



Board of County Commissioners Agenda Request

3A

Agenda Item #

Requested Meeting Date: November 26, 2024**Title of Item:** Implementation of the Mississippi River Grand Rapids Watershed, 1W1P CWMP

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> REGULAR AGENDA <input type="checkbox"/> CONSENT AGENDA	Action Requested: <input type="checkbox"/> Approve/Deny Motion <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Adopt Resolution (attach draft) <input type="checkbox"/> Hold Public Hearing <i>*provide copy of hearing notice that was published</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> Direction Requested <input type="checkbox"/> Discussion Item <input type="checkbox"/> Information Only
Submitted by: Janet Smude		Department: Aitkin Co Soil & Water Conservation District
Presenter (Name and Title): Janet Smude, District Manager		Estimated Time Needed: 15 min.
Summary of Issue: <p>The Upper Mississippi River Grand Rapids One Watershed One Plan Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan has been developed over the past two years. Public comments were recently gathered during a 60 day comment period and a public hearing. We are asking all Partners in this watershed to review and adopt the Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan for this watershed in Aitkin County.</p> <p>Upon adoption, this plan will replace the Aitkin County Comprehensive Water Management Plan for this watershed within the County.</p> <p>After adoption this watershed is eligible to apply for implementation grant funds of \$1,324,120, for a three year period. These funds will be used to protect and improve water quality by implementing steps that were outlined in the Watershed Plan. Having a clear agreement between partners will help us prepare to use these funds to make a difference for our waters.</p>		
Alternatives, Options, Effects on Others/Comments: The Board could choose to not support this Resolution. Future funding from the Board of Water and Soil Resources may be jeopardized.		
Recommended Action/Motion: It is recommended that this Resolution be approved and the Upper Mississippi Grand Rapids Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan be adopted.		
Financial Impact: <i>Is there a cost associated with this request?</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <i>What is the total cost, with tax and shipping? \$</i> <i>Is this budgeted?</i> <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <i>Please Explain:</i>		

Legally binding agreements must have County Attorney approval prior to submission.

CERTIFIED COPY OF RESOLUTION OF COUNTY BOARD OF AITKIN COUNTY, MINNESOTA

ADOPTED November 26, 2024

By Commissioner: xxx

20241126-xxx

**Implementation of the Upper Mississippi – Grand Rapids
Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan**

WHEREAS the Upper Mississippi - Grand Rapids Comprehensive Local Water Management Plan identifies high-priority erosion, sedimentation, and water quality issues and concerns in accordance with Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) rules and guidelines; and

WHEREAS the Upper Mississippi - Grand Rapids Comprehensive Local Water Management Plan identifies high-priority erosion, sedimentation, and water quality improvement projects to maintain and improve the natural resources of the watershed in accordance with Board of Water Soil Resources (BWSR) rules and guidelines; and

WHEREAS the Upper Mississippi – Grand Rapids Comprehensive Local Watershed Management Plan replaces the Aitkin County Comprehensive Water Management Plan for the area of the county identified within the Plan; and

WHEREAS Aitkin County supports sending the final draft plan of the Upper Mississippi - Grand Rapids Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan to BWSR for review; and

WHEREAS the BWSR Board will review and approve the Upper Mississippi - Grand Rapids Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan according to Minnesota Statutes §103B.101, Subdivision 14.

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that Aitkin County adopts and will begin implementation of the Upper Mississippi - Grand Rapids Comprehensive Local Water Management Plan as its Comprehensive Plan within the Upper Mississippi - Grand Rapids Watershed from 2025 to 2034 upon approval from the BWSR Board.

Commissioner xxx seconded the adoption of the resolution and it was declared adopted upon the following vote

xxx MEMBERS PRESENT

All Members Voting xxx

**STATE OF MINNESOTA}
COUNTY OF AITKIN}**

I, Jessica Seibert, County Administrator, Aitkin County, Minnesota do hereby certify that I have compared the foregoing with the original resolution filed in the Administration Office of Aitkin County in Aitkin, Minnesota as stated in the minutes of the proceedings of said Board on the 26th day of November 2024, and that the same is a true and correct copy of the whole thereof.

