

Missouri River SWOT ... Lessons Learned

On August 14 of this year, 105 water managers, elected officials, members of the general public and representatives from local, state insert KWR photo and federal agencies met in Mandan, North Dakota for the Missouri River Stakeholders meeting.

This meeting, hosted jointly by the Missouri River Joint Water Board (MRJWB) and the Missouri River Advisory Council (MRAC), is part of the ongoing Educate, Advocate and Engage (EAE) Program being conducted by the MRJWB and funded, in large part, by the North Dakota Department of Water Resources and the Garrison Diversion Conservancy District. The focus and intent of the meeting was to conduct a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) assessment; a tool often used by governmental agencies and private business to assess their current operations and future needs. In this instance, that is exactly how this tool was used: as a means to bring together stakeholders of the Missouri River system, including both the free-flowing river and the reservoirs, to identify important issues that could impact the system and North Dakota.

Participants identified a wide variety of concerns, including: water supply, irrigation, recreation, flooding, power generation, environmental issues, fish and wildlife, economic opportunities, transferring Missouri River water to eastern North Dakota, regulatory and policy issues, and tribal issues. From those 10 categories, breakout groups were formed for more in-depth discussion. The categories of water supply and economic opportunity had so much interest that each included two separate groups.

LESSONS LEARNED

Significant Interest in the Missouri River

There is an interest from water managers, regulatory entities and policy makers within the state relative to the management and use of Missouri River water. As noted previously in this report, 105 stakeholders attended the conference. Of those, the largest single group was comprised of water managers - who represented both consumptive uses such as drinking water, irrigation or industrial use; and those who represented non-consumptive uses such as recreation, flood control and power generation.

Additionally, the managers represented a geographic spread across the state, with attendees from systems or



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projects in the west, central and east, from rural and urban North Dakota.

Significant regulatory entities also were represented, including the North Dakota Department of Water Resources, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Geological Survey. Those attendees provided inputs into the SWOT process with their own unique perspective of programs and policies they have at their disposal to provide management and operations of the river system. They also had the opportunity to hear firsthand the concerns of the other attendees at the event.

Perhaps most significant was the attendance by public policy representatives, including elected or appointed representatives from the North Dakota congressional delegation, the governor's office, the North Dakota legislative body, county commissions and municipalities. Attendance from this group demonstrated the importance our policy leadership places on Missouri River issues.

Appreciation and Acknowledgment of the Resource

One overriding theme coming out of the group discussions was the knowledge and appreciation of just how valuable the river system is to North Dakota. That theme was expressed in various terms of "good quality," "abundant supply," "affordable to treat" and "sufficient reservoir storage levels." There were varying discussions on issues of accessibility and cost of infrastructure to use the resource, but the overall sentiment was that the river system is a very valuable resource to the state.

Apathy and Lack of Political Clout

Attendees agreed that North Dakota has a high a degree of apathy in how the system is managed and operated. There is a feeling that river flows are so abundant that

“The Missouri River is North Dakota’s most valuable and readily available water resource. It supports a broad spectrum of beneficial uses, such as irrigation, drinking water supplies, industry, recreation, and others. The best way for our state to be successful in protecting our interests in the river is through cooperation with groups like the Missouri River Advisory Council, the Missouri River Joint Water Board and the Educate, Advocate and Engage Initiative. By working together, and with a unified voice, we will continue to put Missouri River water to beneficial use for North Dakota’s citizens and economy for generations to come.”

– Dr. Andrea Travnicek, North Dakota Department of Water Resources Director



North Dakota’s needs can and always will be fulfilled regardless of other demands or circumstances impacting flows. The remedy for this issue is education to a broader base of our users. Apathy also was expressed relative to a perspective that more human resources and professional staff appear to be needed by the North Dakota Department of Water Resources to better manage and protect our rights to the river. A lack of political clout, due to our low population and resultant low federal representation in the U.S. Congress, puts us at a disadvantage with downstream or out-of-basin states that may infringe on our ability to use water from the system.

Greater Use Possibilities

All groups reached consensus during discussions that greater use of the river system should be pursued. Some of those uses involved promotion of value-added agriculture and irrigation development, promotion of industries needing a large water supply, increased drinking water supply (particularly in the eastern part of the state), recreational and tourism development and power supply increases. There was a general agreement that North Dakota has sufficient funding programs in place to accommodate many of these items. However, more state funding programs and policies are needed to promote irrigation development. There was discussion on possibilities and strategies to shape federal policies and obtain more federal dollars to pursue such added use possibilities.

Burdensome Regulatory Issues

As previously noted, a common theme raised by several groups focused on burdensome and time-consuming regulatory requirements, primarily imposed by the federal government. Water access issues are a concern for both consumptive and non-consumptive users. Lack of manpower to process and issue water permits was the only regulatory concerns raised relative to the state.

Threat of Depletion of the River

Significant discussions were held, and concerns raised, by most groups regarding depletion of the water in the river system by downstream states or other out-of-state interests. Most attendees recognized that river flows meet the state’s current needs and likely those of other states of the upper basin. However, as drought in the West continues, and more public discussions appear of possible large water transfers from the Missouri to drought stricken areas, then the issue of future depletion of the water becomes more concerning. The climate change impact on southwestern states has created a threat to Missouri River basin states. The concept of a Missouri River compact between all basin states was raised.

ANS and Environmental

Aquatic nuisance species (ANS) and other environmental concerns were raised by many groups. ANS poses a large and costly problem if not proactively addressed and acted upon. The threat is not only a financial threat, but also a public welfare and environmental threat. Other environmental issues relate to the delta formation and sediment deposits into the river and reservoirs, both of which will impact the ability of existing infrastructure to service water withdrawals and power generation, and could limit access to recreational facilities. The groups believe that a more proactive approach needs to be developed by the state to combat this issue.

The full results of the SWOT analysis will be provided in a report to be made available to any interested party.

Ultimately the MRJWB, in conjunction with the North Dakota Department of Water Resources and the MRAC, will have more discussions on possible action items to address some of the concerns identified in the report. Some discussions with federal agencies or entities or our congressional delegation may also be considered.