

Wetland Partnership Meeting Summary
Thursday, April 25, 2013
Three Rivers Public Library – Three Rivers, Michigan
Coordinated by Friends of the St. Joe River Association (FotSJR)

Matt Meersman, President of the FotSJR welcomed everyone to the April quarterly meeting. The meeting began with introductions of all those in attendance.

IN ATTENDANCE: Bob Jones, LaGrange Co. SWCD; Norm Cox, Acres Land Trust; Karen Mackowiak, St. Joseph River Basin Commission; Eric Kerney, Nottawa Huron Band of Potawatomi & FotSJR; Rachel Smith, Branch CD & FotSJR; Maria Mast, St. Joe Co., IN MS4 & FotSJR; Matt Meersman, FotSJR; Marcy Colclough, SWMPC; Chris Bauer, MDEQ-WRD; Joe Schmees, IDEM; Grant Poole, Pokagon Band of Potawatomi; Geoff Cripe, SWMLC; Jim Coury, FotSJR; Dona Hunter, former member of FotSJR.

OVERVIEW OF WETLAND PROJECT: No formal overview was given since all those in attendance were familiar with the project.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND STATUS UPDATES: A meeting was held in the Prairie River Watershed with about 25 people in attendance. Rachel Smith compiled a mailing list using data from the wetland assessment. Matt had a computer set up so that landowners could actually see maps of their properties and the wetlands on each parcel. Some discussion was held concerning the Watershed Management Plan that will be developed by LaGrange County SWCD for the Fawn River and how the wetland assessments can be used to enhance the final plan. Joe Schmees encouraged the SWCD to make sure that critical wetland areas for preservation be listed in the plan.

GRANT ADMINISTRATION – Matt reported that the 9th quarterly report has been submitted to EPA. If the current timeline is followed, there are just two more quarters remaining in the grant, which would end in September. There is still money left in the grant possibly to do some additional outreach events. Matt talked with EPA and they sounded optimistic that an extension could be given on the grant. Matt sent an official request for a one year extension, which would allow for more time to use the remaining funds. He has not heard anything back since he sent the letter. Dona asked a question concerning the match. Marcy reported that match is ok, with Matt supplying a major portion of it from all the work he has been doing with the grant. Marcy encouraged everyone to continue sending in the match sheets with time and mileage, including any other activities related to the grant that they are involved in.

LANDOWNER OUTREACH EVENTS – There was some additional discussion about the Prairie River Watershed wetland event. Rachel Smith sent out a post card, not a formal letter, as invitations to the meeting. Rachel did a couple of interviews promoting the meeting and the wetland project and there were some publicity articles in local newspapers. Four landowners, each owning at least 40 acres of land, were interested in knowing more about ways they can protect the wetlands on their properties. It was a successful event.

Earlier in the year at the Paw Paw/Black River wetland meeting there were a lot of blueberry farmers concerned about who was looking at the wetlands and what it might mean to their businesses. Matt was able to assure them that this information was not going to be used to shut them down.

Future meetings should include information about MAEAP – Michigan Agricultural Environmental Assurance Program through the Michigan State Department of Agriculture. This provides a way for landowners to show voluntary activities on their properties to benefit the environment. In Indiana the Indiana Association of Soil & Water Conservation Districts provides SWCDs the opportunity to recognize farmers for environmental efforts through the River Friendly Farmer Program. Signs are provided through both programs for landowners to post on their properties. This provides good PR for both the landowner and the programs.

In the new Farm Bill efforts are under way to include funding for landowners for voluntary environmental efforts they carry out on their properties.

Geoff Cripe distributed extra copies of “Landscapes” – Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy newsletter – with an article about the Wetland Partnership Grant and how it fits into the focus and priorities of the Land Conservancy.

Geoff is working to hold three more outreach meetings this summer and fall. He is working with a committee in Cass and St. Joseph Counties. One meeting will be scheduled in the Dowagiac River Watershed/Berrien and Cass Counties. Cass County has the second highest acres of existing wetlands in the Michigan portion of the St. Joseph River Watershed, while Berrien County has lost the highest acreage of wetlands in the Michigan portion of the watershed. A second meeting could be scheduled to focus on the Cass/Berrien and St. Joseph County, IN wetlands. They still have a lot of existing wetlands, but a lot of them are more open water wetlands attracting more waterfowl to these areas. A third potential meeting could be scheduled in Calhoun County to focus on waterfowl habitat and the need for wetlands.

It was discussed including McCoy Creek and/or Juday Creek with the Dowagiac meeting with assistance from Karen Mackowiak and the St. Joseph River Basin Commission. A good location might be Fernwood where the Commission holds their annual meeting each year. Matt is willing to do as many meetings as can be scheduled. If the grant is extended, it will provide more time to organize these and other meetings. Matt is concerned about the time Geoff and the SWMLC can and is willing to put into their project. Geoff is as willing as Matt to do additional meetings. Various locations were discussed to hold the meetings that might attract a few more landowners.

Marcy did a presentation at the Calhoun County Conservation District’s Annual Meeting.