Witness my hand and seal this 26th day of November 2024

Jessica Seibert
County Administrator

Formal Agreements

The CWMP's Policy Committee is a coalition of Aitkin County, Aitkin SWCD, Carlton County, Carlton SWCD, Cass SWCD, Itasca County, Itasca SWCD, Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, and Salo Township (Figure 11.4). The Policy Committee previously entered into a MOA for planning the 1W1P for the Watershed (see Appendix F). The entities, along with any additional eligible entities, will draft an agreement for purposes of implementing this plan. Implementation will occur through a JPA.

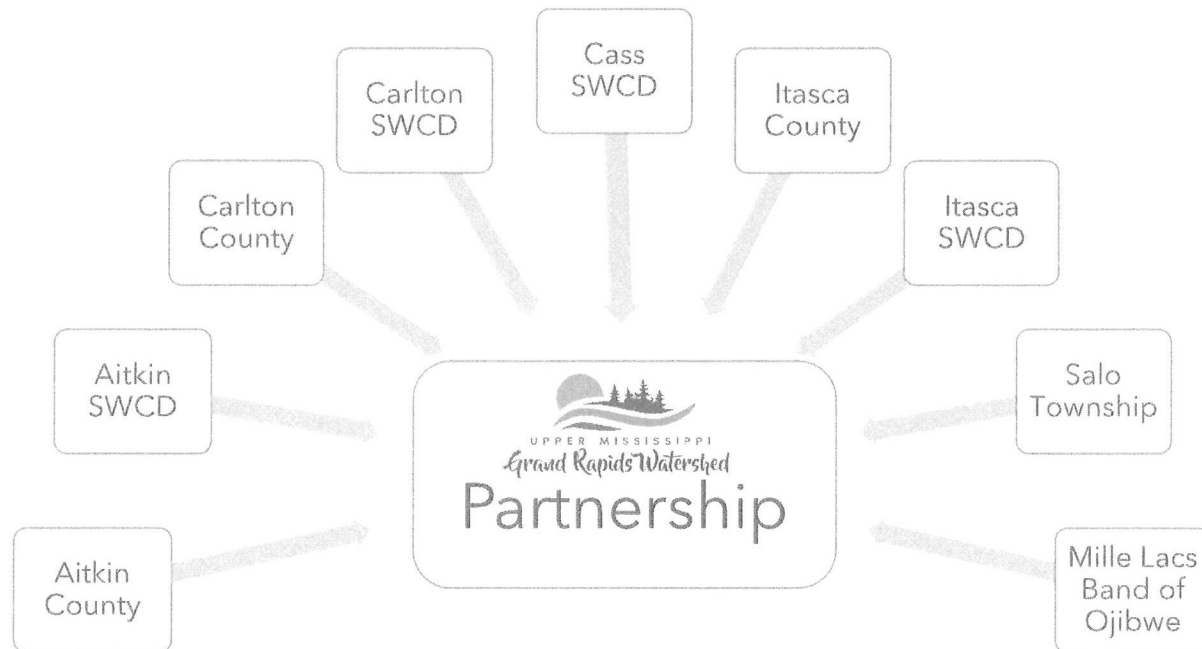


Figure 11.4. Planning and implementation partnership.

SECTION 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Upper Mississippi - Grand Rapids (UM-GR) Watershed collects the water that topography and gravity provide from the borders of 3 adjacent watersheds (Figure 1.1):

- ❖ Laurentian Divide, flowing to the north via Rainy to Hudson's Bay;
- ❖ The St. Lawrence, to the east through the Great Lakes;
- ❖ The St. Croix, to the south joining the Mississippi's journey near Prescott, south-east of the Metro Area.

The Mississippi River itself enters the UM-GR at the Pokegama Dam in Cohasset, just to the north-west of Grand Rapids. From there it flows into the Mississippi-Brainerd Watershed just south of Palisade at the confluence with the Willow River. Along the way two principal arteries provide cumulative input to the UM-GR (Figure 1.2):

- ❖ Prairie River, from the north-east quadrant of lakes and highland;
- ❖ Willow River from the south-west lowlands with wetland drainage.

