role in compiling and sharing information with stakeholders.

What: Implementation actions listed in a CWMP and completed by members of the partnership. Actions can be projects, programs, policies, studies, or anything else listed in the plan's implementation or programs section.

Partners may also include other known actions that contribute to plan goals (regardless of whether the implementers are members of the partnership) but were not listed in the plan (regardless of funding source). For example, projects implemented by state or tribal governments, projects paid for with federal funds, or community sponsored initiatives. Considerations for tracking such actions:

- Is it reasonable to incorporate into the partnership's established tracking system?
- Is there enough information to determine the contribution to plan goals?
- If the implementer is not part of the partnership, is there mutual agreement between the partnership and the implementer that the action can be included?
- Is there a check in place to ensure the action (or all or part of an outcome) was not already counted elsewhere in the tracking system?

See the appendix for examples of what actions to track.

Where: Actions in the planning boundary should be tracked.

How: Partnerships determine how information gets tracked, compiled, and shared. Some data is already being collected and compiled through existing reporting systems (like eLINK), whereas other information may not be captured in existing reporting. Groups may wish to explore a combination of the options below for tracking:

- The State has an existing system capturing work done through state and federal conservation programs. Much of this data is included in the MPCA's "Best Management Practices Implemented - by Watershed" accountability report, which draws on eLINK, NRCS, and other data streams and updated annually. This information is available at the 12-HUC scale.

- ArcGIS Online and Field Maps/Collector are valuable for collecting project location and additional information as the project moves through the planning, construction, and maintenance phases. Some ArcGIS Online tracking systems have already been developed by implementation partnerships. ArcGIS Online can integrate other data (parcel, permit, monitoring, outreach) that goes beyond a project location.

- Collaborative data sharing tools such as SharePoint, Google Drive and Virtual Snapshots, Microsoft Teams, and others.
  - Within these platforms, groups can use spreadsheets and maps for tracking project details.
  - One idea is to replicate the targeted implementation schedule in a tabular format with extra columns to keep track of activity status, indicators/metrics, and comments to provide context for progress (what's working well, what barriers exist).
  - Groups may want to copy their entire implementation table into a google spreadsheet to facilitate detailed tracking of their plan.

BWSR's Role: BWSR will facilitate sharing of locally developed tracking examples across the state.

Reflecting

Definition: comparing the work activities (projects, practices, or programs) the partnership completed with the work activities they set out to accomplish in a specific time frame. This generates feedback to the partnership about staffing, skills, or other capacity issues that affect getting the work done. Typically done on the same time scale as work planning (could be annual or biennial).

BWSR recommends that groups incorporate this adaptive management step into the process of developing work plans.

Why: To generate feedback for continuous improvement that can be used by individual entities participating in implementation partnerships as well as the partnerships themselves.

What: The reflection should focus on previous work plans, whether those are specific to a funding source such as WBIF or an organization-specific or partnership/shared work plans). Reflection should include a determination of whether the same activities should be continued, or if adjustments in the implementation approach(es) are needed, and a commitment to take action to make those adjustments.

When: During implementation prior to work planning for the next phase of implementation (annually or biennially, depending on the work plan).

Who: Reflecting could be done by individual entities, who share their results, or as a group. This is a good time to convene the advisory and policy committees to check-in on progress and partnership function. Discuss and use the information to make capacity, program, and partnership adjustments.

How: Decide on a list of questions the group will answer and discuss. Questions can vary based on specific plan/work plan elements or aspects of organizational structure, and some questions may be appropriate for the policy or advisory committees to discuss. *See the appendix for example questions about the work and the partnership and suggestions for how to use the answers.*

BWSR's Role: BWSR's role will vary depending on what the partnership requests. There may be no need to involve BWSR in the process. However, BWSR could: share examples from other watershed groups (e.g., organizational structure/policies, best practices for coordination); serve as a neutral facilitator and/or knowledgeable person with a history and understanding of the partnership; be a mediator in very specific situations.

Evaluating

The One Watershed, One Plan - Plan Content Requirements specify that each plan must lay out a schedule for evaluating plan progress at the mid-point of plan implementation. That evaluation includes whether changes to the plan are warranted. BWSR recommends that groups conduct an evaluation according to their plan.

