

## **The Sea Grant Files 8.7, Dec 18, 2018**

### **How Communities are Collaborating to Manage Water (Duluth Urban Watershed Advisory Committee)**

Hi. I'm Jesse Schomberg and you're listening to the Sea Grant Files.

Today I get to talk about a project that I've been working on for over 4 years, and it's celebrating a pretty important milestone. Ten communities are working together to manage water instead of deciding what to do independently.

It's a huge step for community leaders to look past political boundaries ... to look at a landscape holistically ... in this case, the landscape is the Duluth area watersheds.... A watershed defines the area of land that drains into a particular waterbody. And because of that, it encompasses the sources of all sorts of water quality issues, such as pollution, erosion, and flooding.

Let's take the 2012 flood as a quick example; many of you likely remember the flooding up near the Miller Hill Mall; some of your cars may have been swamped by that 3 feet of water in the parking lot by Grandma's Restaurant. Why was that water there? Well, because the torrential rain that fell on the land in the upper parts of the Miller Creek watershed was running downhill towards the lake, and in those spots that flooded, the water was flowing in faster than it could flow out. It is tough to stop flooding when such extreme storms hit, but it is certainly possible to make changes that can reduce flooding. For example, we can look at the upstream portions of the Miller Creek watershed, and consider how the ways we've changed the land in that area, including parking lots, roads and ditches, yards, and houses, contribute to more of the rainfall running off more quickly.

The Miller Creek watershed .. all the land that drains into Miller Creek .... includes the cities of Hermantown, Rice Lake, and Duluth. But Miller Creek is just one of the 42 named streams within the Duluth city limits, and every one has its own watershed! To manage these systems... to reduce pollution, protect the 16 trout streams, reduce impacts from flooding, and maintain the infrastructure that helps move all of the stormwater through the communities, it makes sense for local governments to coordinate how they manage water!

So, Sea Grant and the Natural Resources Research Institute began working with the MN Pollution Control Agency in 2014 to see if we could create a way for all of the communities in the Duluth-area watersheds to cooperate. Sounds simple, right? Well, not so much. We looked at how watersheds are managed in other parts of Minnesota, across the country, and even in Canada, and no surprise, there were some pretty strong differences of opinion on how to do this. We also had 10 different communities involved - 4 cities - Proctor, Hermantown, Rice Lake, and Duluth, 5 townships - Thomson, Midway, Gnesen, Normanna, and Lakewood - and also St. Louis County; and while all wanted to participate, each had some of their own ideas and priorities. All along, though, I've been impressed with these communities' willingness to engage and debate, seek common ground, and compromise. These communities forged plans for a new future, and as we sit at the end of 2018, nearly all of the 10 communities have signed a Memorandum of Understanding that specifies how they will cooperate on watershed management!

I thought I'd share with you the five areas where they agreed to work together:

First off, they want to improve their understanding and knowledge about water issues. As an example, we've invited experts from the DNR, Superior National Forest, and UMD to discuss how beaver activities can change hydrology ... or the way water moves with relation to the land.

Second, the communities have already started identifying and prioritizing water projects that improve stream water quality and protect against future floods. The prioritizing is meant to maximize efficiency and ensure taxpayers are getting the biggest impact from these water management investments.

The third area of agreement recognizes that there are others working on water issues as well. The communities agreed to seek a better understanding of what these groups do, and to find ways to work with them on projects of mutual interest. These groups include state and federal agencies, tribes, and others that have a role in water management and watershed health.

The fourth point of agreement recognizes that community ordinances and policies play a big role in how land is developed, and therefore how much water runs off and how clean it is. So the communities are identifying options for local codes and ordinances that affect water resources, and the members are bringing these ideas back to their communities for consideration.

And lastly, because 10 of these Duluth-area streams have water quality problems ... too much sediment and bacteria are the most common issues ... the communities are working together to fix those problems. They are also cooperating to ensure that other area streams stay in good shape, so we don't have to try and fix them later on. Indeed, all of these areas of agreement will help restore and protect the region's water quality.

In this time when it seems like civility and collaboration are hard to find, the willingness of these communities to come together to work for everyone's benefit, is quite refreshing. I'll leave you with the vision these community's developed to guide their work: "our water resources and associated ecosystems become healthier and more resilient through public engagement and local government collaboration."

You can find out more about the Duluth Urban Watershed Advisory Committee on the website [LakeSuperiorStreams \(one word\), dot O-R-G](http://LakeSuperiorStreams.org). You can also reach Minnesota Sea Grant by email at [seagr@d-dot-umn-dot-edu](mailto:seagr@d-dot-umn-dot-edu) or by phone at (218) 726-8106; ask for me, Jesse Schomberg.

This episode of the Sea Grant Files was produced by Sharon Moen, Chris Harwood, Tiffany Sprague, KUMD and, me, Jesse Schomberg. For more information, or to listen to other episodes of the Sea Grant Files, visit Minnesota Sea Grant at [w-w-w-dot-sea-grant-dot-u-m-n-dot-e.d.u](http://w-w-w-dot-sea-grant-dot-u-m-n-dot-e.d.u). Thanks for listening!