The UM-GR also has the somewhat unique feature of the east end of the Mesabi Iron Range - an extensive development stretching north-east from Grand Rapids to Keewatin, bordering the Lake Superior/St. Lawrence watershed. This area is characterized by an industrial landscape with large open pits, many of which are now filled with water, surrounded by immense tailing basins and stockpiles.

The UM-GR drains over 1.3 million acres and contains almost 2,000 miles of streams and 625 lakes greater than 10 acres. It spans five counties: Aitkin, Carlton, Cass, Itasca, and St. Louis (Figure 1.2). The watershed also includes portions of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Reservation, and a number of communities including Grand Rapids, Colerain, Cromwell, Hill City, McGregor, and Remer. This watershed has an abundance of beautiful lakes that make it an important recreational destination. It is also home to unique plant and animal species such as wild rice, peatlands, and trout, along with an abundance of healthy forests.

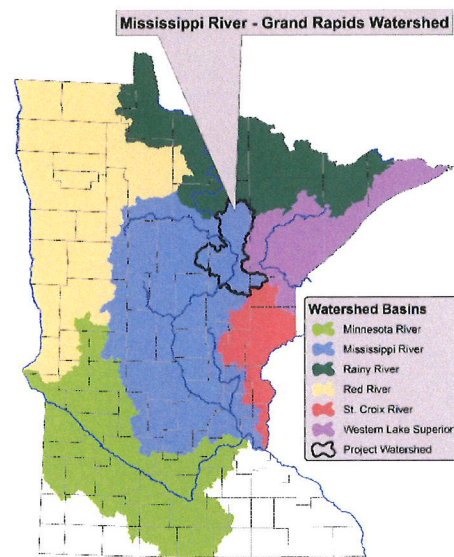


Figure 1.1. UM-GR watershed and Minnesota River Basins.

This Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan (CWMP) was developed in 2023-2024 as a part of the Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR) One Watershed, One Plan Program (1W1P). This program seeks to align watershed planning along hydrologic boundaries rather than jurisdictional ones, making partnerships between local government units within the watershed essential during planning and implementation. With very few water quality impairments and 37% public land ownership, the UM-GR CWMP focuses on **nondegredation**, as evidenced by the vision statement below.

nondegredation

non.deg.ra.da.tion

noun

1. Prevention of a significant change that lowers the condition of high-quality land and waters.

Watershed Vision:

From the peattlands to the iron range, we work to protect our vibrant Northwoods lands and waters for vibrant communities.



