
SOURCE WATER PROTECTION COLLABORATIVE

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INITIATIVE

The Minnesota Source Water Protection Collaborative

2023 report: Building greater collective capacity to protect Minnesota's drinking water sources

The Source Water Protection Collaborative brings together individuals who have expertise in source water, community outreach, engagement, or public health to advance collective actions to protect drinking water sources. This report provides an overview of the early development and projects undertaken by Minnesota's first state-wide Source Water Protection Collaborative.



Funding primarily provided by the Minnesota Department of Health from Clean Water, Land, and Legacy Amendment funds; additional funding provided by the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and the Board of Water and Soil Resources.

COLLABORATIVE BACKGROUND

The background work that informed the formation of the Source Water Protection Collaborative occurred in 2019 and 2020 through a series of listening sessions. These discussions were facilitated by the nonprofits Environmental Initiative and Citizens League with funding through the Minnesota Department of Health from the Clean Water, Land, and Legacy Amendment. More information about the listening sessions and outcomes can be found in the report [“Exploring the Development of a Source Water Protection Collaborative.”](#)

Environmental Initiative formed the Source Water Protection Collaborative in mid-2020 to address listening session themes. Collaborative members include individuals from state agencies, local governments, nonprofit organizations, higher education, and industry associations. The members are scientists, public health professionals, water protection specialists, artists, and local leaders with extensive knowledge and experience in source water protection issues across Minnesota. A list of 2023 Collaborative members is available in the appendix.

Through this partnership we hope to:

- Leverage and learn from the many policy and planning efforts and projects that impact drinking water protection across the state and facilitate the sharing of that knowledge between communities with similar concerns.
- Expand the capacity of local and state government officials responsible for providing drinking water to engage with community members, particularly those who have been marginalized from government decision-making, like farmers, immigrant communities, BIPOC communities, rural residents, and small businesses.
- Support local community partnership and trust-building efforts that are focused on those who have been marginalized, ultimately building a stronger civic fabric and greater collective capacity for securing safe drinking water for all.

Vision: We make choices on the land that ensure clean, safe drinking water for all.

Purpose: Bring together diverse groups and perspectives to advance collective action for protecting drinking water.

Collaborative convening and project development

The work of the Collaborative is primarily driven by members. The group operates in a collaborative decision-making style with members shaping the vision. Environmental Initiative facilitates conversations about the next steps; manages administrative structures, partner relationships, and project communications efforts; and works to support the members' vision. This structure builds on members' existing connections and expertise while also clarifying gaps that the group wants to address.

Geared with a shared vision and purpose, three years ago, members began to work in small groups and as a whole to discuss what collective actions they could advance to protect drinking water sources.

When brainstorming projects, members followed this set of values and guiding principles.

Collaboration

We will leverage the perspectives and strengths of this Collaborative to do work together that we could not do alone.



Mutual exchange and trust-building

We will work from the understanding that information alone does not create behavior change. We will draw on human values and experiences to build connections and trust.



Rooted in belonging and relatedness

We will connect to the context of the place and community and foster projects stemming from community-identified needs.



Risk taking and narrative shifting

We will create inclusive spaces for non-dominant narratives and perspectives. We will test new approaches that incorporate arts, culture, and play.



Shared learning

We will grow through collective learning and come with vulnerability to learn new ways of working together.



The Source Water Protection Collaborative is a partnership that is centering social and cultural barriers to change. Members recognized that current practices and ways of “educating people” were not making enough of a difference. The group sought projects that were in line with its guiding principles and moved away from the assumption that information alone creates behavior change. Instead, the group sought projects that:

- **Humanize our government and the services it provides.**
- **Utilize arts, culture, and play.**
- **Move beyond information sharing and connect to human values and experiences.**
- **Deliver multiple benefits, including accessible communication.**

Membership expectations

Source Water Protection Collaborative members meet as a full partnership on a quarterly basis. Members are expected to participate as a community member or a representative of their place-of-work, join relationship building opportunities when available, and represent the Collaborative within their networks by sharing news, project updates, and requests for project engagement.

Collaborative projects are organized and advanced by smaller subgroups of the partnership. Subgroups have been instrumental in strengthening member relationships, generating new ideas, clarifying project goals, tracking progress, and identifying next steps. Members are not required to be part of a subgroup to be part of the Collaborative. Members who are not part of subgroups still receive project updates and requests through the Collaborative’s monthly internal newsletter and during quarterly member meetings.

While most gatherings have been held virtually, the Collaborative convened in person for the first time in September 2023. Members met in Little Falls to ground themselves in the creative engagement project work happening in the town. Learn more about the Collaborative’s creative engagement efforts on page 7.

COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

During regular quarterly meetings in 2021, members broke out into smaller groups to discuss how projects could assist with network building, engagement, and peer-to-peer learning, based on experiences and themes that came out of the earlier listening sessions. By the end of the year, members coalesced around two different projects:

- A pilot, place-based project using art and creativity as an engagement strategy.
- An online information clearinghouse for water resource professionals in Greater Minnesota.