This section represents an idealized evaluation. BWSR acknowledges that information about resource outcomes (monitoring, modeling) for the initial evaluation (4-6 years into implementation) may be limited or unavailable, resulting in a narrower evaluation of progress toward goals (or one more focused on outputs than outcomes). As time goes on and more data is available, more robust evaluations will be possible. Also, public expectations of progress will increase over time as more funding is allocated for implementation. Groups will need to start small, work with what they have, and highlight accomplishments to date. The evaluation is meant to inform an adaptive management process, not to be a burdensome administrative exercise.

Definition: comparing the resource results associated with projects, practices, or programs to the stated resource goals/outcomes in the plan. Evaluation is a holistic analysis (higher level, longer time scale, outcome-oriented) that may examine modeling estimations and monitoring data. It may also consider factors outside the partnership's control that affect resource goals. Through evaluation, partnerships determine if the work they are doing is achieving their resource goals and decide whether to shift their activities or amend/update their plan. Evaluating should take place sometime during years 4-6 of plan implementation and be revisited as the plan nears the ten-year mark.

Why: To determine: a) how much progress has been made toward goals in the plan; b) whether new information that's become available since the plan was approved warrants any changes to the plan; c) whether the plan should be amended based on progress and data.

When: Mid-way through implementing the 10-year plan (between the four and six year mark). The timeline may vary depending on MPCA's monitoring schedule or other factors – consult with your BWSR board conservationist).

Who: Plan implementation partnership with assistance from BWSR and other state agencies as requested. Policy committees will play an important role in examining progress toward plan goals and determining whether to amend the plan.

Where: Evaluation of progress toward goals should be focused on high priority issues as designated in the plan. Depending on the scale of the priority areas, the extent of implementation, and availability of data, other locations could be evaluated. If a priority issue was not given a location ("watershed-wide"), work on that issue should be evaluated accordingly.

New data available anywhere in the watershed should be examined to determine if it signals the need to consider shifting priority locations, issues, or activities.

What: The evaluation should look at new information, progress toward goals, and other changes since the original plan was written. Based on that information, determine whether any course corrections are warranted,

and whether the plan should be amended to reflect a new direction for the implementers. Some questions to consider:

✓ Is there new data or information that should be incorporated into the plan? (examples: WRAPS updates, GRAPS, evaluation of hydrologic change, groundwater model)

  o New information should be incorporated into the plan if it would result in shifting priority locations, issues, or activities (amendment).

  o New information can be added to the plan without an amendment process if there are no other changes to the plan.

✓ How much progress has been made toward goals?

✓ Is there a need to re-examine the organizational structure?

✓ Should any new partners be consulted or brought into the partnership? (note that BWSR policy updates require Minnesota Tribal Nations to be invited to One Watershed, One Plan efforts)

✓ Have adjacent boundaries changed? Does something need to be changed to make boundaries align? (map updates, examining areas that have been added due to boundary changes to see if revised priorities or new implementation actions are warranted)

How: Look at the following items. For each, evaluate whether a plan amendment is needed.

■ New Data:

  o Gather new reports (WRAPS, GRAPS, Landscape Stewardship Plans, other resource information, social science, etc.)
  o Look for information relevant to priority issues and goals in the plan to see if the status of the resource or recommended strategies has changed significantly since the last planning effort
  o Look for new information that may warrant a policy discussion about re-prioritizing or modifying goals (e.g., a high public value lake now has a downward WQ trend)
  o Evaluate whether:
    ▪ The new data warrants a re-examination of priorities
    ▪ The new data suggests a shift in strategies
    ▪ etc.
  o Note: *If a WRAPS has been completed or updated since the plan was originally adopted, this evaluation <u>must </u>include an assessment of any changes to the plan necessary due to new information* (from 1W1P Plan Content Requirements).

