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Lower Otter Tail River Restoration Informational Meeting Minutes

Thursday February 10, 2022

Managers Present: Peter Fjestad, Catherine Affield, John Hanson, Paul Krabbenhoft, Gerald Van Amburg, Troy Larson.

Managers Absent: Mark Hanson.

Staff Present: Kristine Altrichter, Administrator; Lee Olson, Watershed Specialist; Matthew Schlauderauff, Watershed Specialist.

Consultants Present: Erik Jones, Engineer (remote); Aaron Young, Engineer, Houston Engineering, Inc. (HEI).

Others Attending: Derek Ingvalson, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE); Zach Rogers, USACE (remote), David Potter, USACE (remote); Charles Boyd, USACE (remote); Stephanie Dupey, USACE (remote); Gloria Penalzoa Ruiz, USACE (remote); Dean Jirak; Gary Karels; Kevin Hiedeman; Norm Hiedeman; Tom Hiedeman; Bernie Steeves (remote); Elliott (remote); John Bertram (remote); Carr (remote); Tom Wilson (remote); Kevin Swann (remote).

President Fjestad called meeting to order at 7:00 PM.

Meeting was held to discuss Lower Otter Tail River Restoration and provide landowners with update on project development.

Otter Tail River has been identified as impaired for water quality and habitat. Lower Otter Tail River Restoration Project seeks to improve water quality and habitat.

Otter Tail River from Orwell Dam to Wilkin County Road 19 is upstream of straightened portion of river. This segment of river has good habitat. Proposed project is planned to emulate this section of river with wide well-defined floodplain (500-1000 ft wide) and 30 plus feet of relief between adjacent fields and river corridor. Otter Tail River from Wilkin County Road 19 to Wilkin County Ditch No. 4 outlet contains most of straightened reach of river. In this reach, field elevations are close to 100-year floodplain and river was straightened with spoil bank protection. Otter Tail River from Wilkin County Ditch No. 4 outlet to Breckenridge Diversion contains a portion of straightened river. This portion of river has well-defined floodplain (500-1000 ft wide), and 5 to 10 feet of relief between adjacent fields and river corridor.

Otter Tail River was straightened between 1952 and 1954. USACE cleaned, enlarged, and straightened 18 miles of river into 11.4 miles between Orwell Dam and Breckenridge. USACE project provided 10-year flood protection when combined with flood protection provided by Orwell Dam. USACE project disconnected 21 of 27 oxbows that have been disconnected from the river channel. Straightening Otter Tail River resulted in increased erosion. Upstream end of USACE straightening project has increased streambed erosion, as a result, sediment has accumulated downstream of project area.

Project objectives include reducing sediment loading, create natural stable river channel, improve habitat and expand diversity of terrestrial and aquatic habitat, and maintain existing flood protection.

USACE feasibility study investigated 27 disconnected oxbows and head cut at upstream end of project area. Oxbows were broken down into localized areas and identified as feature groups. Project was broken down into feature groups to aid in the analysis of alternatives for project development. Goal of project is to restore channel through identified disconnected oxbows. Jones explained that structures designed to divert water through oxbows would act as overflow structures and allow water to also flow through straightened channel during large flood events.

USACE estimates overall cost of project is \$56 million. Estimated cost has been identified by feature group. At this time, head cut at upstream end of project is priority and is estimated to cost \$1,023,536.00. Estimated costs include purchase of

land, as required by USACE feasibility study requirements. BRRWD plans to obtain permanent conservation easements for land acquisition, so actual cost anticipated to be lower.

USACE Section 1135 Program was discussed. First step is a feasibility study. First \$100,000 is paid for with federal dollars from USACE. Remaining cost has 50/50 cost-share with local sponsor. Study must show project is technically feasible, environmentally acceptable, and provides cost effective environmental benefits. Projects constructed using Section 1135 Program must maintain benefits of original USACE project. Feasibility study for Lower Otter Tail River expected to be completed in March 2022. Feasibility study out for 30-day review, ending February 21, 2022. Comments from informational meeting will be considered as part of projects public review. Second step is project construction. Total federal cost is capped at \$10 million, including design and study. These funds require 25 percent local cost-share.

Additional funding could be obtained through Clean Water Funds (CWF) through MN Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Funds (LSOHF) through Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (LSOHC), Section 319 Grant Program through MN Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), Conservation Reserve Program (CREP), Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Program, mitigation funding, locally raised funds, landowner contributions, and private contributions.

Next steps for project include continued coordination with USACE on Section 1135 Project, complete environmental review, acquire conservation easements, refine channel restoration design, refine cost estimates, obtain permits, acquire additional funding. Construction will commence as permits, easements, and funding are obtained.

Landowners asked if they would be required to participate. Board of Managers stated that project is driven by landowner interest. BRRWD will focus on landowners that want to be involved in project. BRRWD will be responsible for easement acquisition and will begin determining landowner interest in Spring 2022.

