

NPS Task Force Meeting Minutes
January 28, 2026 – NDDEQ Normandy Building

Attendees: see sign in sheets

Task Force Members in attendance:

Rhonda Kelsch, ND Association of Soil Conservation Districts
Kathleen Duttenhefner, ND Parks and Recreation Department
Lillian Johnston, ND Department of Agriculture
Cody Vanderbusch, ND Department of Mineral Resources
Julie Ellingson, ND Stockmen's Association
Sienna Houle, ND Rural Water Systems Association
Aaron Larsen, ND Game and Fish Department
Matthew Olson, ND Forest Service
Benjamin York, ND Geological Survey
Dan Hovland, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service
Mark Hayek, USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service
Spencer Wheeling, US Geological Survey
Joe Nett, ND Department of Water Resources
Ted Preister, ND Department of Water Resources
Marty Haroldson, ND Department of Environmental Quality

Task Force Members attending remotely:

Eric Trum, US EPA Region VIII
Paula Comeau, ND State Soil Conservation Committee
Mark Wax, USDA Rural Development
Spencer Wheeling, US Geological Survey

- 1) January 15, 2025 Task Force meeting minutes posted for review. Motion to approve by Matt Olson, second by Ted Preister; upon voice vote, all in favor.
- 2) Project Proposal Presentations

Upper Sheyenne River Watershed Pilot Program – Phase II

Presentation by Mandar Nangare, Barr Engineering

Q&A/Discussion:

- 1) What is the plan for post installation monitoring, evaluations?

- Literature demonstrates bioengineered projects like these have demonstrable value
- Visual check vegetation has come back, compare aerial photos of bank movement and correlate to sediment loading and water quality improvements
- Potentially engage with HS students to collect WQ samples; not much success on that so far due to the remoteness of the sites, but maybe in the future

2) Any thoughts on the flow from Devils Lake, changing hydrology, how projects will respond?

- Looking at the Sheyenne River Cross section as a whole, in a normal water condition would be 150 CFS under normal water level.
- Today we are pushing approximately 450 CFS for the last 20 some years. These projects don't use heavy armoring or grading – they use bioengineering below normal water level.
- We have heard from landowners that flow is season long instead of seasonal. Still kind of a pilot project to see if this work will hold up the same under these conditions.

3) How many landowners are involved?

- 3 for this project. They have been through NRCS screening RCPP process, will be completed under this grant.
- 1 or 2 potential in the future using a different source of funding, may be just fencing/grazing management, no engineering.

4) So 2 completed, 3 this phase. Will this use up the funding?

- Construction costs have escalated since 2019. 2 sites last year came out a little higher due to mobilization costs. May have to find some additional funding to finish these 3 sites, but think there will be enough.

5) Big fan of this collaborative project. Originally there were 15 sites? Are they the same? Previous phase of the project reductions 2 tons of phosphorus soil per year and 2200 lbs- will this phase of the project be the same?

- 18 reaches were identified on the original map, 15 showed that there was some instability. At 6 public meetings we heard from landowners and based on that, refined to 7 projects. Out of the 7, designed 5, 3 could not be done due to landowners not wanting to give up river access, and the Joint Board determined not to fund. 2 were implemented. On the 3 new sites, 3,000' or about 5X the first Phase projects, so would expect 5X the benefits.

Jamestown Reservoir Watershed Project – Phase II

Presentation by Dustin Kreuger, Stutsman County SCD

Q&A/Discussion:

- 1) Overall acres and results on the one example producer (grass plantings) shown – how is the data generated?
 - PTMApp is a model estimate based on NRCS standards, you put in the practices implemented, it models improvements.
- 2) For prioritization, you said look at cost effectiveness versus highest reduction results. Would you get more bang for your buck doing like 2 highest reduction projects versus 5 most cost effective?
 - Board does not want one producer to get all the funds, they want to spread the money around. When I model the highest reduction projects it would be more money than could even ask for. Plus, the more people talking versus having one person talking - it sells the program even more.
- 3) Has the Bureau of Reclamation done any sediment load work on the Reservoir itself?
 - BOR gave the Reservoir to the County. There may be some past data, but the county is not doing any monitoring.