- **Measurable[1] Progress Toward Plan Goals:**
  - Compile information about implementation from all funding sources that contributed to plan goals (see tracking)
  - Connect implementation efforts to specific goals in the plan
  - Look at any available empirical/monitoring/resource data to see if measurable resource changes have taken place (see interagency monitoring spreadsheet)
  - If data is not available or change is less than expected based on implementation effort, use a model or tool to estimate expected results and/or add contextual information about other factors that may have affected progress toward goals
  - Evaluate whether:
    - there is enough evidence to show that the progress you are making is reasonable[2]
    - the activities you are implementing are the highest-leverage toward the goal (effective for resource outcome, cost-effective, sell-able, etc.)
    - more effort or new activities are needed to achieve the pace of progress in the plan
    - the pace of progress in the plan needs to be re-calibrated based on progress made so far
    - more/different effort (resources, funding, skills, capacity) are needed to achieve the plan goals

- **Other Plan Items/Administrative:**
  - If the plan boundary or adjacent plan boundaries have changed:
    - are there areas now in this planning boundary that require specific attention in the plan?
    - if there has been a significant change to the boundary (based on a resource or square miles), do maps, charts, tables, or other plan elements need to be updated to reflect the boundary shift?
    - at a minimum, the plan should contain an acknowledgement of the new boundary.
  - If administrative structure has changed, does the plan need to be modified to reflect the new structure, new activities that are being jointly implemented, or new partners?
  - Are there parts of the plan that the group would like to re-write to improve clarity or readability? Reformat? Add graphics?

{this section continued on the next page}

---

[1] how detailed or accurate "measurable" is for any given goal will vary. This will depend on availability of empirical data, validity of models, accuracy of tracked information, external factors outside the group's control, and more. However, "we did one thing towards this goal, therefore we are making progress" seems inadequate. Perhaps a scale of "no-low-medium-high-completed" would be adequate. This would require some criteria for judging progress and could certainly include contextual information to help explain why despite high effort, low resource progress is being made.

[2] "reasonable" will be similarly nuanced and goal-dependent (see [1]).

BWSR's Role: This guidance document will be the basis for the PRAP evaluation of plan implementation.

- If LGUs do their own evaluation using this BWSR guidance, then PRAP can take that information and incorporate into a report with recommendations.

- If LGUs choose, BWSR will assist in the evaluation in a manner consistent with this BWSR guidance. The results of that evaluation will be incorporated into a PRAP report with recommendations.

Sharing

BWSR recommends that partnerships communicate regularly to the public and stakeholders about their watershed management work. Local governments communicate in various ways and BWSR provides support.

Definition: Maintaining support for local work through communications about local watershed implementation geared toward the public and specific stakeholders.

What: Telling stories about accomplishments and progress made toward plan goals via local communications (press releases, presentations, etc.) and state communications (BWSR Snapshots, Clean Water Fund stories). "Sharing" is not the same as required reporting associated with grants.

Why: To disseminate the results of public investments in watershed management, to communicate about successes (or challenges) in implementing the plan, and to maintain public support for watershed work (and legacy funding overall). Plan implementers can also generate local participation in conservation work by promoting or reporting on programs and events.

Who: Local and tribal governments are the primary source of local watershed information. Stories are best told at the local level. BWSR and other partners provide support.

When: Whenever there is a local conservation success story, upcoming or recent event, new relevant data/information, or action by the implementation partnership. Partnerships may create certain items on a regular basis, such as "state of the watershed" reports or profiles of planned and/or completed implementation.

How: Identify the purpose for the communication (see "why" above) and the primary audience you wish to reach. In telling the story, focus on the impact to local resources and local people. How has the work of one or more partners solved a problem or created an opportunity for a local resident? How has the solution or opportunity improved the quality of life for people and the ecosystem in the area? How has the state benefitted?   If partners can help identify good stories to tell, BWSR can provide support with interviews, writing, photography, video, etc. and provide materials that can be disseminated through local channels.

BWSR's Role: BWSR can assist partnerships by providing training on communications topics. BWSR also crafts stories in partnership with implementers. Those stories are distributed locally through local media channels and statewide via BWSR Snapshots, clean water fund stories, social media, press releases, presentations, and other modes of communication. Other state agencies and partners may also play a similar role in collaborative sharing.