Credit: Matt Gutzmann

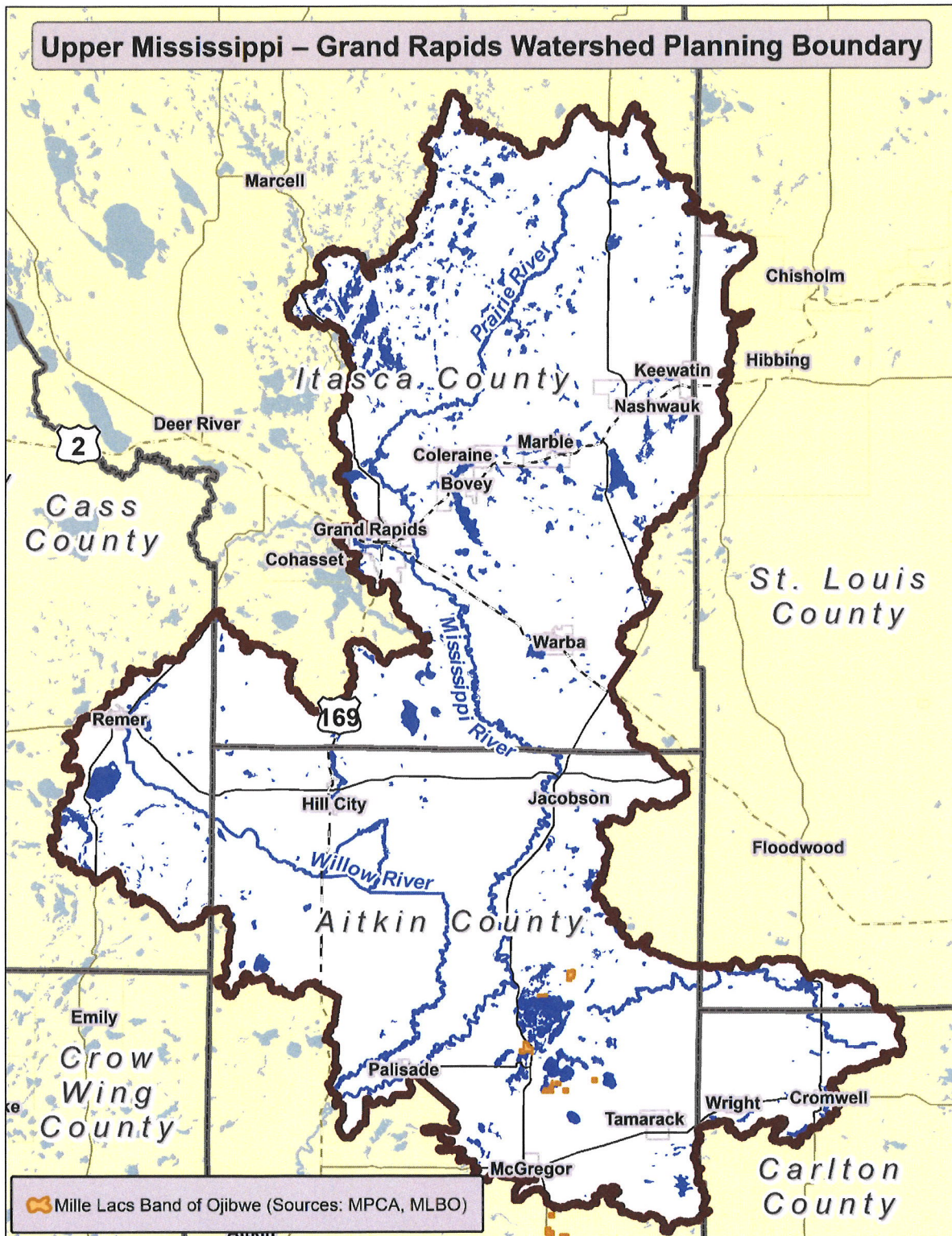


Figure 1.2. Location map for the UM-GR Watershed.

Roles

The UM-GR Partnership is a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between Aitkin County, Aitkin Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), Carlton County, Carlton SWCD, Cass SWCD, Itasca County, Itasca SWCD, Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, and Salo Township (see Figure 1.3).

