

MINNESOTA RIVER - LAKE PEPIN "FRIENDSHIP TOUR"

Summary Notes From the Upstream/Downstream Exchange in Redwood Falls on 9/29-30/2010

WHAT WE DID

In all, 43 people took part in at least one of the events of the return "Friendship Tour" that was sponsored in an effort to promote shared vision and understanding about water quality issues affecting the Minnesota River and Lake Pepin. The tour was a joint effort between Clean up the River Environment (CURE) the Minnesota Ag Water Resources Coalition (MAWRC) the Minnesota River Board (MRB), the Minnesota River Watershed Alliance (MinnRivWa) the Cannon River Watershed Partnership (CRWP) and the Lake Pepin Legacy Alliance (LPLA). Here is a very brief overview of what happened:

Wed. September 29, 2010

Lake Pepin area residents boarded the bus in Red Wing and drove to Northfield where we picked up more passengers and then went on a short tour led by farmer David Legvold of the area around Northfield.

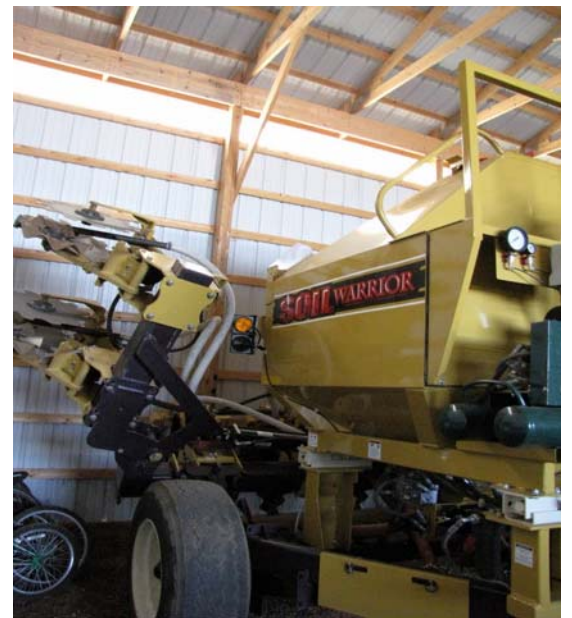
We visited a CRWP research site that is monitoring runoff from a farm field that had different rates of pig manure applied to 3 different sections of the field drained by 3 different tile lines. We went to David's farm and saw his "Soil Warrior" strip tillage machine. We visited a corn field where the corn had been planted right into last year's corn stubble with the Soil Warrior.

We looked at some gully ridden moldboard plowed land across the road from the strip-tilled land and discussed the difficulties of getting everyone to come into compliance with conservation minded farming practices. Farmers are independent and like the freedom to devise their own system, so it is hard to pressure, cajole or incentivize farmers who want to farm in a way that does not put a priority on keeping the soil in place. They're uncommon, but they're what downstreamers would call a "bad actor." Warren Formo pointed out that organic farmers can be "bad actors" too – that it is not just a phenomenon limited to conventional corn and bean farmers.

We then drove to Redwood Falls. We had to take a detour to cross the flood-swollen Minnesota River in Belle Plaine rather than in Henderson. Along the way, we saw the soybean harvest in full swing in Sibley County. We had a lengthy discussion about ditch buffers along the way. Many, if not most, of the ditches we saw along the way had no buffers along them. Warren Formo explained what we were seeing and answered many questions about farming practices, wetland drainage, soil types, and socio-cultural differences between the counties in the Minnesota River Watershed.

Patrick Moore talked about the geologic history of the Glacial River Warren and touched on the history of the U.S. Dakota conflict of 1862 and Euro-American immigration to the region. It was noted that many of the communities of the Minnesota River Watershed still maintain strong ethnic traditions that reflect their European heritage and that this can be a strong factor when it comes to attempting to introduce new ideas or farming practices to a region.

Upon arriving in Redwood Falls, we had a lovely wine tasting and meal at Fieldstone Vineyards, sponsored by the Minnesota Pork Producers. Lively conversation was held at the individual tables.



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WHAT WE DID (cont.)

After supper, we learned briefly about the Tatanka Bluffs Corridor between Redwood and Renville Counties that is working to promote trails, tourism, recreation and economic development in the region. We also learned about the Minnesota River Green Corridor project which seeks to secure lands of historic, cultural or environmental sensitivity to be purchased by the public or held in permanent easement along the Minnesota River corridor between Granite Falls and New Ulm in the "Middle Minnesota River" region

Host Bruce Tiffany of Redwood Falls gave background information about Redwood and Renville Counties, pointing out that the area is a national leader in the quantity of corn and soybeans produced.

After the meal, we checked into our rooms at the Select Inn and then attended a "Farm Drainage 101" discussion led by farmer David Legvold, former Board President of the Cannon River Watershed Partnership (CRWP). A lively roundtable discussion ensued after David's powerpoint presentation that explained the CRWP's research on tile drainage, nutrients and different tillage practices on a farm owned by St. Olaf College in Northfield.

Thursday September 30

We boarded the bus again by 7:30 a.m. and took a quick tour of the stunningly beautiful Alexander Ramsey Park owned and maintained by the City of Redwood Falls. We were able to witness the power of the Redwood River running at full bore due to recent record rainfall events in the watershed.

We then visited the Bruce and Ann Tiffany farm just outside of Redwood Falls. We boarded a smaller bus that took us around the Tiffany family fields. We were joined by Redwood County Commissioner and Vice Chair of the Minnesota River Board John Schueller. We saw and discussed many things, including the history of how the landscape has changed since pre-settlement times and about how farmers view the role of drainage has played in improving both crop yields and in reducing soil erosion from the fields. We talked about buffers and Commissioner Schueller reported that Redwood County had recently mandated a county-wide process for re-determining benefits to the ditch system. This will eventually bring all the ditches into compliance with buffer strip laws, though it may take several years.