Geoff has been looking at the data and it shows a lot of wetlands lost in Van Buren County. There has been a lot of work done in the Paw Paw/Black with the Van Buren Conservation District up there, so it is not as critical to hold additional meetings there. The loss of wetlands in the Elkhart River Watershed and also the high loss in St. Joseph County, IN should not be forgotten. Matt definitely wants to have a wetland meeting in this area.

Jim Coury asked if there would be Great Lakes Restoration Funds available for more educational/outreach type activities. Marcy reported there are really no AOC (Areas of Concern) listed in the watershed specifically, so education funds are hard to get written into these grants. When the new RFP comes out, they will need to look and see what can be included. The grant can pay for restoration, but the proposal needs to have landowner signatures on letters of intent showing a direct interest in restoration as a part of the grant. There may be more success using funds supplied through US Fish and Wildlife.

Jim stated it will be a shame to lose the broad partnership already formed with this group. This should be used to leverage future implementation funding. FotSJR provides assistance to the conservation districts and others to help them write grants focusing on specific projects in their areas. After this project is over, what will the role of this group be? EPA is very excited about what has been done with this project and there may be a way to work with them on future efforts.

Joe Schmees said that Matt needs to meet with IDEM's wetland people in Indianapolis and see if there are ways to get more grant funds for restoration and/or education.

Karen Mackowiac talked with 401 certification people through IDEM and also with Michiana Branch of Army Corp of Engineers and they both want to learn more about the project. A meeting with MDEQ, IDEM, and ACOE asking for their recommendations about how to utilize this information to the fullest might be of benefit to this group. Could this information be another tool to use in the mitigation process? Could this information eventually help influence rules and regulations concerning wetlands? These are all things that might come out of this partnership grant.

Geoff stated he feels the success of the first three outreach meetings is attributable to all the partners who contributed before, during and after the meeting. If anyone has any additional suggestions or ideas about additional meetings and locations, please share those ideas with Geoff. He feels like maybe two meetings in the Dowagiac River Watershed might be of benefit.

Karen asked if there was going to be a way to continue to track success stories throughout the watershed from this project. She knows there were 3 or 4 landowners interested after the Howe meeting. Matt says that as long as the various agencies working with these landowners keep FotSJR posted on success efforts, this information will be shared.

MUNICIPAL OUTREACH STRATEGY – Marcy has two meetings scheduled next week with local planning officials to begin discussing ways to use this wetland information in new planning ordinances, etc. One meeting will be held in Paw Paw, Michigan on Tuesday, April 30 and the other is scheduled for Thursday, May 2 in South Bend. If anyone wants more information, contact Marcy. The purpose of the meetings is to introduce the planning experts to the wetland project and discuss the strategy to use throughout the watershed. Some of the questions include where to hold future meetings; land use throughout the watershed; what options are available for protection and what are gaps that local units can fill with state regulations. Marcy is more familiar with local government in Michigan than in Indiana. Karen is working to gather information from Indiana. Porter County does have some local wetland

regulations in place. There are some regulations in place concerning setbacks from wetlands in Michigan. A local bus tour and some specifically developed materials are activities for future planning.

Marcy is working with Julie Pioch from the Citizen Planner Program through Michigan State University Extension. Julie is working on developing a separate module for the course focusing on wetland protection and management. They are trying to put together a scholarship program for attendees in the course. To get the scholarship individuals would have to show what they would do locally with the information they receive through the course.

Norm Cox asked if there was any benefit to feeding this information down to each of the municipalities. Matt and Marcy both answered, yes that is happening, but with the large number of townships in Michigan responsible for local planning, it is just very time consuming. They have both worked with some of the townships, customizing maps and information specifically for them. It just takes time. The data tables that are available are easy to deliver, but hard for local entities to interpret. There needs to be some standard master plan language development to make it easier for those local entities to customize it to their specific needs. Norm also asked if anyone had checked with local foundations about the possibility of grant funds to move forward. Matt said that is one of the things that need to be looked into - what are the gaps with sharing this information and what kinds of funds are available. A person needs to be available to present this information to these entities, so they will understand the various wetland functions, etc.

DATA DELIVERY – Through Matt’s project with the Paw Paw and Black Rivers, he is working on generating reports in an easier fashion. Right now it is very time consuming. He is hoping to work with MDEQ on this aspect of the project.

NEXT STEPS:

- Having the data on line so that individuals and municipalities can access the information is crucial to the success of this project. The tables are available on line now without any explanation, but it will leave most people scratching their heads.
- Establish next landowner meetings – Geoff Cripe
- Continue with the municipal outreach strategy and bus tour

NEXT MEETING – These meetings are usually held on the same days as the regular FotSJR board meetings. The next meeting should be in July, but a July board meeting is usually not held. So it was agreed to meet on August 22, 2013 at 10:15 at the Three Rivers Public Library.

Marcy asked for copies of any articles that anyone might be or have been put together on this project. It would be nice to have those included in future quarterly reports. The Indiana Lakes Management newsletter would be another good place for an article similar to the one that was in Landscapes. Matt said he could easily generate a watershed map for any articles.

Meeting adjourned at 12:00 noon.