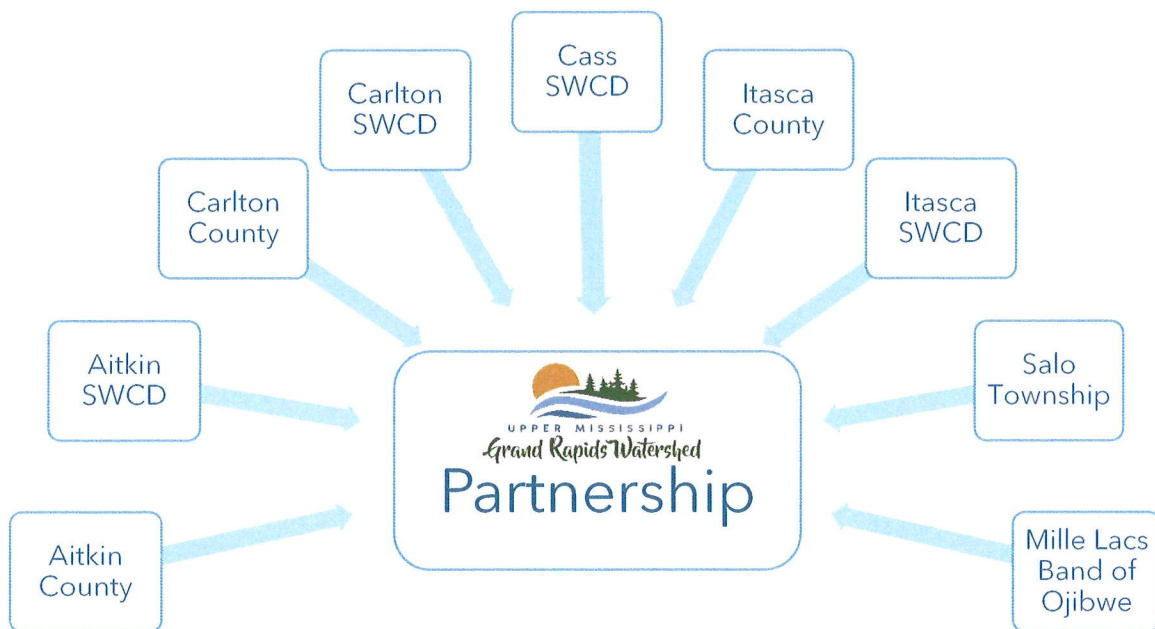


Figure 1.3. Planning Partners.

The CWMP development process is driven by three committees, the Policy, Steering, and Advisory Committees (Figure 1.4). The Steering Committee contains local government unit staff (LGUs), guided by an Advisory Committee made up of local stakeholders, federal and state agencies, and tribal entities. The decision-making body for the plan is a Policy Committee made up of elected officials from each entity in the MOA.

Policy Committee

Includes: An elected official from each entity in Figure 1.1.

Role: Decision-making body for the CWMP.

Steering Committee

Includes: One staff member from each LGU on the MOA, BWSR, and the consultant.

Role: Guides plan development and produces plan content.

Advisory Committee

Includes: Local stakeholders such as state agency staff, watershed residents, and private businesses.

Role: Advises on plan content.

Figure 1.4. Roles of the Policy, Steering, and Advisory Committees involved in the development of the UM-GR CWMP.

Plan Development

After establishing the committees, the planning process began with requesting letters from state agencies on watershed priorities and issues. A public kick-off event was held in June 2023 to solicit resident input on issues. See Appendix B for the public kickoff summary. The Steering Committee reviewed existing reports and data, agency letters, and the public kick-off feedback and categorized issues into seven resource categories, shown below:



Topic Meetings

In the first step in the planning process, six topic meetings were held to solicit expert and stakeholder opinion when developing issues, measurable goals, and actions on each topic. The topic meetings were: 1) lakes, 2) forests, 3) wetlands & ditching 4) rivers & streams 5) stormwater and 6) farms & groundwater.

Table 1.1. Experts at topic meetings.

Topic	Expert Affiliations
  Farms Groundwater	City Staff, SWCD Staff, Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA), Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) Feedlot Inspector, Mississippi Headwaters Board (MHB), MLBO
 Forests	SWCD Forester, County Land Commissioner, Conservation Center, Deer Hunters Association, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Forester, DNR Wildlife Staff, Tamarack Water Alliance, United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Staff, MHB, MLBO
 Lakes	County Highway Departments, Lakes and River Association/Advocates, Big Sandy Area Lake Watershed Management Project, Tamarack Water Alliance, City Staff, Lake Associations, SWCD Staff, Conservation Center, DNR Fisheries, DNR Wildlife Staff, Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT), MHB, MLBO
 Stormwater	County Highway Departments, County Transportation Department, DNR Fisheries, MnDOT, MPCA Staff, MHB, MLBO
 Streams	County Highway Departments, Lakes and River Association/Advocates, County Transportation Department, Big Sandy Area Lake Watershed Management Project, City Staff, Lake Associations, SWCD Staff, Conservation Center, DNR Fisheries, DNR Wildlife Staff, MnDOT, MPCA Staff, Tamarack Water Alliance, USFWS Staff, MHB, MLBO
 Wetlands	BWSR Wetland Specialists, MPCA Staff, USFWS Staff, MLBO

Issues

To help understand what issues and opportunities affect each topic in the watershed, issues listed in previous plans, reports, state agency comment letters and public input were gathered and compiled into common themes, becoming the basis of creating the issues for the UM-GR Watershed. At each topic meeting, attendees brainstormed issues and settled on 1-6 issue statements. These were further prioritized into 1-3 statements, and then finalized at the January 2024 Advisory Committee meeting. The process for issue development is shown in Figure 1.5, and the final issue list is shown in Table 1.2.