Clearinghouse project

Background

Members noted that in some areas of the state, particularly those outside of the Twin Cities metropolitan area, there can be a lack of networks, resources, and support for engagement around source water protection. To address this, the Collaborative wanted to create a clearinghouse of engagement resources and technical materials aimed at local water resource professionals in public health, soil and water conservation districts, and similar entities. The Collaborative first started working parallel to, and then decided to work in partnership with, the University of Minnesota Water Resources Center on their clearinghouse project, titled the Watershed Engagement Programming (WEP) Hub.



2023 progress

In early 2023, Environmental Initiative received engagement resource submissions from members and other industry professionals that addressed both topical outreach and program and content development needs. Using these resources, Environmental Initiative staff worked with the University of Minnesota Water Resources Center to build up the backend of the WEP Hub. Simultaneously, staff met with members of the Collaborative's clearinghouse subgroup to solicit feedback and guidance from professionals who would be using the finished version of the hub.

Due to a shift in staff capacity and department priorities, in the summer of 2023, the Water Resources Center shared that they would be able to continue to host the site but would not have a staff person dedicated to updating or maintaining the clearinghouse resources after the Collaborative's work wrapped up at the end of the year. With this change, the Collaborative clearinghouse subgroup decided to shift focus to developing the site as a proof of concept to present to other organizations with similar goals who could hopefully continue the work of the WEP Hub. High-quality engagement resources are still deeply needed by water professionals as evidenced by the Water Resources Center's initial research around the WEP Hub as well as Collaborative members' professional experience. The Collaborative remains dedicated to advancing this work.

Next steps

Going into 2024, the clearinghouse subgroup is focused on identifying and meeting with state agencies and nonprofit organizations to present the clearinghouse proof of concept. Once a new host has been identified, Environmental Initiative will work with the Water Resources Center to orient the new host to the WEP Hub process and facilitate a smooth transition to a new website.

Place-based creative engagement project

Background

As the Collaborative members thought of ways to structure a place-based project, they proposed the idea to use an engagement specialist to move beyond traditional methods of public engagement and visualize a project that incorporated arts and play. Many Collaborative members had not worked with a creative engagement specialist or artist-in-residence before and were unsure what to expect. The Collaborative heard from a panel of artists-in-residence during their full member meeting in May 2022 and continued to work with one of the panelists while developing this project.

“Who better to “build back better,” making the invisible visible, playfully bringing in all the community voices, and illustrating a new future together, than artists within government.”

- Amanda Lovelee, Metropolitan Council

Collaborative members decided to anchor work in a rural community in greater Minnesota as they knew there tended to be less focus, resources, and opportunity outside the metro for projects like these. Members brainstormed a list of communities that were large enough to have a point person to assist the artist, had some kind of connection to the arts, and had drinking water issues the public could affect. Environmental Initiative staff then interviewed these communities about their interest and capacity. They chose three potential hosts: Chatfield, Fairmont, and Little Falls.

As staff worked to finalize potential hosts, a subgroup worked to finalize the structure of the project. The Collaborative settled on a year-long residency where an artist would be guided by a local team and use their artistic mediums and engagement skills to:

- Empower community members to better engage around protecting drinking water sources.
- Create engagement capacity for the local officials responsible for providing water.
- Connect community members to their water providers.
- Encourage new ways of thinking of community engagement around water.



The artist panel consisted of five civic artist/engagement specialists that shared the breadth and depth of artists working in government, small towns, and on tenuous public issues.

Advisory panelists:

- Ashley Hanson
- Mary Welcome
- Mallory Rukhsana Nezam
- Johanna K Taylor
- Amanda Lovelee

See advisory panelist biographies in the appendix.

Members realized that, as a Collaborative made up largely of non-artists, they were not the experts and did not want to decide what the final project would look like. Instead, they designed the pilot project so the chosen artist could co-create it with the community and Collaborative input.

2023 progress

The Collaborative put out a call for artists in November of 2022 and by the beginning of the next year, they received 23 applications. A small team of Collaborative members from this subgroup came together to review the applicants, settling on six finalists for the project. Out of the finalists, the team initially chose Sharon and Shirley Nordrum, two educators, storytellers, sisters, Red Lake Band members, lifelong residents of rural Minnesota, and advocates for those without voices and those unheard. The sisters chose to work with Little Falls. Sadly, Shirley passed away while the project was in development, and the project was paused to allow Sharon time to grieve and decide next steps. When she made the decision to step back from the work, the team reached out to another finalist, Su Legatt. Su was interested in the project, even on the shortened timeline, and she worked with Sharon to transition the work.

Su Legatt is an artist, community organizer, and educator who spent the first month of her time meeting with over 10 different community contacts to think about how to design her project. In July, she proposed *Creating With and For Water*, a project with two main parts:

- Community workshops around papermaking and paper art that facilitated drinking water discussions.
- Creating a series of broadside posters using materials from the workshops to display across Little Falls.

