

Wetland Partnership Meeting Summary
Thursday, February 23, 2012
Three Rivers Public Library, Three Rivers, Michigan
Coordinated by Friends of the St. Joe River Association (FotSJR)

Matt Meersman, President of FotSJR, welcomed everyone to the sixth quarterly meeting and asked for introductions.

IN ATTENDANCE: Eric Kerney, Nottawaseppi Huron Band of Potawatomi Indians; Rachel Smith, Branch County Conservation District; Martin Franke, LaGrange County Soil & Water Conservation District; Brian Musser, Steuben County Soil & Water Conservation District; Joe Schmees, Indiana Department of Environmental Management; Geoffrey Cripe, Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy/FotSJR; Michael Sertle, Ducks Unlimited; Karen Mackowiack, St. Joseph River Basin Commission/MACOG; Marcy Colclough, Southwest Michigan Plan Commission; Matt Meersman, FotSJR President; Dona Hunter, LaGrange Co. SWCD & FotSJR.

PROJECT STATUS: Matt and Geoff completed what could be called the first official outreach presentation of the Wetland Partnership Project at the Branch County Conservation Expo. A computer was set up with data loaded on it from the project. They were actually able to look at several landowner's wetlands and their functions, which have been identified in Branch County. One landowner had the 10th most significant wetland in the county based on floodwater storage. Geoff has already met with this landowner and is discussing the possibility of a conservation easement. They were able to talk about the tax benefits and financial incentives potentially available for protecting these wetlands. The landowners seemed to be impressed by the significance of the functions their wetlands served. This ranking might serve to sway people's views on the importance of wetlands and may help sell them on wetland protection.

Geoff and Matt sent out a letter to about 100 people before this meeting. Copies were distributed to the group asking for their input on the language in the letter. They want to make sure the letter is not applying pressure to the landowners receiving it.

Parcel data in a wide variety of forms has been received from all of the counties. Some has landowner data, some do not. Some is just parcel polygons with no other identification attached. Some of the counties were reluctant to provide the data, but have been assured that the information will not be used for anything other than this grant. Once all of the wetland assessments are completed, the wetland information will be shared with all of the counties in the watershed in exchange for the parcel data. The parcel data is constantly changing at the county level.

GRANT ADMINISTRATION: Leah Cooper is under contract with FotSJR with two separate contracts - one contract providing outreach and assistance directly to FotSJR and the other with the Wetland Partnership Grant. Since Leah has taken on a full time job, she will no longer be responsible for grant administration. Marcy has been assisting Matt in making sure the grant administration is complete. A cooperation agreement has been put together with Southwest Michigan Planning Commission to aid with grant

administration and outreach, along with providing some local match for the grant. Michigan Extension is also involved with outreach for planning and zoning and a cooperation agreement will be signed soon. In Indiana Bob McCormick, with Planning for Power through Purdue University, was going to be involved, but he has retired and no one is sure if that program is still ongoing through Purdue. Marcy may need some assistance in finding a good county planner on the Indiana side of the watershed to aid in outreach. Someone through MACOG or someone involved with the Indiana Leadership Academy might also provide some assistance. The next quarterly report will be submitted in March.

OUTREACH STRATEGY: Marcy is still working on fine tuning the Wetland Wonders hand-out which she shared with everyone at the last meeting. The next newsletter for FotSJR should be out around March 1 and will focus on wetlands and this project.

MICHIGAN DEVELOPMENTS: Marcy shared some concerns with changes to wetland regulation at the state level. There is a committee making recommendations on changes to make MDEQ more “business friendly”. One of the recommendations includes removing wetland regulation from MDEQ and any local government. These changes would relinquish wetland regulation authority back to Army Corp of Engineers. Mike Sertle stated that in a separate effort, MDEQ streamlined the wetland permit application – from 16 pages down to 5 – which is a definite improvement.

DATA AVAILABILITY: The wetland data should be completed by the end of March. Matt has basically started over when looking at the prioritization process. He has worked with MDEQ to come up with a more understandable approach to selling the importance of the wetland functional assessment to landowners for protection purposes not only for restoration. This prioritization process will allow us to identify and talk to people about their existing or historic wetlands and why it is important to protect or restore them. GIS can be used to calculate the size and functional value of different wetlands under common ownership. Matt would like to have 5 or 6 volunteers to assist him in processing parcel data in order to have a more meaningful data set for each county. It would include looking at all the parcel data and identifying parcels under common ownership that cannot be automatically merged. Eric Kerney, Geoff Cripe, and Brian Musser volunteered to help Matt with the process. Over the next six months it will probably take 10 – 20 hrs. per county to complete this process. It was suggested that this might be an opportunity to hire a local intern to aid with the process, but local knowledge of individual landowners is important and an intern might be ideal for this.

As part of the outreach portion of the grant, Marcy is looking for people who have been involved in wetland protection or restoration projects that might be willing to be a part of a promotional video. Mike Sertle, Ducks Unlimited, said there might be some clips that could be taken from a video that they already have. He said they have a very successful project working with a farmer in Steuben County.

NEXT MEETING – Thursday, May 24 at 10:15 a.m. at the Three Rivers Public Library.