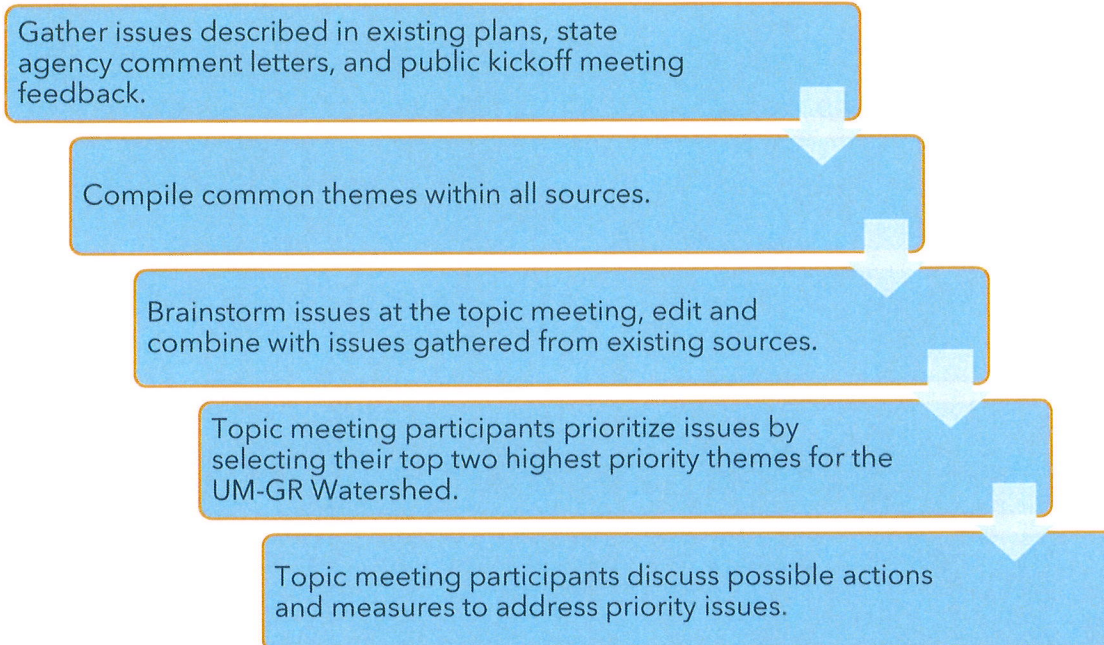


Figure 1.5. Issue statement development process.



Table 1.2. Priority Issue Statements.








Resource Topic	Issue Statement
	Sufficient protection is needed for outstanding resources and sensitive species (i.e., trout, cisco, wild rice, forests) to maintain water quality, native species, wildlife, and plant communities.
 Lakes	Lakeshore alteration from development, conversion of cabins to year-round homes, removal of native vegetation, and wake boats impact water quality and shoreline habitat.
 Lakes	Nutrients from lakeshore development, septic systems, internal loading, and land use changes contribute to algal growth along with recreational impairments.
 Forests	Forest health is vulnerable to climate variability, pests, and invasive species which can affect forest diversity and productivity.
 Streams	Riparian alteration and loss of connectivity , from development and land use change increases streambank erosion and temperature of streams in the watershed.
 Wetlands	Wetland health and function is impacted by invasive species, ditching, recreation, and beavers.
 Wetlands	Historic straightening of natural watercourses impacts water quality, aquatic life, and flooding.
 Stormwater	Stormwater runoff from developed areas delivers sediment, nutrients, chloride, and bacteria to lakes, streams, and wetlands.
 Farms	Agricultural runoff and livestock access increases erosion, nutrients, sediment, and bacteria in streams and groundwater.
 Groundwater	Groundwater quality and quantity needs protection from contamination due to activities on the land and environmental conditions.
 Groundwater	More testing and screening are needed to track groundwater and drinking water safety and quality.

Goals

Ten measurable goals were set to cover the seven topics. Goals were discussed during three Advisory Committee meetings and were further refined based on what is possible with available funding and staff capacity.