In total, even on her compressed timeline, Su held nine different public and private workshops in the community, working with the local arts center, high school, and Franciscan Sisters to reach over 40 community members. She took the art community members created and turned it into a series of 13 broadsides that incorporated 23 different art submissions. Pictures of the broadsides are available in the appendix.

Little Falls was originally a paper milling town. The project acknowledged this history and connected it to current community water challenges.

Evaluation and next steps

Su and Collaborative members worked with Dr. Amit Pradhananga to evaluate this project. Participants in the workshops took informal bead surveys, and the majority of respondents said they learned more about where their drinking water comes from and how water is managed locally. In all but one session, the majority of the participants felt more comfortable reaching out to their local unit of government about water. Dr. Pradhananga also sent out formal surveys to workshop participants after each event, and his full report is available in the appendix. While there was a small sample size, the majority of respondents felt inspired to keep learning about water and take action to protect it.

The broadsides that Su created will be on display at Little Falls City Hall for the first part of 2024. Su retained full rights to her work and will be selling reproductions to interested community members, with proceeds benefiting the Friends of Crane Meadows National Wildlife Reserve. There are currently discussions between Su and the We are Water Mississippi River Sartell team on how they can use and expand on her art, which includes potentially incorporating more of the submissions she received. The project team is also thinking about how to broaden this successful pilot project.



NEXT STEPS

for the Source Water Protection Collaborative

As the Collaborative has developed, there has been interest in it on a regional and national scale. Members spoke about the Collaborative at the 2023 American Water Works Association Sustainable Water Management conference and the Ground Water Protection Council's 2023 annual forum. The creative engagement project has also generated excitement in the water resources community, and Collaborative members held a panel on creative engagement in water at the 2023 Minnesota Water Resources Conference and presented a poster on the work at the 2023 National Nonpoint Source Training Workshop.

Additionally, members engaged Dr. Amit Pradhananga to evaluate the Collaborative overall. He conducted interviews with five members of the Collaborative, transcribing the interviews and analyzing them qualitatively to identify themes relevant to the project's objectives. Dr. Pradhananga's full report is available in the appendix. In his research, he found that members were motivated to join the Collaborative to share their expertise, build relationships, and learn about different aspects of water management statewide.

While the Collaborative has found success in member connection and project work, it has also had to overcome issues that have set back member momentum in thinking beyond the primary project work. In Dr. Pradhananga's interviews, members expressed struggling with their roles and the overall goals of the Collaborative, lacking time and having scheduling conflicts, and feeling that the Collaborative's projects did not always align with their interests and expertise.

Interviewed members suggested the Collaborative should work to develop a clearer plan of action by clarifying its purpose and the role of members. They felt that the Collaborative needed to either be more representative of statewide needs or focus on one portion of the state. Alongside this desire for clarity in geographic scope, members also specified the need for more involvement from representatives of local-level government agencies, and for greater engagement and leadership of stakeholders impacted by drinking water issues.

Building off project momentum, the group suggested that a next step for the Collaborative could be to review previous project ideas and consider reinvigorating them, making sure that all member expertise can be incorporated into future work, and that there is a better balance of socially focused projects and technical expertise. Members expressed that in all of this planning, there needed to be consistent leadership from Environmental Initiative since staff would have to take the initial lead on the work.

To address this feedback, the Collaborative plans to refocus in 2024 by putting a co-chair guidance system in place, talking to members and partners about best next steps, transitioning the clearinghouse, expanding on the creative engagement project, and creating a plan for the continued future of this work.

Appendix

I. List of Members

Sarah Berry, Local Public Health Association and Waseca County Public Health

William Cole, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency

Mae Davenport, University of Minnesota

Annie Felix-Gerth, Board of Water and Soil Resources

Tim Gieseke, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

Larry Gunderson, Minnesota Department of Agriculture

Stephanie Hatzenbichler, Stearns County Soil and Water Conservation District

Alex Keilty, Lake Pepin Legacy Alliance

Amanda Lovelee, Metropolitan Council

Aaron Meyer, Minnesota Rural Water Association

Alycia Overbo, Minnesota Department of Health

Jen Schaust, Minnesota Department of Agriculture

Dave Schulenberg, Minnesota Water Well Association

Trygve Throntveit, Minnesota Humanities Center

Bruce Tiffany, farmer, Redwood Falls

Lisa Vollbrecht, American Water Works Association and Saint Cloud Public Utilities Department

Ed Zabinski, Itasca Waters

Molly Zins, Central Regional Sustainable Development Partnership

II. Artist bios

Ashley Hanson

Ashley Hanson is the founder of both PlaceBase Productions, a theater company that creates original, site-specific musicals celebrating small town life, and the Department of Public Transformation, an artist-led organization that collaborates with local leaders in rural areas to develop creative strategies for community connection and civic participation. She was named a 2018 Obama Foundation Fellow and a 2019 Bush Fellow for her work with rural communities. She believes deeply in the power of play and exclamation points!