Square Butte Creek Watershed Project

Presentation by JD Hanson, Oliver County SCD

Q&A/Discussion:

- 1) Do you have any idea on number of landowners? acres?
 - Don't really know yet. Have talked about it at ladies' ag night, boards etc. There is interest but no head count yet. Since we've started the conversation, there is interest and support, people wondering when it will start (when cost share will be available).
- 2) Will you be looking to expand staff with this new project?
 - Just JD for now to focus on this project, add a seasonal technician to take on other tasks.
- 3) Any discussion with Minnkota?
 - No not really
- 4) Continued discussion of sample site locations in relation to permitted facilities, ongoing monitoring by other entities and how this ties into this project and TMDL assessments in the area.

Nine Townships Watershed Project – Phase II

Presentation by Sierra Henke, Mercer County SCD

Q&A/Discussion:

- 1) The proposal lists a secondary goal of improving the uses on the Knife River, but there's no assessment of that in the project that's listed right now. Is there any thought into the future of doing upstream and downstream of these reaches to see if there is an improvement?
 - Not sure as Sierra has only been there 6 weeks.

Government Creek Watershed Project

Presentation by Erin Miller, Stark-Billings County SCD

Q&A/Discussion:

- 1) 2 grazing systems in 3 years?
 - Goal is 2 but think we will see a lot more interest
- 2) How are producers going to be prioritized?
 - Ultimately it will be up to the Board to prioritize.
- 3) Septic may come along in second year.
- 4) Methyl mercury impairment for Lake Tschida?
 - Fish tissue concentrations came back too high, but have not been back since the 1990's. Technically still impaired but haven't been back to reassess.
- 5) During the presentation you mentioned a producer who visits with at samplings- what was the historic perspective they shared?
 - Within the last 10 years, he has seen more vegetation growth in the waterway. Former swimming holes are green and slimy. Not as "clean". He has river pasture, will be a good contact and will be interested in implementations.
- 6) Think about RCPP funds as well as EQIP and CSP, EQIP may be limited.

-Break-

Sheyenne River Watershed Project – Phase II

Presentation by Bob Flath, Ransom County SCD

Q&A/Discussion:

- 1) How are you using the Wayfindr app?
 - Worked with IWI, they did the analysis. Wayfindr a bit too expensive - \$1.75/acre to have created within the app. There are many other groups are doing something similar.

- 2) Wayfindr takes the PTMApp predictions and you put in actual applied practices and it runs various models. It is a good tool. IWI working with buyers to utilize certificates to get higher price for commodities.
- 3) WQ report flow adjusted?
 - No just regular analysis in the WQ report. Joe – analysis with flow adjusted slightly different than what was presented. May answer some of the question about why N is still so high, but TSS, P low – maybe at normal flow levels would not be.
- 4) No sampling in this Phase?
 - No sampling in this phase as was done in the past. Maybe do post implementation sampling in the future. Do not have a lot of data.
- 5) Feel like good partners in Barnes County? They don't participate in Joint Boards.
 - Yes, SCD Board are supportive. And has worked with supervisors in previous watershed projects. Good relationship with employees. We'll see.
- 6) About the concern with the tile drains. Are you tracking acres being tiled? Is there quantification through permitting?
 - It is on the list to get a better handle on this. Local county WRB should be approving every project. Intend to work with them to compile list of permits.
 - Caveat – only 80 acres or larger are permitted, and there are a lot of 79 acre fields. It will be challenging.

Turtle River – Larimore Dam Watershed Project

Presenter not available

Submitted PowerPoint presented by Emilee Novak

ND Conservation Work Force Training and Certification Initiative

Presentation by Kelli Schumacher, NDCDEA

Q&A/Discussion:

- 1) How is it determined if there are gaps in workforce training?
 - Needs assessment has been sent out to employees for several years, and there is major turnover. Don't have consistent training for the new employees. Association identified that this position was needed, and to create a platform that fills the holes identified in the needs assessment. Priority is SCD employees but will share with partners. Hope is that Boards

will see the staff have the capacity and support to take on more watershed projects.