Each topic has a short-term goal (to be met within 10 years) and a long-term goal, a desired future condition. The short-term goals are the focus of this plan and are listed below:

Table 1.3. Short-term (10-year) measurable goals.

10-Year Goals for the UM-GR Watershed		
 Lakes	Reduce phosphorus in Priority Enhance and Restore lakes by 40lbs/yr ; Restore 3 linear miles of shoreline on priority lakes	
	Protect or enhance 1 mile of priority streams	 Streams
 Farms	Implement 3,659 acres of agricultural best management practices (BMPs)	
	Implement 8,162 acres of forest protection; Implement 36,000 acres of forest management	 Forests
 Wetlands	Maintain and enhance wetlands and peatlands at current rate	
	Complete stormwater retrofit analysis for 3 communities ; Implement 5 stormwater projects	 Stormwater
 Groundwater	Seal 50 unused wells .	

Implementation

Overall Priorities

To prioritize where to work first overall, the focus areas for the resource topics were stacked together to determine overall watershed priorities. The outcome is shown below in Figure 1.6 and indicates where outreach and funding will be focused in the first five years of plan implementation.

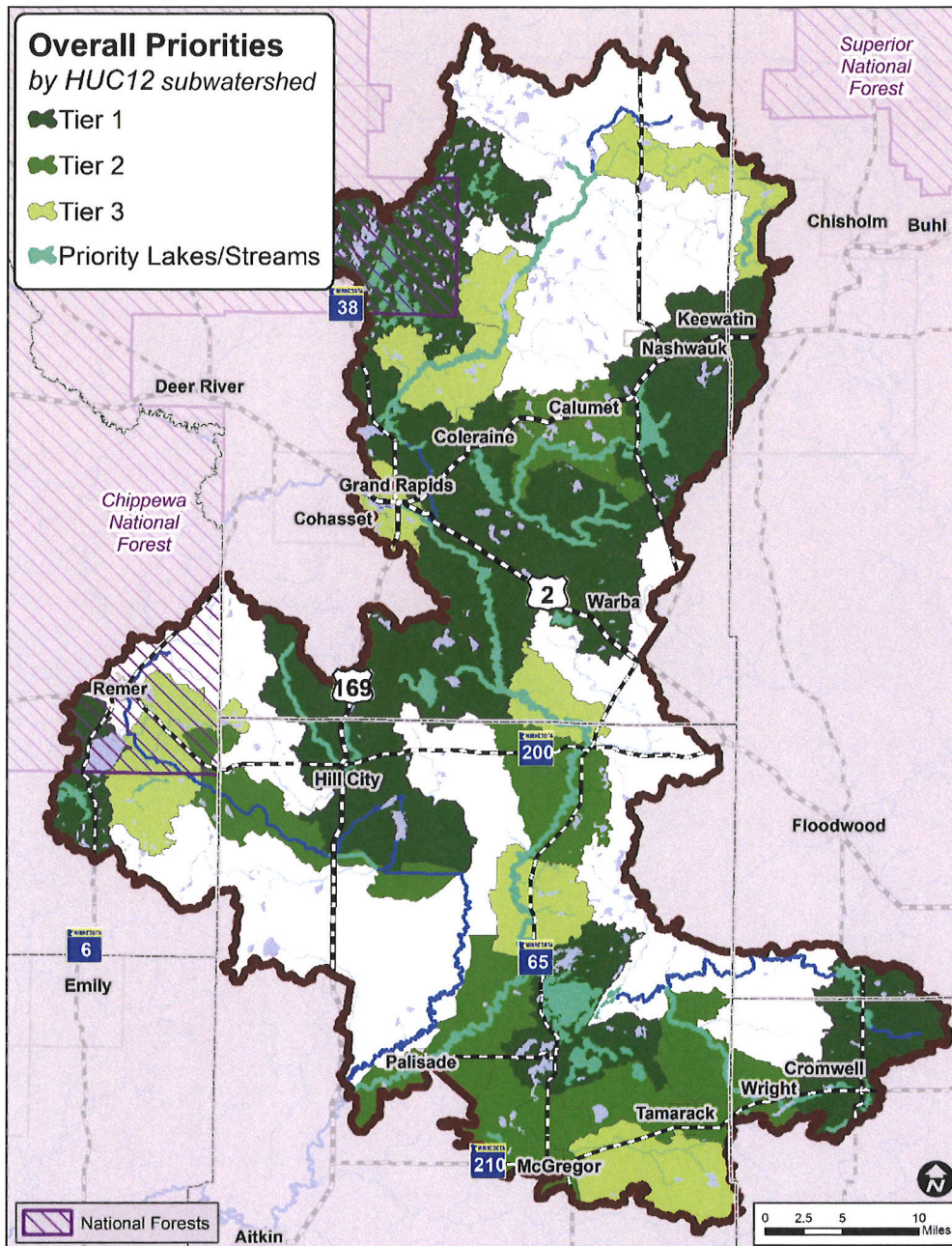


Figure 1.6. Overall priorities of where to work first in the UM-GR Watershed.

Actions

The Advisory Committee and Topic Meeting Experts brainstormed a list of possible actions to address the priority issues and make progress towards the short-term goal. These actions are included in the targeted implementation schedule, at the end of each topic section. The targeted implementation schedule contains the 'what', 'where', 'who', 'when', and cost.

- ❖ What: Action name, outcome, and program.
 - For example, the first action in the groundwater table is 'seal abandoned wells' in the 'Fix it' program, with an output of 50 wells sealed (within the 10 years of plan implementation).
- ❖ Where: Rather than implementing the action anywhere in the watershed, a specific area or resources are targeted for more effective implementation.
- ❖ Who: Agencies that will be involved in the action are listed and the lead(s) are indicated.
- ❖ When: The estimated time of implementation is indicated. Many actions are annual and will continue throughout implementation. Others have a targeted biennium.
- ❖ Cost: The funding source and the estimated 10-year cost are given.

