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Wilkin County Ditch No. 44 Hearing Minutes

Wednesday February 2, 2022

Managers Present: Peter Fjestad, Catherine Affield, Gerald Van Amburg, Paul Krabbenhoft.

Managers Absent: John Hanson, Troy Larson, Mark Hanson.

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

Consultants Present: Erik Jones, Engineer; Bennett Uhler, Engineer, Houston Engineering, Inc. (HEI).

Others Attending: Cliff Frosлие; Jim Haick; Chris Watterud; Eric Hoff, The Nature Conservancy (remote).

President Fjestad called meeting to order at 7:03 PM.

This meeting was held to discuss the petition to impound, reroute, and divert Wilkin County Ditch No. 44 and partial abandonment of Wilkin County Ditch No. 44 in association with restoration of South Branch Buffalo River.

Drainage area of project comprised of 27 square miles in Norwegian Grove and Trondhjem Townships, Otter Tail County and Prairie View, Tanberg, and Manston Townships, Wilkin County. Reroute and partial abandonment of Wilkin County Ditch 44 will occur in Sections 9, 10, and 11, Manston Township.

Previously, BRRWD rebuilt banks on south and west side of Wilkin County Ditch No. 40 and completed restoration of Lawndale Creek in Sections 34 and 35, Atherton Township, Wilkin County to prevent breakout flows from Wilkin County Ditch No. 40. Breakout flows from Wilkin County Ditch 40 would scour landscape and deposit sediment in South Branch Buffalo River.

Future proposed project includes complete restoration of South Branch Buffalo River from Highway 9 to Wilkin and Clay County line. Reroute and partial abandonment of Wilkin County Ditch No. 44 will be Phase 1 of a multi-phase project to restore South Branch Buffalo-River and reduce future sediment loading. Future phases are planned to be completed as watershed projects.

Historically, South Branch Buffalo River meandered through Sections 9, 10, and 11, Manston Township. Early 1910s, Wilkin County Ditch No. 44 (formally known as Judicial Ditch No. 3) was constructed, effectively cutting off natural stream. Channel was shortened from 4.6 miles to 2.7 miles.

The restoration project is an attempt to address existing problems such as: breakout flows affecting agricultural fields during large flood events, poor drainage and channel capacity downstream of Phase 1, poor water quality due to high turbidity, and poor wildlife and aquatic habitat due to straightened channel. Overall goal of project is to improve conveyance and habitat by restoring South Branch Buffalo River back to its natural flow path.

Reroute of Wilkin County Ditch No. 44 will be completed through MN Statue 103E.227. BRRWD filed petition on September 28, 2021. Under MN Statue 103E.227, ditch can be rerouted if drainage benefits to benefiting landowners are maintained. Reroute will involve diverting water from current ditch into a two-stage channel at section line between Sections 11 and 12, Manston Township. Width of meandering channel varies from 8.5 to 10.5 feet, channel depth is 2.25 feet, valley width varies from 60 to 75 feet wide.

Project proposes to utilize riprap section as a best management practice (BMP) to manage sediment. Land adjacent to project is in well-established permanent conservation, so there is a buffer between agricultural fields and channel. Riprap sections will have lower installation and maintenance costs compared to side inlet pipes because there will be no culvert.

Land surrounding Phase 1 of project has already been enrolled in permanent conservation programs. BRRWD will acquire 140 feet wide easement for construction and future maintenance. Land in Sections 9 and 11 are enrolled in Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) program and land in Section 10 is owned by Pheasants Forever, Inc. and will be transferred to Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) for establishment of a Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

Partial abandonment of Wilkin County Ditch No. 44 will be completed through MN Statute 103E.806. Pheasants Forever, Inc. was benefitting landowner that petitioned for partial abandonment of ditch that runs parallel to 170th Street. Existing ditch through Sections 3, 10, and 11 will be converted to Township Road ditch.

BRRWD has acquired permits through Wilkin County for wetland impacts under Wetland Conservation Act (WCA). Wetland permits through DNR and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) were not required. Once project is awarded to contractor, BRRWD will obtain Construction Stormwater Permit through Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA).

Total project cost estimate is \$1.245 million. \$50,000 proposed to be paid for by Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) to manage tree encroachment on adjacent RIM easements. \$1.195 million in grant funds from Outdoor Heritage Fund (OHF) through Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (LSOHC) has been secured. Gaps in funding are anticipated to be paid through district-wide levy authorized through MN Statute 103D.905. BRRWD may utilize Clean Water Fund grant acquired for work within South Branch Buffalo River watershed.

Proposed project will improve water quality by reducing sediment and nutrient loading to Wilkin County Ditch No. 44 and South Branch Buffalo River through creation of stable natural prairie stream. Project reduces peak discharge at its outlet by reconnecting Wilkin County Ditch No. 44 to its natural floodplain. Project will not adversely impact drainage and will maintain drainage benefits for benefitting landowners. BRRWD will acquire easements along rerouted stream ensuring drainage maintenance rights for Wilkin County Ditch No. 44 are maintained. Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) developed between BWSR, Pheasants Forever, Inc., and BRRWD to ensure drainage maintenance rights through entire project area.

Once reroute of Wilkin County Ditch No. 44 is complete and fully vegetated, portion of Wilkin County Ditch No. 44 sought to be abandoned will not serve substantial useful purpose as part of drainage system to any property remaining in system and is not of substantial public benefit and utility.

BRRWD will continue to use existing Wilkin County Ditch 44 alignment until restored channel is fully vegetated. Once vegetation along channel is stable, water will be rerouted through restored channel. At this time, portion of ditch along 170th Street will be regraded to be road ditch.

Construction of project expected to begin late summer 2022.

Project benefits include maintained drainage and conveyance of system, improved water quality by reducing sediment and nutrient loading to channel with river restoration allowing flood flows to spill over vegetated lands and installation of 18 sediment BMPs, improved habitat through installation of 80 acres of enhanced buffers and restoration of 4.6 miles of Wilkin County Ditch 44/South Branch Buffalo River to stable stream, and improved road safety along 170th Street.

In northeast corner Section 11, pipe will be installed diagonally through 170th Street to bring water directly into project area in Section 11 to keep water from crossing over road during large rain event.

BRRWD receiving funding from OHF for stream restoration program. Application identified South Branch Buffalo River and Upper Buffalo River as priority areas. Future phases of South Branch Buffalo River Project will depend on funding needs for both projects. BRRWD requested extension for current grant. If granted extension, BRRWD may be able to fund additional phases. BRRWD has completed Environmental Assessment Worksheet (EAW) for downstream phases. Once bids are opened for Phase 1 there will be a better understanding of funding for future phases of project.

Bids will be let once BRRWD acquires easements from landowners. Four easements will be required for Phase 1.

President Fjestad adjourned meeting at 7:49 PM.

/s/ John Hanson

Secretary