Amanda Lovelee

Amanda Lovelee is an artist who works in civic systems as a translator between government and community with the goal of building places where everyone belongs. The creative tools Lovelee has created for community engagement and connection have been used and replicated across the United States. She is interested in how people connect and the spaces in which they do. Lovelee holds an MFA in Visual Studies from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and BFA in Photography from University of Hartford. At the time of the presentation, she was a member of the Source Water Protection Collaborative and was working as the Parks Ambassador for the Metropolitan Council based in the Twin Cities, where her job was to connect people to the outdoors with a focus on equity.

Mallory Rukhsana Nezam

Mallory Rukhsana Nezam is a cross-sector culture-maker who loves cities and believes that we have the tools to make them more just and joyful. Through her cross-sector practice, Justice + Joy, she engages government, artists, advocacy groups, elected officials, community members, and urban planners to de-silo the way we run cities and build new models of creative, interdisciplinary collaboration. She has helped build inaugural arts & culture teams at the Metropolitan Area Planning Council of Boston, Transportation for America, and PolicyLink. She was a 2020 Monument Lab Transnational Fellow, a 2019-2020 inaugural

Practices for Change Fellow at Arizona State University's Herberger Institute of Design and the Arts, and a 2018 National Arts Strategies Creative Community Fellow. At the time of the presentation, she was the Curator of Partnerships and Programs for FORWARD, a publication by Forecast Public Art. She holds a Master of Design from Harvard's Graduate School of Design and seeks to be in every room she's not supposed to be in.

Johanna K. Taylor

Johanna K. Taylor holds a PhD in Urban Policy from The New School and an MA in Arts Management from Carnegie Mellon University. At the time of the presentation, she was an Assistant Professor at the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University and director of the graduate program in Creative Enterprise and Cultural Leadership. Her work is grounded in a core value of art as catalyzing force advancing justice in daily life; her research pursues questions of cultural equity through the intersection of art, community, policy, and place.

Mary Welcome

Mary Welcome (Palouse, Washington/Idaho) is a multidisciplinary cultural worker. As an artist-organizer, her projects are rooted in community engagement and the development of intersectional programming to address equity, cultural advocacy, inclusivity, visibility, and imagination. She brings a nuanced perspective to the contemporary field, as an organizer working in service to small towns, as a cultural producer across American geographies, and as a facilitator of place-based arts programming. At the time of the presentation, she was the artist-in-residence for the Washington State Department of Transportation and a civic designer for the City of Palouse.

III. Pictures of all the broadsides



LITTLE FALLS WATER FACTS

Calcium, Iron, and Manganese are the most common elements found in the ground water.

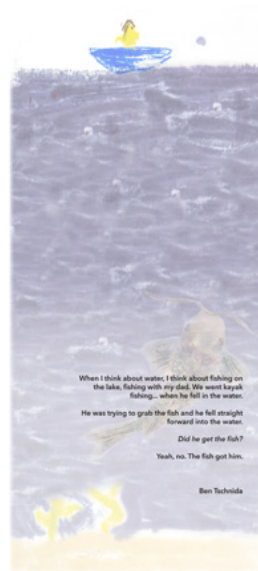
The city has eight active wells.

The biggest challenge facing Little Falls drinking water is capacity but plans are in the works to expand the well system to access ground water.

The current water treatment plant was built in 1973, replacing the original plant from 1934.

Approximately 9061 people use Little Falls drinking water.

December 2023
provided by Dwayne Heinen



Water is two molecules of hydrogen, the father and the son, and the love relationship between them is oxygen.

H₂O is water and water is life.
We need water for life.

We come out of water in our mother's womb. We are born in water. Our bodies are 75% water.

We carry the make-up of this ocean in us. Whatever animal decided to go out of the water, on to the land, it carried that percentage that's from the sea. We carry that in our bodies.

Water always reveals God to me.
I think God is water.

Sr. Shirley Mueller



THE SAVING OF OUR EARTH.
IS SAVING ALL OF HUMANITY.

WE'RE NOT JUST SAVING IT,
WE'RE ALL INTERCONNECTED.

except from a conversation with the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, NY.



The Transcendent Nature of Gods' Gifts, together with our "frustration, embrace a kind idea that understands "community" to include not only humans but also all created reality. We believe creation is an overflow of divine love in view of Transcendence, an expression of God's never-ending active presence in Jesus Christ. We recognize that all created things are gifts of God, are interdependent, and exist for the common good.

Some implications of religiosity such a kind idea statement:

Our land ethic directs all members of a community to meet one another with respect for the mutual benefit of all. We must care for and share what has been entrusted to us as a carefully, sparingly, and gratefully. Our passion affirms the decisions we make about what we use each day and how we dispose of what we can no longer use. It requires continual assessment of the decisions we make about the health and well being of our lands and buildings, what we have and must purchase, how we dispose of our waste and of what we no longer need, how we insure the energy that we use each day. It motivates us to create places of beauty, harmony, and discovery wherever we live and assemble.