Landowners were concerned about how project would impact wildlife on their land.

Landowners concerned about how rock weirs will impact ability to float river. Otter Tail River already has weir structures that allow people to float downstream but prohibit people from going upstream. Landowners were concerned that additional structures would create additional obstacles along the river and impact recreation. Ingvalson explained that overflow structures would be positioned to divert water into oxbows and should not inhibit recreation because during normal flows, people would be able to move down river through the oxbows.

Landowners asked about setback levees within project area. Jones explained that there may be some site grading to maintain existing conditions in areas where breakouts currently occur. These were in locations where there are currently drainage divides where water moves in multiple directions during high water events. Instead of installing setback levees, project design includes floodplain excavation. A lower bench would be excavated next to the channel to create more capacity for river.

Landowners questioned how much land would be taken out of agricultural production for floodplain excavation. Ingvalson explained that areas with unstable banks were targeted. Most land that will be used for floodplain excavation are degraded lands. Areas that are well vegetated were generally avoided for this activity.

Landowner stated that original USACE project to straighten Otter Tail River occurred to reduce erosion. Landowner stated that oxbows had significant erosion prior to straightening of river. Ingvalson explained that as part of the Section 1135 program, Lower Otter Tail River Restoration will need to maintain the original benefits of the river straightening project. Ingvalson explained that overflow structures will divert water to oxbows during normal flows, however, during flood events, water will over top the structures and use straightened channel. This will maintain current capacity of river. Landowner explained that prior to straightening river, he had land that was too wet to farm. Once river was straightened, he was able to farm area. Landowner is concerned that if oxbows are restored he will not be able to farm that land anymore.

Landowners asked about future assessments. Jones explained that at this time future assessments are not known. BRRWD will review grant funding opportunities before determining if there will be a local assessment.

Another landowner expressed concern about restoring oxbows resulting in increased flooding. Landowner expressed that original straightening project was completed to protect farmland from flooding. Ingvalson explained that overflow structures diverting water to oxbows will allow water to overtop and use straightened channel during flood events. Landowner asked if oxbows would be deepened. Ingvalson explained that in some cases it would, depending on how much sediment has accumulated. Ingvalson explained detailed designs for each oxbow have not been finalized, so final excavation amounts have not been determined.

Landowners asked if trees in oxbows would be removed. Ingvalson stated that they would have to be removed in order to restore oxbows and allow water to flow through the historic channel.

Landowners expressed concern regarding how much water is released from Orwell Dam. They were concerned that overflow structures would reduce capacity of stream and result in increased flooding on their properties. Ingvalson explained that intention is for impacts to be same as they are now. Areas that may have increased impacts due to project will be targeted for permanent conservation easements.

Landowners expressed concern that stream capacity would be reduced by project. Jones explained that oxbows currently are blocked would be opened for water to flow through the channel. Ingvalson noted that feasibility study reviewed current habitat value compared to habitat value following restoration. Study found that habitat would be improved by projects in long term.

Landowners expressed concern that restoration of oxbows would cut them off from portions of their land that they utilize for hunting. Ingvalson stated that overflow structures could be used to cross river. Landowners stated that the straightening project resulted in problems with land ownership on either side of the river. Some landowners settled disputes in court, others were never settled. Restoration could create additional problems with landownership. Jones stated project may be opportunity to clean up some of the landownership issues, possibly through access easements. Landowners asked about land bridges and how that would impact wildlife. Ingvalson stated that those would be removed but wildlife habitat would still be improved with the continuous habitat corridor along river.

Landowners asked if anyone has been onsite. Ingvalson stated that USACE and HEI staff have been onsite. Landowners offered to have staff meet with them onsite to see their concerns.

Landowners that live next to river are concerned about project impacts resulting on from project causing flooding at their house.

Landowners also concerned about habitat loss. They are worried the damage from the construction will not recover for many years. Ingvalson stated that overall habitat will be improved by project.

Landowners felt there were too many open questions for decision to be made. Landowners were concerned how upstream and downstream landowner participation would impact their land even if they choose not to participate. Ingvalson stated that meeting was informational to give landowners update on project design and allow landowners to provide comment to assist with feasibility report.

Jones stated as project develops BRRWD staff can work with landowners to explain landowner specific questions on their properties.

Board of Managers reiterated that meeting is informational to provide landowners with update and allow them to provide comment. They also reiterated that project will focus on willing landowners.

Landowners expressed it is hard to comment on projects that they do not know enough about. They expressed that concern came from fear of unknowns and trying to interpret engineering reports. They were concerned that this is their last opportunity to provide comment. Altrichter noted that this is not the last opportunity to provide comment. Prior to project moving forward, at a minimum a hearing would need to be held.

Landowners asked if there are other projects like this that have been done. Ingvalson and Jones discussed other projects that are similar to Lower Otter Tail River Restoration.

President Fjestad adjourned meeting at 8:45 PM.

/s/ John Hanson

Secretary