- 2) And you mentioned that you're using some sort of software program. What was that again?
 - Skyprep will hold modules. Articulate will be used to create modules. MN and WA are using these. We've already started to work on some onboarding modules for that.
 - MN and WA have both been in the process of building their training platforms for years now. MN has been close to 15 years now, having their training platforms, and it has greatly increased their capacity, and then Washington's about three years ahead of us.
 - We're hoping to get a hold of some of the modules that they've already created so that we can catch up a little faster.
- 3) I know for years we have turnover in the districts, and I know when Jim was here, he was always pushing for higher salaries in those positions because you know that is important. I think it's equally as important in any position to feel empowered through education and through connection, and I think this is awesome.
- 4) I think with the challenges that we're facing at the federal level, relying on our partners to be force multipliers in delivering what we're trying to deliver terms of conservation. Certification will help deliver [NRCS] program dollars. Because one of the constraints that we have currently is having enough partners that are certified conservation planners to deliver the technical assistance in the programs.
- 5) What are some of the benefits that you expect for our soil conservation district supervisors as a result of this?
 - Supervisors hopefully will see that they won't have to rehire people every year. Supervisors should be able to see that those employees are sticking around and they will be able to see that paying them a better wage and provide benefits.
- 6) Is there anything in place to ensure that in this program has the full force to keep it going?

- So long as the training coordinator position is funded, yes.
- Long term plan is to have regional training coordinators.

Livestock Environmental Nutrient Management Educational Support Program – Phase III

Presentation by Mary Keena, NDSU Extension

Q&A/Discussion:

- 1) How do you prioritize?
 - Generally on a 1st come 1st serve, or Extension agents refer, or from meeting follow up. Also based on what objectives were not fully addressed last year. Prioritize based on weather and travel at times.
- 2) What is the "admin" line item on budget.
 - NDSU overhead is admin.

Red River Basin River Watch and River of Dreams – Phase III

Presentation by Asher Kingery and Taylor

Q&A/Discussion:

- 1) what % MN or ND?
 - River watch – 5 more schools in MN. River of Dreams more in MN. But fairly evenly split.
- 2) Are there 3 staff working?
 - 3 field staff and 1 admin
- 3) Since the this project encompasses individuals from North Dakota and Minnesota, does Minnesota contribute to any funding?
 - Yes they are separate, ND money stays in ND and MN money stays in MN.
- 4) For the Macro sample collections, do you ID in the field or send in to a lab?
 - ID to Order in the field.
- 5) Do you focus on Zebra mussels?
 - Yes, and they have to follow SOPs. Kids ask a lot of questions about them.

-Break-

Presentation of Budget by Emilee Novak and Eric Trum

- Historically since 2018 ND allocation has been 3.8 to 4 million
- DEQ staffing/overhead comes off the top, leaving about \$2.8 million for subawards. At least 50% of this must go to watershed projects.

- Based on the EPA budget signed by President, anticipate 319 will be nearly the same as FY25. Don't have exact allocation but seems will be status quo.

General Discussion:

- Can BMP dollars be moved around? Yes, can move from one BMP to the other. Annual report is the bottom line. For example if they budget for one practice, but get interest in another practice, they can move the funds. Many applicants don't break their budget down by practice for just this reason.
- How would you track something like the training project? Falls under education.
- How do you tie an education project just to water? This has been an issue in the past - would be good to know exactly what training we are paying for.
- What is the scheduling of these grants -can we defer the third year? Most apps are the max amount of time, but can be cut back. Had some underutilization of some older funds which could be a 1-year bridge to some existing phases and have them come back next year. Existing phase utilization:
 - Livestock and RRB/RD always fully utilized. Have done a no cost extension during COVID.
 - Watershed projects. 9 townships and Jamestown Reservoir requested additional funds for BMPs during the current phase.
 - Sheyenne River (Barnes/Ransom) previous phase underutilized BMP because they fund through other programs- they do provide a lot of technical assistance and enter the BMPs in the report, just with \$0 attached.
 - Turtle R Larimore, underutilized, but they do have a bit more time to use what is left. Not as much tech assistance need in that county.
 - Upper Sheyenne all funds specifically to the projects identified.
- Because of the timing, there will be some funds for 2026, but optimistically will only be a half year. Budgets will be adjusted to reflect that or project end dates moved further out.
- Instruction on how to submit comments and rate fund, partial fund, do not fund. Sponsors will have an opportunity to revise and re-submit. They will also update budgets based on what funding is available.
 - Budget periods are all over the place 2029 through 2031.
 - Question – if budget is cut, can they still produce this product?