Sources for this statement are from Abby Lincoln, David Cloutier, Alexander, Ruth Barnett, Francisco Rodriguez-Marquez, Megan, Creation as a Community of Gifts, and the Francisco Sales of Calabash, Inc.

Sometimes, it may seem as if the forest is against us, the current pushing back against our strokes. In slack season, those dry late summer months, it can turn headrich and slow. In winter, it wrings its icy fangs around low hanging trees, knots of docks, and squawken birds. It has the power to crush, but also to pry, to create roads.

For hunters pop-up on lakes like snowy villages. Anything from an upturned bucket to a makeshift tent to a fully-stocked liner man camper trailer will appear beside mostly ignored holes. A few will fall through each year. A crack here and there will angle its nose into a crack, or hit a heater, and slide slowly into the slush, into the thin water, into the hidden world below. Oil and water don't mix, we are told, but down those cracks and underby snow-covered gas, gas vents, ball, power steering fluid and engine oil and well-lubed parts landed into the next season's world. Find the water.

In spring, rivers flood, pick up debris from watershed areas along their way, lumber and old window frames, suspicious barrels and gas cans, sewage, cardboard, wrappers. It is the river's time for serious pushing, then summer arrives and the sun.

The rivers and lakes become calm and content, happy to host all manner of living-moving-breathing bubbling fluttering chaffed and scaled things, to snug up to them and refresh the trees and grasses. It is a time of ecstatic sharing as ducks and geese stir the water with bills and feet, turtles paddled, snapping blandings rise and greet the sun, and strong herons stink mudskate to weed wide lanes across the surface of the water.

I lean, used to love to skim the surface, as the street had cut ahead of me, then pulling back, legs paddling or kicking, an occasionally pushing myself below the surface as deep as I could go, skimming the waxy colored light from above, reaching down to see how much or where or when. It was a universe I loved, had grown it up in, burst forth from it seemed.

I never saw, back then, how fragile it was. My vision seemed to steady, no doubt.

I have a confession to make. As much as I and my family loved that river, we hurt it, too. We had a boat that leaked gas, leaving behind a small expanding bubble where it seeped from the lower end. (I used to think those rainbow puffers were spilled white gasoline paint when we painted the ship. There was a speckle of it in the Gulf, bottom about three feet down where it stayed for years like a gelatinous bubble in oilfish.

And Father keeps up the annual sound and feed on the lawn which sloped down to the water. We know so much more these days about the benefits of maintaining a natural soundness of the negative impacts of fertilizer runoff.

Every so often a running wild would claim a chunk of back, a plastic lawn chair or a flower box that would puncture and sink. One day we lost a half-horse manure than, not properly secured, fell off the boat. (An unhappy dead moment.) None of this has ever washed aboard. I imagine all these bits and bobs from an unlikely graveyard just off the drop-off, a history of the living we did with all on our stretch of the Mississippi. We meant no harm. We loved it with all our hearts.

Laura Hansen

III. Pictures of all the broadsides

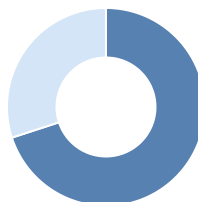


Engaging communities in water through art

Findings from a survey of event participants

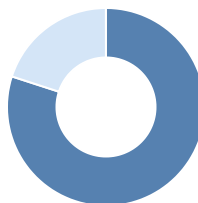
2024

The purpose of this project was to assess participant perspectives about community events organized by Environmental Initiative. The events were designed to engage community members in water issues through art, storytelling, and creative writing activities. The survey was conducted at eight community events in Little Falls, MN from October to November 2023. Of the 46 attendees, 24 agreed to participate in the survey. Of the 24 attendees contacted, 11 completed the survey. Most survey respondents (70%) were residents of Little Falls, MN and 40% were students. About half of the respondents obtained drinking water from the city (50%).



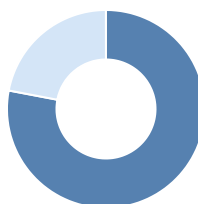
70%

agreed that the event allowed them to **discuss their drinking water** in a comfortable setting



80%

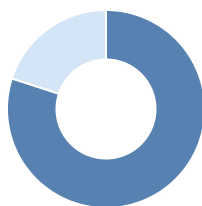
agreed that the event inspired them to **learn more about water**



78%

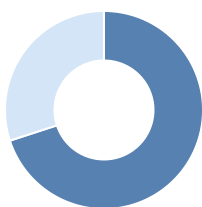
agreed that the event inspired them to **take actions to protect water**

How likely are participants to attend similar events or encourage others to attend similar events in the future?