Implementation of actions will fall under one of four programs: Planned Landscape Management ("Manage It"), Constructed Environmental Enhancements ("Fix It"), Protected Lands Maintenance ("Keep It"), and Data Collection and Outreach ("Know It").



Fix It

Constructed Environmental Enhancements are actions that involve installation or construction.



Manage It

Planned Landscape Management actions manage the soil, forest, cropland, and water resources.



Keep It

Protected Lands Maintenance actions include permanent landscape protection.



Know It

Data Collection & Outreach actions involve gathering information or education and outreach to the public.



Current programs and funding will not be enough to accomplish all the actions planned in the targeted implementation schedule. BWSR provides non-competitive Watershed-Based Implementation Funding (WBIF) with this CWMP from the Clean Water Land and Legacy Amendment. This is estimated to be \$1,324,120 per biennium based on the 2025-2026 allocation. This plan will operate using baseline + WBIF funds, with additional partner funding/grants set aside as 'Other'.

The success of plan implementation will hinge on reliable non-competitive WBIF being available for plan implementation in addition to competitive state, federal, and private grant dollars. The CWMP's Steering Committee and Policy Committee acknowledge that additional staffing may be necessary to meet plan goals. Because implementation is occurring under a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA), staff will be hired by existing local government units in the watershed.

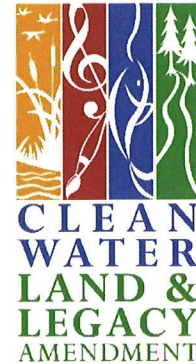


Table 1.4. Annual and 10-year funding summary.

Funding Level	Estimated Annual Average	Estimated Plan Total (10-year)
Baseline Funding	\$720,000	\$7,200,000
Funding needed to fully implement this plan <i>Baseline funding=\$720,000/year</i> <i>2025-2026 WBIF Allocation=\$662,000/year</i> <i>Additional needed=\$511,400/year</i>	\$1,893,000	\$18,930,000
Other <i>Partners and other agencies, including NRCS, USFWS, USFS, SFIA, LSOHF, MHB, DNR, MPCA, etc.</i>	\$1,485,237	\$14,852,371

The same partnership for planning will continue into plan implementation. The same committees shown in Figure 1.4 will continue to meet, but not as often as during plan development.