SAND HILL RIVER ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION PROJECT TEAM MEETING

Location: Sand Hill River Watershed District, Fertile, MN

Date: August 14, 2025

Time: 9:30AM – 12:00PM

Participants

April Swenby (SHRWD), Emily Hutchins (DNR – Wildlife), Mike Kelly (DNR – R1), Nathan Olson (DNR – Fisheries), Nick Kludt (DNR – Fisheries), Stephanie Klamm (DNR Hydrologist), Bethany Bethke (DNR), Henry Van Offelen (BWSR), Scott Schroeder (MPCA), Karl Tollefson (Scandia Township Supervisor), Alex Engelstad (Liberty Township Landowner), Moriya Rufer (HEI), Zach Herrmann (HEI/SHRWD)

Meeting Summary

Introduction to the Project Team Process

The meeting began with an overview of the Project Team process. Moriya Rufer, the facilitator, presented that the Project Team is advisory to the Project Sponsor (Sand Hill River Watershed District). The Project Team can contain anyone who is a stakeholder, permitter, or potential funder of the project (state and federal agencies, townships, local governments, local landowners, etc.). All members of the Project Team are expected to bring their thoughts and express concerns at each meeting.

The Project Team's goal is to provide interagency and stakeholder review to the flooding problems along the Sand Hill River and develop a recommended alternative for consideration of the SHRWD Board of Managers. With representation from a broad array of regulatory and local interests, the recommended alternative will be technically feasible, locally acceptable, and permittable. The Project Team process can take several years depending on the complexity of the problems and solutions, to develop a project concept to present to the SHRWD.

The SHRWD Board of Managers can either accept the recommended alternative, send it back to the Project Team, or halt the Project Team. Assuming the recommended alternative is carried forward, the Project Team will continue to function through more detailed design to ensure technical feasibility, permit-ability and local acceptance, and provide input on grant funding opportunities.

Conflict of Interest Policy

A Conflict of Interest Policy was adopted by the SHRWD Board of Managers at their August 2025 Regular Board Meeting. With multiple initiatives on-going in the SHRWD, this provides added transparency and avoids any potential allegations of conflict of interest. A manager or

volunteer must disclose “financial interest”, which means any ownership or control in an asset that has the potential to produce a monetary return. This does apply to members (volunteers) of the Sand Hill River Ecosystem Restoration Project Team. A copy of the adopted conflict of interest statement is available from the Watershed District staff upon request.

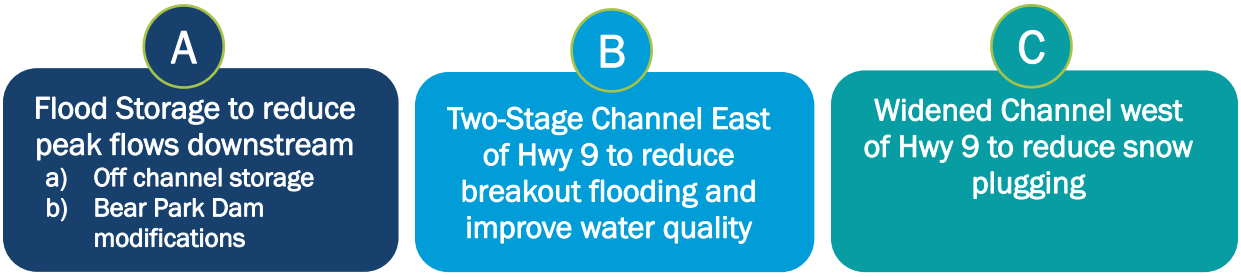
Alternatives Discussion

Herrmann discussed the alternatives development process. Alternatives are evaluated on alignment with expected outcomes, technical feasibility, permit-ability, and local acceptance. Alternative evaluation began during the March 4, 2024, Project Team meeting, and was further refined during the September 4, 2024, January 29, 2025, March 27, 2025, and June 11, 2025 Project Team meetings. Alternatives will continue to be refined based on comments from this meeting. In total, we anticipate several additional meetings will be required before a recommended alternative can be presented to the SHRWD Board of Managers.

The prior Project Team meeting (June 11, 2025) contemplated two large off-channel holding structures. Since that time, a new opportunity for storage has been reviewed that includes modifications to the Bear Park Dam. This alternative fits into group A of the major project components below.

Major Project Components:

Presently, there are three project components being discussed by the Project Team. They are highlighted below.