80%

likely to **attend** similar events in the future



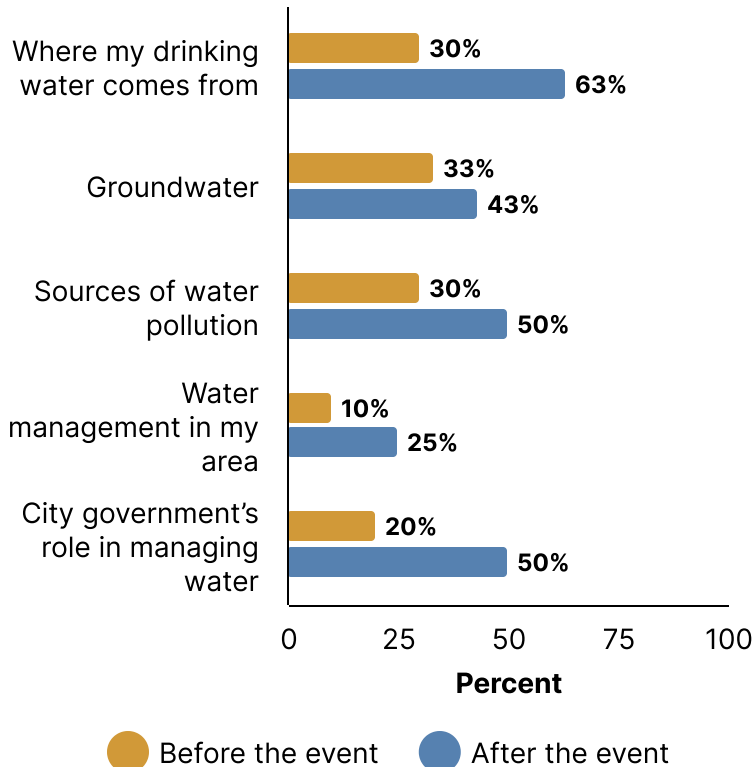
70%

likely to **encourage** friends and family to attend similar events

- **80%** of respondents are currently involved or have been involved in the past in **community organizations or events**
- **70%** of respondents are currently involved or have been involved in the past in **creative experiences/arts**
- **60%** of respondents are currently involved or have been involved in the past in **environmental organizations or environment-related events**

To what extent did the participants learn about water at the events?

Overall, the event increased participants' knowledge about water. While 30% reported that they knew "much" to "very much" about water before the event, almost two thirds (63%) reported that they know "much" to "very much" about water after the event. Similarly, 30% of respondents reported that they knew "much" to "very much" about sources of water pollution before the event, 50% of respondents reported that they know "much" to "very much" about sources of water pollution after attending the event.



What recommendations do participants have for future events?

Event participants recommended improving promotion of future events, providing more learning opportunities and information about actions community members can take, and engaging various stakeholders in community discussions in future events.

"Water quality is so important. I would like to challenge a project coordinator to bring members of our agricultural community and small town/city dwellers together to experience an event such as this, to think about how we can all work together in our day-to-day lives to better our rural water quality."

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Britta Dornfeld at Environmental Initiative and Emily Kraeske for their insights on study design and survey development. Gratitude is also extended to event participants and survey respondents. Image provided by Leah Rathe.

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Source Water Protection Collaborative

A qualitative evaluation

2024

This report describes findings from a qualitative evaluation of the Source Water Protection Collaborative. The Source Water Protection Collaborative is a statewide initiative in Minnesota that brings together a diverse group of experts to advance collective action aimed at drinking water protection. The Collaborative began in 2019 and currently has 18 members. Environmental Initiative contracted with the author of this report to conduct an evaluation of the Source Water Protection Collaborative. The main objectives of this project were to assess:

- Members' motivations to participate in the Source Water Protection Collaborative
- Challenges to member engagement in the Source Water Protection Collaborative
- Member recommendations to improve their experiences in the Source Water Protection Collaborative

Methodology

To assess Source Water Collaborative members' motivations, challenges, and recommendations, interviews were conducted in 2024 with five members of the Source Water Collaborative. A list of potential participants was obtained from Environmental Initiative. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed qualitatively to identify themes relevant to the project's objectives.

Member Motivations

Building relationships

Connecting and building relationships with other experts and stakeholders was an important motivator for Collaborative members. One participant stated,

"I've really enjoyed the connections that I've made with people. I know that some of the Collaborative members are able to participate more than others, but for the ones that I've interacted with the most, it's been some really great relationship building."

Bringing together different groups of people was important for another participant:

"It was originally thought of as something that could be very much about interpersonal connections. So, connecting all these different groups of people who work around source water together in a way that we really hadn't done before... I really hadn't been working in this way before, so that for me was really exciting about kind of tying together all these different groups."

"The process of having conversations build relationships that helps us to get all sorts of things done, whether it's specifically the target of the Collaborative, or it's just good way to do work to engage with each other, to understand different sectors."

Sharing expertise

Some Collaborative members valued opportunities to share information and expertise with others. For example, one participant enjoyed being able to provide "resources and connections" to the Collaborative. For another participant, sharing their expertise and experience that could be of value in other parts of the state was important. The participant found value in participating as a "facilitator, convener, problem solver...so that my awareness and understanding of natural resource issues and water quality issues in this part of the state would be useful somewhere else"

Learning about water

Opportunities to learn about water management and the agencies involved was of value to some Collaborative members. For one participant, better understanding of "the myriad ways that water is monitored, evaluated, and managed" was of interest. Another participant enjoyed learning about "what was going on in other places, other parts of the state who might have shared similar or related challenges." Collaborative members were also motivated by their interest in specific topics or projects. For example, one participant was particularly interested in projects about "community engagement, education, and outreach".