Bruce Tiffany wanted to emphasize how farmers in Redwood County were very conscious of their desire to farm with a conservation ethic in mind. He showed how precision farming and a complex analysis of each area of the fields he plants and manages has allowed him to see how crop yields are improved by drainage and how different methods of tillage have brought soil erosion down to a minimum on his fields. He talked about how he is often reluctant to enroll or participate in government subsidy programs because it can often limit his management options. Above all, he desires the ability to experiment and figure things out in his own way and not be mandated to apply some "one size fits all solution" to the varying conditions that exist on his farm.

We then got back on the big bus and drove to the Brian and Michelle Hicks farm just North of Tracy, MN. The Hicks live near the Cottonwood River and his land had received more than 9 inches of rain on September 22 – 23rd. Brian had planned to show us the fields where he is conducting research with the University of Minnesota's Southwest Research and Outreach Center in Lamberton. They've installed controlled drainage devices in the fields—a system that regulates when and how much water leaves the land and which can be used to store water for use during dry times.



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WHAT WE DID (cont.)

Not being able to tour the flooded fields, we stood in a circle in Brian's farmyard and had a very engaging discussion about many issues of contention between upstreamers and downstreamers. We talked about the rise of corn production and how many options there were for Brian to market his crop. We talked about the relative benefits and drawbacks of grass farming vs. cash grain farming, organic vs. conventional agriculture and how the Farm Bill and Farm Subsidy payments play a role in all this. The farmers who were part of the discussion made the point that the Farm Bill is not as much a driver of decision making as critics believe it is.

Brian talked about how he has moved from being a "fire fighter" on his farm to being a manager. He explained that spends a lot of time researching ways to make his operation more efficient and profitable. Two web sites that he consults regularly are: <http://waterdata.usgs.gov/mn/nwis/rt> (This site contains information on USGS stream gages and allows the user to see graphs of stream flow.) <http://www.finbin.umn.edu/> (This site provides financial benchmarking information on farm enterprise.)

After finishing our conversation at the Hicks Farm we went to the Brauhaus in Lucan for a lunch sponsored by the Turkey Research and Promotion Council. Again, we were able to have lively and substantive one-on-one discussions that followed up on the large group discussions held out on the farm tours and the previous night at the hotel.

After lunch, we had a brief wrap up discussion that is detailed below.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

- There is a good case made that decisions need to be local, "by farm."
- There is a generational commitment and motivation by farmers to be stewards of the land.
- Calling for a ditch re-determination of benefits will eventually lead to county-wide compliance with buffer requirements. Redwood County Commissioners voted recently to make this happen.
- The links between optimizing business opportunity and resource management (i.e. reducing nitrogen and phosphorus use to save money) were clearly stated and demonstrated.
- Learned that there is a "face" on the farmer, not as big corporate boogey men, but families who are very concerned about these issues and are working on them. Same goes for down streamers who are concerned about clean water,
- Farmer David Legvold talked about his commitment to the 'triple bottom line' — it struck home. We can connect on this common language to focus on measuring economic, ecological and social factors of success.
- We learned that farmers will be quick to adopt it if it helps the crop. New technologies -- strip tillage, precision farming, and conservation drainage structures represent win/wins that up streamers and down streamers can get behind.
- Farmers are secure in their network. They share information with each other. They keep their own counsel.
- We liked the opportunity to have a more thoughtful and nuanced dialogue. Having the time in this informal settling led to a more valuable and rich experience.



- Hyperbole has become its own commodity. Production is way up. This dialogue was different.
- This conversation might make a difference in having comments made by farmers to the TMDL implementation process be heard if we can integrate some of these processes employed in the "Friendship Tour"

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WHAT CAN WE COLLABORATE ON?

A quick brainstorming session was held on potential areas for future collaboration between upstream and downstream citizens. This list needs more time to be discussed, fleshed out and lengthened. We did take a non-binding straw poll to get a pulse of where the most passion, interest and energy was for future collaboration. This list shows the list of ideas in the order of their ranking from this *non-binding* straw poll:

- We could collaborate on input to the TMDL (water quality standards) implementation planning process for the Minnesota River and Lake Pepin.
- We could collaborate on communicating to the general public about what ag is doing and can do to help achieve the clean water standards we all desire.
- We could collaborate on water quality monitoring.
- We could collaborate on lobbying to the legislature with suggestions on how to enact the "framework" document being developed by the U of M. For example, rather than the "Random Acts of Conservation" scatter shot approach we have now, we could as a unified upstream/downstream coalition insist on a more targeted approach to spending the money in a way that could demonstrate measurable results.
- We could collaborate on the development of a small model watershed project where the best practices of what farmers and cities can do to reach water quality standards can be demonstrated and measured.
- We could co-sponsor a public meeting/ forum to discuss the issue of using perpetual easements to secure land in sensitive areas and the whole issue of buying more land for public use in the MN river watershed as this is an area of growing concern.
- We could collaborate on more educational meetings and future Upstream/Downstream forums in other areas. (Perhaps in the Cannon River Watershed?)
- We could collaborate on pushing for more buffer strips to be planted along ditches and public waterways in the Minnesota River/ Lake Pepin watershed.

NEXT STEPS

Mike, Patrick, Susie, Warren & Beth will communicate and advance proposal for next meeting.

Patrick and CURE staff will compile notes from the meeting and distribute to everyone.

Patrick and CURE staff will be the keeper of e-mail addresses and meeting notes etc. but everyone is encouraged to collaborate with the contact information already provided.

To get on the "Friendship Tour" mailing list call the CURE office: 1-877-269-2873 or e-mail: patrick@cureriver.org