A Temporary Storage

At the last Project Team meeting (June 2025), the two sites previously identified near the upstream (east) end of the Sand Hill Ditch were refined based on PT comments. Since the June Project Team Meeting, the strategy for storage sites was discussed with the SHRWD Board of Managers. This resulted in an additional alternative being evaluated. Landowner outreach was postponed until the result could be discussed with the Project Team at this meeting.

Additional Alternative: Modified Flood Storage at Bear Park Dam

Bear Park Dam (SHRWD Project No. 1) is an on-channel dam located on the Sand Hill River in Bear Park Township, Norman County, MN. The dam was constructed by the SHRWD in 1984 for purposes of providing flood control downstream by providing flow attenuation for the upper Sand Hill Watershed, which contributes to the Project Team’s area of interest. At maximum pool, the flood pool inundates the floodplain adjacent to the Sand Hill River in portions Bear Park Township (Norman County) and Bejou Township (Mahnomen County).

Currently, landowners within the flood pool have expressed concerns to the SHRWD regarding "stagnate" water in the Sand Hill River, leading to sedimentation, reduced capacity, and increased flooding. Also, the analyzed flood event indicates that the auxiliary spillway overtops during the 10-year spring flood scenario. Once flows overtop the auxiliary spillway, flood attenuation benefits are lost, resulting in reduced flood prevention downstream.

To better use the flood storage during events when it's needed further downstream, modifications to the outlet capacity at Bear Park that would reprioritize when the already available storage would be utilized. By increasing capacity in the principal spillway, we'd provide less attenuation during low and moderate flood flows, leaving that storage available for larger spring floods that are causing downstream issues.

Two alternatives were analyzed for modifications to Bear Park Dam. The first alternative was a non-gated option that would permanently increase the capacity of the principal spillway. While this option provides benefits of no manual operation, it also has a negative consequence of increased downstream flows for all events. The second alternative would incorporate a gate that would be closed in the spring prior to runoff and would open when the flood pool reached an elevation two feet less than the auxiliary spillway crest. This would allow for attenuation of "early water" during spring runoff and use the added capacity of the opened gate to reduce likelihood of auxiliary spillway overtopping. The pros and cons of each were discussed. Both alternatives would allow for more flow through Bear Park Dam during summer low and moderate flows, which has potential to address landowner concerns in the flood pool.

Discussion

Overall, the Project Team was supportive of the Bear Park modification. The DNR supported improving fish passage at this site. Option 1 would be easier to fund from a habitat perspective, however Option 2 funding would depend on the operation of the gate. If the gate were closed limited periods, there may be potential for funding from a habitat perspective. Conversely, if the gate were closed most of the time funding would likely have to be more geared towards Flood Damage Reduction. Bear Park Dam is considered the "last fish barrier" on the Sand Hill River, which would help in prioritization for habitat funding.

➡ *Conclusions:*

- DNR look at old Bear Park Dam permitting and see what this new option would mean for permitting.
- Model the Bear Park storage scenarios to identify the "worst case" scenario in terms of increased downstream flows.
- Model the storage options as additive to options B and C below.
- Outreach to landowners about the off-channel storage options.

B Two-Stage Channel East of Highway 9

The two-stage channel alternatives were presented and discussed in January 2025. The original design options were a 330-foot-wide channel or a 100-foot-wide channel. Herrmann proposed a 120-foot-wide floodplain width to match the proposed width of option C west of Highway 9. The estimated cost of this option would be ~$12 million.

➡ Conclusion: Model this option as additive to options A and C.

C Widened Channel West of MN Highway 9

Landowners have expressed that snow plugging during spring flooding is a concern west of Highway 9. Options to widen the channel geometry to 120-feet-wide were discussed by the Project Team. By widening the channel, snow plugging could be contained to below adjacent field elevations, whereas the current condition appears to have snow plugging above the adjacent field elevations. The estimated cost for this option is ~$24 million. Some landowners still want to remove the snow with an excavator. There are many potential problems with safety and feasibility of snow removal. The Project Team felt this needed to be discussed by the SHRWD Board and should be separate from the Project Team.

➡ Conclusion: Model this option as additive to options A and B.

Next Steps

The next project team meeting is anticipated in November 2025.

Additional Information

To see Project Team information such as past meeting minutes and studies, visit http://www.sandhillwatershed.org/Project_Team.html