Member Challenges

Member roles and Collaborative goals are unclear

Lack of clarity about Collaborative members' role was a challenge for some participants. For some participants, the level of engagement expected of Collaborative members was unclear.

"Are we intended to provide advice to the staff? Are we being asked to roll up our sleeves and get engaged in project or two? And so just in that formative stage, which is a normal development, it was a little confusing."

Another challenge for participants is the lack of clarity of Collaborative goals. One participant asked for more clarity in the goals of the Collaborative: "There's been some struggles with really understanding...what are the goals?" Another participant put it succinctly, "I don't know what the end goal is." Participants also highlighted the need for a sense of urgency and deadlines to meet objectives.

Member Challenges (Themes and Descriptors)
Member roles and Collaborative goals are unclear <i>Member roles are unclear; goals are not clearly outlined; lack of clarity about lead or "go-to" person for projects; loss of momentum on projects; staff turnover.</i>
Projects do not align with member interests and expertise <i>Focus of the Collaborative does not always match members' interests or expertise; projects and topics (e.g., murals, social justice) perceived by some members as not relevant to source water and not aligned with member interest.</i>
Members lack time and may have scheduling conflicts <i>Scheduling conflict with meetings; other conflicting priorities; difficulty in keeping up with discussion if members miss a meeting; participation is valuable but time consuming.</i>
Collaborative lacks member engagement and representation of local stakeholders <i>Lack of participation from collaborative members in work groups; lack of representation of water distributors and providers.</i>

Along with member roles and Collaborative goals, lack of leadership and a "go-to" person for projects was cited as a challenge. While the Collaborative generates ideas, for one participant the lack of project leadership was an issue. The participant said, "I think lots of times we say, 'oh, this is a really great idea,' and you go and do it, and... who is the go and work person?"

A related challenge was staff turnover in leadership, which led to loss of project momentum. One participant expressed frustration when "the project management leadership changed several times during the project that was hard to pick up and keep going, and so kind of stalled out, and so lost a lot of momentum." For another participant, staff turnover meant having to re-engage in the project and a lack of continuity.

Projects do not align with member interests and expertise

One challenge for Collaborative members was a mismatch between the Collaborative's projects and members' interests or prior experiences. For example, one participant mentioned that the Collaborative's focus was not on "water quality from rivers and lakes", issues the participant was familiar with. Another participant disagreed with the direction of projects and perceived discussions around social justice as not relevant to project outcomes. The participant explained:

"I don't have a lot of input into it [discussions] because it's not relevant for what I feel is the direction it needs to go when we're talking about things, of using money for a local artist painting a mural. I don't think that's a valuable use of our time unless that mural is an educational tool for groundwater protection."

A participant also spoke about how members have different priorities depending on their disciplinary focus and interests:

"It seems like it's very challenging for technical staff to understand why it's important to prioritize that community engagement and education and outreach piece. So when they have a long task list, those items may fall to the bottom."

Members lack time and may have scheduling conflicts

Collaborative members interviewed acknowledged that participation in the collaborative is time consuming, both in terms of time spent during meetings and time spent in reviewing meeting materials. Collaborative members may also have other priorities that demand their attention and may have scheduling conflicts. Finally, one participant highlighted that if a member misses a meeting, they may be out of communication with the rest of the group for half a year since the meetings are held on a quarterly basis.

Collaborative lacks member engagement and representation of local stakeholders

Lack of representation of and engagement with local stakeholders was a challenge for some participants. One participant commented that while agencies are represented, water providers are not represented in the Collaborative.

"It feels like they [state agencies] take up a lot of the bandwidth and the conversation. I don't see as much engagement from the people who actually are either distributing the water or responsible for providing the water."

For others, lack of participation from collaborative members in projects and work groups was a challenge. One participant explained,

"The most challenging piece was wanting more Collaborative members to be able to participate in the work groups, and in working on stuff for the Collaborative outside of just our big Collaborative meetings. I think that there were a few people that were able to dedicate more time to the Collaborative work, and so it was kind of the same faces at those additional meetings."

Member Recommendations

Clarify the Collaborative's purpose, member roles, and develop action plan

Collaborative members interviewed suggested clarifying the purpose and mission of the Collaborative. Participants suggested developing a strategic plan and a timeline. One participant suggested staying focused on topics and projects: "Make sure we're always getting right to the point. Time is valuable for everyone. Here's our idea. Here's our topic. Let's go."

"Be crystal clear about the purpose and mission of the group ...and not just the purpose, but the action plan or the strategy, whether it's a one year or a two year action plan or a strategic plan."