Proposal Discussions

Upper Sheyenne River Watershed Pilot Program – Phase II

- Nice if they would just follow the standard format with the budget. Objective, Task, Budget. If the cost is covered under another objective, note that. Like to see how much is going into BMPs.
- Like the project. Concerned only reaches 3 landowners.
- Nothing about monitoring. In Phase 1 this what brought up. Plan will be to quantify though remote/modeling.
- Table 5 funding sources. Some of the funding sources haven't been secured yet, some sources are not eligible for match. Does this hinder the project? They would have to find another source of match, eg. Sponsor Cash.
- Project overlaps the RCPP project area – finish out the RCPP then come back for funding. Think there might be some landowner resistance to using RCPP.
- Funding only for engineering and permitting? Previous phase paid contractors. We have the BMP team to handle engineering.

Jamestown Reservoir Watershed Project – Phase II

- One of the better written proposals. They have been very involved and have assisted partners.
- Are letters of support required? No.
- Noticed task 1 cost did not match budget table – Yes, we caught that and the table is the correct numbers.

Square Butte Creek Watershed Project

- Appreciate it being a new area and taking over for TMDL sample development & moving into implementation

Nine Townships Watershed Project – Phase II

- Good project, good proposal
- In-kind for grazing, how is that quantified? Payment for prescribed grazing used as in-kind by paying for everything else.
- 70% BMP implementation is really good

Government Creek Watershed Project

- Proposal needed some work. Are they implementing septic systems or just planning? Needs to be refined a bit. Not much budget. Not much detail.
- They set up a very strong why but not a fleshed out plan for HOW.
- Small budget maybe can be a blessing, start small, come back for more.

Sheyenne River Watershed Project – Phase II

- Current phase, no interest in septic systems but that is the majority of the BMP budget.
- Would have been nice to have someone from Barnes to show the support in working together. Support letter does not specify how they would work together, just that they support. Plan is for Ransom to cover Barnes with no involvement from Barnes SCD staff.
- Proposal was great. Best monitoring section.
- Goes through 2031 - maybe shorten the project to not tie funds up so far out.

Turtle River – Larimore Dam Watershed Project

- Do they have enough to sustain through 2026 and come back in 2027? Very low utilization in current phase – why is this? Perhaps get some more feedback and ask for a re-application.

ND Conservation Work Force Training and Certification Initiative

- What types of training are they looking at doing? Is it related to water quality?
- Sounds like the Soil and Water Leadership academy. Eco ed for district employees. Turnover is a big problem. There needs to be a watershed focus.
 - S&W leadership more focused on Supervisors, not employees.
- Concern about sustainability if Kelli or Sarah leave – not sure anyone else could take over that role. NDASCD would continue the position, and it is written into the directives.
- This is a great project. However, it is the one that we can't say connects to water quality. It is the furthest out there. Need more about content and curriculum. Must have something in writing. If following WA and MT, what are they doing?
- All employees are encouraged to become certified conservation planners. Would this training be equivalent to what would be needed to do planning for any partner program?
- Would like them to come back with specific curriculum and tie outcomes to water quality.
- This is a short project – 2.5 years for over \$500k.

Livestock Environmental Nutrient Management Educational Support Program – Phase III

- Very enthusiastic and has tapped into a constituency that is often overlooked and not engaged.
- Doing a good job of measuring success and outcomes and bringing them through to the next phase.
- Would appreciate better alignment of objectives, tasks, funding tie to budget.

- Discussion of "admin" budget item. Universities have federally negotiated indirect rate. We require they limit to 15%. It will automatically be set to 15%, they can track the difference and track it as in-kind.

Red River Basin River Watch and River of Dreams – Phase III-IV

- They came in last year, this is Phase IV now. They were cut back to just one year due to how many I&E requests came in last year, and the need for 50% to go to watershed projects.
- 1 FTE listed but the hours don't seem to match up. 3 people equivalent to 1 FTE.
- Budget is not broken out by year.
- Harder to tie to water quality, but also builds really good foundational interest in water. Maybe good replacement for TREES for the younger kids. Like that this is in the field and not all in the classroom.

Final thoughts, instructions

Draft NPS Management Plan 2026-2030 is available for review and comment.

Emilee Novak provided instructions for comments, due 2/27/2026

Motion to adjourn by Ted, seconded by Matt.

Adjourn 2:50 p.m.

Minutes submitted by Liz Smith, ND Department of Environmental Quality