BWSR will report watershed progress to the legislature via a report based on the evaluations completed annually (each watershed will be evaluated once every 10 years).

Appendix

TRACKING: Examples of actions to track

Examples of implementation work done by local and Tribal governments:

- Number of acres addressed {private forest management plans, farm plans, soil health practices including cover crops, percent land in protected status, easements (CRP, WRP, forest easements)}

- BMPs and drainage area treated by BMPs (WASCOBs, waterways, well sealing, shoreland restoration, stormwater and other LID projects, chloride application, and BMPs associated with regulatory projects)

- Voluntary programs (education and outreach activities (events, media, including groundwater programs), AIS prevention, forest protection, adopt-a-drain}, regulatory programs (buffers, WCA, septic, land use)

- Public engagement (Social factors including: perceptions of long-term residents, historical knowledge, behavior change as a result of outreach, public support, recreation, landowner feedback and participation)

- Research projects, trends over time, and inventories completed (tile, unsealed wells, culvert inventory, septic inventory)

Examples of implementation work done by others, which may be connected to goals in CWMPs:

- Federal programs (e.g., EQIP, CSP Data from PRoTRACTS/CART)

- State agency work (e.g., DNR forest plans, habitat projects)

- Nongovernment operations (e.g., partnership w/TNC and DNR, PF)

- Landowners (including private industry) implementing projects on their own (not involved with government programs)

REFLECTING: Example questions and suggestions for how to use answers.

Example questions about the work

- How much progress did you make on the items in your past work plan(s)?

- What factors contributed to successful completion of the work? What factors interfered with getting work done? (funding availability, landowner willingness, weather, contractor availability, skilled staff, partners, etc.)

- Do members of the partnership have enough staff and/or contractors with the required skills to get implementation done? What skills or certifications are lacking? Do any members need to hire or train staff?

- Have members of the group done any evaluation of outreach and education programs to determine how effective they are? Which efforts are more successful? Will the success elements translate to other areas of the watershed? Can you try something more or different in priority areas where people are not adopting conservation practices?

Example questions about the partnership

- How often does the steering team meet? How about the policy committee? Advisory committee? Are the meetings well attended and productive? Do the committee discussions contribute to better watershed management? How?

- Are partners using the comprehensive watershed management plan and associated work plans to guide their day-to-day work (beyond grant fund-ed work)?

- Are funds being shared in a way that reflects the priorities in the plan, the amount of funds available, and each partners' ability to raise other funds?

- How many projects and programs have partners collaborated on? What factors contribute to whether collaboration in your partnership is successful?

- Are any entities in the partnership sharing staff? Are there opportunities to be more efficient or effective if you shared staff?

- How would you rate communication among partnership members? Is information regularly and freely shared? Do all (or most) members take responsibility for communication, or is it driven primarily by one or two people?

- Is the organizational structure for implementing the plan working? Are the appropriate policies and procedures documented, understood, and applied correctly? Do any policies need to be re-examined or updated (e.g., cost share policy)?

- Are there potential partners that are currently not involved with the plan who should be invited (note that BWSR policy updates require Minnesota Tribal Nations to be invited to One Watershed, One Plan efforts)

Suggestions for how to use the answers to the above reflecting questions:

In work planning:

- Look at the progress you've made so far. Now look at your 10-year targeted implementation schedule. Given your progress to date and how much more work you need to do, decide what you need to do more/less/the same of in the next round.

- Consider the factors that prevented you from getting work done (that you can control). Decide if you can add capacity (add staff/training/skills, pursue more funding) or if you need to plan on doing less of those items.

- For voluntary programs, determine if your landowner contacts are resulting in participation. Decide if the priority resource areas in your plan where you've done outreach should get more outreach efforts or if you will move on to other plan priorities.

Regarding the partnership:

- Review the responses to the questions above. Determine whether most/all of the group is generally in agreement (if not, that could be a sign that more or better communication is needed).

- If specific issues arise during the discussion, determine the best course of action for addressing them. (BWSR may be able to help.)

- Decide if the current organizational structure and associated policies are meeting the group's needs. If not, suggest modifications or clarifications so all members understand the role and function of the policy and advisory committees.