Tailor topics and projects to address regional and statewide needs

Participants expressed that the Collaborative should be representative of statewide needs. To do this, participants suggested that the Collaborative engage in projects or topics that represent interests and issues across the state. One participant described,

"Minnesota is a varied state. Geographically, it's large enough. And I think there are regional water quality issues...so I think there are parallels, and then there are differences. I think, recognizing that if it is a statewide collaborative, and you want to engage people statewide for a variety of reasons in terms of political impact on resolving policy issues, then you need to be geared up enough to be able to sift through those issues. Either find commonality in those issues around the state, or else segment your work, so that if you're truly a statewide collaborative that you can address issues that hold people's interest and engage them."

Another participant suggested setting up regional cohorts to engage members in regionally relevant issues:

"Setting up regional meetings and regional cohorts rather than trying to do one statewide cohort and say, 'okay, here are the leaders or the people who want to kind of advance something here in Central Minnesota', and then let's do one for Northeast Minnesota and Northwest Minnesota, and maybe try to get at it that way rather than build something in the metro, which it's important to do, too. Certainly, I have a metro contingent, and we kind of use that approach in other areas or arenas of my work to try build more of a regional cohort together and build momentum there, and maybe some will take off, and maybe some won't."

Participants also recommended engaging people from regional and statewide partnerships in the Collaborative. One participant said,

"There are some other regional and statewide partnerships that don't necessarily work with drinking water specifically, but they do with water resources...it would be interesting to have a few other folks from those other organizations that work on a partnership, or regional scale to weigh in on some pieces."

"If the scope is truly statewide, then engage a group that is statewide, reflective of that statewide constituency."

Engage local stakeholders to identify local needs and concerns

Participants identified a need to engage local stakeholders in the Collaborative. One participant stressed the need for greater representation of local stakeholders to identify local problems and explained,

"I can't identify the problem. Obviously, the locals have to identify the problem. I just think it's getting them together, getting them to come together around a topic or several topics that they want to advance forward for their area that they would see is beneficial."

Participants suggested lower levels of state agency involvement, and greater engagement and leadership of stakeholders who are impacted by drinking water issues. One participant described the need for local leadership,

"I'd like to see less agency leadership and more ownership within those people who are either impacted by drinking water issues or people who are providing water being the leaders and bringing things forward and advocating for things and asking for the state agencies to say, 'Hey, you guys need to do this. You need to step up and do that,' giving some direction or some recommendations, but I just haven't seen that yet."

Develop leadership and address staffing issues

Finding and developing effective leaders was suggested as an important strategy. Participants noted that finding local leaders is critical to ensuring project progress: "Someone who is a local Collaborative leader, so a regional leader that can keep the foot on the gas pedal, so to speak on driving change. So, making sure that these meetings are being scheduled and making sure people are coming." Another participant emphasized the need to develop local leadership but suggested that Environmental Initiative would have to take the lead, at least initially. The participant explained,

"They [Environmental Initiative] unfortunately have to drive the change initially...and maybe in some areas you'll get a local leader who will step up and step into that and say, 'No, I'll take the lead'. People simply just don't want to take the lead these days. They don't have the time or resources, or energy or enthusiasm to do that. So, unfortunately, I think you know [Environmental Initiative] has to do that for right now."

To address challenges associated with staff turnover, participants suggested providing staff with the resources needed to engage with the Collaborative. One participant said, "I would wanna make sure that I was able to staff the organization with budget...enough budget to make sure that they're paid well enough, so they aren't eager to leave at the first opportunity."

Reinvigorate projects and build momentum

Participants spoke about the importance of building project momentum. One specific strategy suggested by a participant was to review the list of project ideas generated in early Collaborative meetings to identify next steps and future project needs. Another participant suggested building momentum through ongoing projects. Using the example of the creative engagement project, one participant described how an ongoing project can help build enthusiasm. The participant emphasized that it takes one successful case study to build momentum for future work. The participant explained:

"We just need one kind of success case, right? And like I said, Southeast Minnesota is kind of a hot area right now, just because of what's going on. So maybe bringing those folks together and say, this is what we want to do as the Collaborative, this is our work, and one or two activities that we can make happen and all the partners come together and do their part...and then maybe we can use that as leverage for other areas to say, 'okay, we did this for Southeast, what do you guys need in the Southwest?'...Try to use that as an example of what happens when you can collaborate together."

Participants also stressed the need to actively engage existing collaborative members. To increase member interest and alignment with expertise, one participant suggested that the Collaborative engage in different types of projects with a technical and social focus. The participant explained in more detail,

"I think that when we look at what we want to focus on next, think about are we engaging Collaborative members in a way that they're comfortable, and then, maybe in a way that stretches their comfort zone. I think right now both of our projects were on that less technical, more social side that may have been just too far out of the comfort zone for a segment of our collaborative members. If we had a mix of some sort of more technical piece, that'd be stretching my comfort zone."

"How do you reinvigorate the project? Certainly the outcomes of this artists' work could help launch a new initiative or build some enthusiasm around replicating that type of thing in another area."

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