

Approved January 19, 2021

Isanti Soil and Water Conservation District

Strategic Direction and Decision-Making Document

2021

Background

Since 2014 the demand for Isanti SWCD services has been increasing. As of 2020, the District had three full-time staff (one Manger and two Technicians) and one part-time administrative staff. As such, there was a need to strategically direct services and limited time in an organized fashion to ensure our county's highest priorities were/are met. This document helps to do just that.

In 2020 the District reevaluated priorities (last done in 2015) and created a tool that can be used to decide whether to take on new programs or projects. The tool is an excel file that is in the Strategic Planning folder on the Districts shared drive. The outcomes are not the be-all-end-all; rather, they should help initiate discussion.

Furthermore, this process's outcomes should be used in conjunction with the Rum and Lower St. Croix One Watershed One Plan (1W1P). For example, the District prioritizes wetland restorations to improve water quality. If the SWCD chooses to pursue a wetland restoration program, it should be targeted to the priority water(s) identified in a 1W1P.

This document includes a summary of the process results and identifies programs and activities that are not optional- they are required by statute or other existing contracts.

During the process, the board and staff also developed a new Mission Statement and Core Values.

Mission:

To provide guidance, to inspire action, and to bring innovative resources to the table so that people can become leaders in keeping land and water healthy for future generations.

Core Values:

Core values are principles that give our work meaning, make sure everyone is on the same page, and help us persevere through adversity. They are beliefs that guide our organization's actions, unite employees, and define our brand. Values should be referred to when hiring staff to make sure we are hiring people with the same values as the organization. Additionally, staff should review these values regularly to make sure their actions align with them.

Communication: When communicating with the public and partners, we will quickly get to the point, we will let people know when we don't know the answer and then work to find the answer, we will keep people in the loop, we won't use technical terms, and we will always be patient, professional and respectful.

Trust: We will always be upfront, honest, and transparent. We work hard to build trust and relationships with the public and our partners—we invest in relationships by committing to our core values. By gaining trust, we create an emotional bank account that we can rely on when things don't go well.

Accountable: If we say we will do something, we will do it, we will work hard, get the job done, and deliver outstanding results. We will strive to go above and beyond expectations. Furthermore, when we make mistakes, we will take responsibility for them, and we won't make excuses.

Growth Mindset: We aren't afraid to make mistakes, and we will strive to learn from our mistakes. We will work to stay relevant and innovative by thinking outside of the box. We continually seek out new opportunities to be trailblazers.

Helpful and Kind: We won't leave anyone hanging without answers, we will point the public in the right direction, we will make every effort to aid the public out even if their question does not pertain to our statutory duties.

Open Minded: We will listen to other people's points of view and try to understand them.

Passionate: We show up excited to do our jobs and to carry our mission, even if we are working on a task that is tough or not our area of expertise and/or favorite activity.

Celebrate and Have Fun: We always remember to celebrate small victories and to have fun while doing our jobs! We work hard while we are on the clock, but we also strive to take time off to enjoy life - family is a priority.

Required Activities

The SWCD is required through statutory authorities, grant agreement provisions, and good governance standards to conduct a variety of activities.

Statutorily Required Activities

- Wetland Conservation Act
- Buffer Enforcement

Grant Agreement Duties

- Grant Administration
- Required Reporting
- Fund Tracking

General District Operations

- Board Administration
 - Meeting Preparation
 - Report Preparation (financial, minutes)
 - Meeting Oversight Assistance
- District Planning
 - Annual Planning
 - Staff Planning
- Basic District Operational Procedures
 - Human Resources Management
 - County Collaboration

Priorities

The decision-making tool should be referred for more in-depth discussion.

Priority Policy-level items:

1. Protect water quality
2. Protect public lands and waters
3. Control or prevent erosion, sedimentation, siltation and other related pollution in order to preserve natural resources.

Issues:

Water quality is the top priority. Staff should focus on opportunities that address water quality. Groundwater and natural resources/habitat are secondary priorities and benefits. When possible, the top priorities should be those that have multiple benefits.

While the District may not take the lead or actively pursue projects or programs that focus solely on groundwater or natural resources, they may consider assisting other agencies or groups if funding and capacity are available.

Water quality:

There was no clear direction on the level of importance of restoration V.S. protection. The 1W1P's can be used to guide work here. Water quantity should be addressed as it relates to water quality.

Groundwater:

Additional data collection should be collected only if it supports addressing quality and quantity; this issue was rated as a low priority. The District should consider addressing groundwater quality and quantity if it is a benefit of surface water quality.

Natural Resources:

Protection, management, and restoration of habitat and wetland health are priorities over degraded aquatic habitat and Aquatic and terrestrial invasive species. The District should consider addressing natural resources if it is a benefit of surface water quality.

Programs and Opportunities:

Programs that should be increased when opportunity allows (staff and funding)

- Water monitoring (to track baselines, trends, project success, and to target BMPs)
- Soil health programs (cover crops and tillage management)
- Wetland restorations that enhance water quality* top priority
- Targeted Agricultural Outreach

There were no upcoming opportunities selected to do more of. This was likely a reflection of the current staffing and funding level.

Multiple Benefits

When evaluating a new program/project, the SWCD should strive to select new programs and projects with multiple benefits. When assessing new programs or projects, refer to the excel decision-making tool located on the District's shared drive.

Policy Framework:

control or prevent erosion, sedimentation, siltation, and related pollution in order to preserve natural resources;
ensure continued soil productivity
protect water quality
prevent impairment of dams and reservoirs
reduce damages caused by floods
preserve wildlife
protect the tax base
protect public lands and waters
Surface Water rate, flow, quantity
Surface Water Quality-restore
Surface Water Quality-protect
Surface Water Quality-waters barely or nearly impaired
Drinking water quality
Groundwater Availability and quantity
Need for more knowledge of Groundwater
Degraded aquatic habitat
Invasive species- upland
Invasive species- aquatic
Protection, management, and restoration of habitat
Wetland health

Other variables to help make decisions:

Before moving forward with any new project or program there are several criteria that should be considered.

History of grants and time spent
Active Landowners
Leveraged funds (LID, TNC, USFWS)
Will impact DS waterbody
Direct Connection to the Rum River
Activity will build capacity (of staff or landowners)
Activity identified in a plan (project or program)
Current focus on waterbody
Leverage existing opportunities
Upstream of existing priority waterbody
Level of urgency- is land being sold, developed, or is infrastructure at risk?
Is this an immediate water quality concern or a localized issue? (refers mostly to rivers)