



Subcommittee on Minnesota Water Policy

July 15, 2020

Inventory, Assessment, and Evaluation of Land Preservation Goals and Programs in the Upper Mississippi River Watershed

Project Summary

This initiative presents an opportunity to assess conservation programs that are intended to preserve lands for habitat and water-quality improvement in the Upper Mississippi River Watershed. Research by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources suggests that protecting 60 percent of a watershed is sufficient to preserve the water quality and habitat of lakes and of streams. This initiative would evaluate the progress made by state, federal and private organizations in making progress toward that goal in this important watershed. It is likely that this goal is within reach in the near future. If that assumption is correct, it will provide a concrete example of the importance and value of environmental programs created through amendments to the states' constitution and will be able to be used as a "poster child" for demonstration the value of the amendments to the citizens of the state.

The Upper Mississippi River Watershed (watershed) is an area where water-quality preservation is within reach. The watershed, which stretches from Lake Itasca to the Metro, is so ecologically and economically significant that it needs to be prioritized for protection. The watershed supports more than 350 species of mammals, birds and other wildlife, including most of the endangered, threatened and rare species in Minnesota. The watershed is also a vital migration route for nearly half of North America's bird species and about 40 percent of its waterfowl. In all, the watershed's thirteen million acres provide drinking water for 2.5 million Minnesotans, more than 44 percent of the state's residents, including much of the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area. The Nature Conservancy's scientists have identified the locations of land within the watershed that are critical for protection and restoration. They have also found that preserving water quality in the watershed could result in nearly \$500 million in direct and indirect benefits. These benefits include water- treatment costs, retained property values and taxes, reduced flood damages, retained tourism revenue and jobs, as well as avoided public health costs. Protecting the river and its surroundings will avoid billions in future costs, because cleaning dirty water is more expensive than protecting clean water. Therefore, we need to assess progress in preserving water quality and habitat in this important watershed. (Based on an editorial by Rich Biscke)

We need a better understanding of progress toward protection goals in the Upper Mississippi River watershed. In some cases, the state's dedicated funding programs preserve lands that provide multiple benefits (habitat and water quality). Unfortunately, these multiple benefits are not always accounted for, or recognized as acting in concert. Similarly lands preserved through federal and private programs are not always included in the complete accounting or lands that are protected.

A complete assessment of the combined impact of all conservation and set-aside programs is needed for the watershed and as a template for other parts of the state. The initiative would not change existing conservation programs. It would simply compile information from all of the environmental programs to understand how effectively the programs are being used and leveraged in the watershed by providing a complete assessment of land preservation programs. The effort would quantify progress in reaching preservation goals and would determine if additional emphasis is needed to reach the protection goals. It would provide an evaluation of whether the watershed has been provided with sufficient and equitable funding and would provide information about progress toward the preservation goals.

Objectives:

- Provide a compilation of the total preserved lands in the watershed.
- Assess the location of preserved lands with respect to lands targeted for preservation by the TNC
- Provide an important example of the value of the state's constitutionally mandated environmental programs