



1303 4TH Ave. NE
Barnesville, MN 56514
218-789-3100
www.brrwd.org

South Branch Buffalo River Restoration – Phase 2 Informational Meeting Minutes

Monday April 8, 2024

Managers Present: Peter Fjestad; Catherine Affield; John Hanson; Troy Larson; Gerald Van Amburg; Curtis Stubstad.

Managers Absent: William Davis.

Staff Present: Kristine Altrichter, Administrator; Matthew Schlauderaff, Watershed Specialist.

Consultants Present: Bennett Uhler, Engineer, Houston Engineering, Inc. (HEI).

Others Attending: Andy Maier; Rick Maier; Rick Thompson; Linda Umlauf; David Umlauf; Dennis Jerger; Julie Jerger; Jim Haick; Ken Packer; Deric Swenson (remote); Eric Stroh, Wilkin Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD); Patrick Brejcha, Wilkin SWCD; Jamieson Volk, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

President Fjestad called meeting to order at 5:00 PM.

Altrichter stated meeting was to discuss Phase 2 of the South Branch Buffalo River Restoration from Highway (HWY) 9 in Section 4, Manston Township, Wilkin County to the Clay/Wilkin County line. Meeting is to provide landowners with an update on restoration plans and an opportunity to provide feedback. Uhler completed presentation and all parties were invited to provide comment.

South Branch Buffalo River has a drainage area of 165 square miles and includes portions of Wilkin, Otter Tail, and Clay Counties. Proposed restoration is located in portions of Manston, Atheron, and Deerhorn Townships, Wilkin County. South Branch Buffalo River has poor drainage. Channel has excess sediment, with survey data showing 2 to 4 feet of sediment in many locations. Water quality and beaver activity are also concerns.

Historically, South Branch Buffalo River meandered through Sections 9, 10, and 11, Manston Township. Wilkin County Ditch No. 44 was constructed in early 1910s which cut off natural stream and created a straight ditch. Channel was shortened from 4.6 miles to 2.7 miles. In 2022, BRRWD held a hearing and approved an Order to reroute and partially abandon Wilkin County Ditch No. 44. Construction began in 2022 and is expected to be completed in 2024.

Phase 2 of South Branch Buffalo River Restoration includes restoring 18 additional miles of channel from HWY 9 to the Clay/Wilkin County line. Proposed project includes installation of 200 side inlet structures. An impoundment site is proposed to eliminate breakout flows and reduce peak flows downstream. Construction of an impoundment site will require landowners willing to store water on their property and additional grant funds. If an impoundment site cannot be built, BRRWD will need to allow breakout flows where they currently occur. The portion of proposed project from HWY 9 to the confluence with Deerhorn Creek will be a two stage meandering channel connected to the floodplain, similar to Wolverton Creek and Whiskey Creek Projects. Downstream of Deerhorn Creek, BRRWD proposes to restore meanders that have been cutoff from the channel, similar to the restoration of the Buffalo River near Hawley.

BRRWD will need to obtain permanent easements along the proposed project corridor. Much of the land along the channel has already been enrolled in Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) or Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) in preparation for restoration. BRRWD will work with landowners to obtain additional easements if needed.

BRRWD has received approximately \$5 million from the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) program through NRCS. These funds can be used on proposed stream restoration or upland practices. Landowners are encouraged to work with the NRCS office in Breckenridge to enroll in program.

Project estimated to cost between \$13 million and \$15 million. Stream restoration accounts for approximately \$7 million and impoundment site accounts for \$6 million to \$8 million. In addition to funds secured from NRCS, BRRWD has received \$1.195 million from Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage Council (LSOHC), and \$620,000.00 from Clean Water Fund (CWF) through Board of Water and Soil Resources. BRRWD anticipates receiving an additional \$1.313 million from Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR) through their Streams Program. BRRWD could pursue funding for impoundment site through MNDNR Flood Hazard Mitigation program.

BRRWD is finalizing design plans and determining potential locations for impoundment site. Once design is complete, BRRWD will work with landowners to acquire additional land needed for restoration. Prior to construction, landowners will need to enroll in NWQI program with NRCS, BRRWD will need to finalize permitting and hold a hearing. If project proceeds, BRRWD hopes to begin construction in summer 2025.

Uhler noted landowners interested in working with BRRWD to use property for storage site should contact staff. Fjestad noted storage site would hold water temporarily during a rain event, otherwise, area would be dry. Uhler confirmed site would be used during large rain events to mitigate some flood impacts downstream.

J. Jerger asked for clarification on work proposed downstream of Deerhorn Creek. Uhler stated some cutoff meanders would be reconnected. Areas performing as they should, will not be modified. However, if there are blockages or sediment accumulation, those would be removed during construction.

J. Jerger asked if project would be phased, where upstream of Deerhorn Creek would be completed first and then work will be completed downstream of Deerhorn Creek. Uhler stated restoration will likely be phased. J. Jerger noted concern that there would be more water downstream of Deerhorn Creek after construction upstream of Deerhorn Creek is completed. Uhler stated hydraulic model would be reviewed, however, often culverts through roads control flow. Lower flows could have more conveyance, however, high flows would remain the same. Uhler noted restoring upstream end is favorable because as contractor moves downstream, completed areas are able to grow vegetation and stabilize channel slopes. Starting restoration at downstream end, could cause additional erosion. Uhler noted NWQI funding divides funding over four years, which favors a phased approach to construction to maximize funding. Uhler noted the only way to prevent breakout flows is to construct impoundment site. Without impoundment site, breakout flows would occur where they currently occur. J. Jerger noted Deerhorn Creek Project brings more water to their property on South Branch Buffalo River. D. Jerger noted water comes faster after Deerhorn Creek Project was constructed. Uhler noted landowners have asked about storage on Deerhorn Creek Project. Deerhorn Creek Project was constructed around the time when state agencies and Red River Basin watershed districts signed a Mediation Agreement. This allowed greater cooperation in permitting impoundment sites. Uhler noted there are sites along Deerhorn Creek that could be used for storage, there just have not been interested landowners.

J. Jerger asked if BRRWD was planning to put benefiting area on Deerhorn Creek Project. Uhler noted Deerhorn Creek Project would be included in water management district (wmd) for South Branch Buffalo River Restoration. If an Order is approved, any future maintenance on Deerhorn Creek would be paid for by landowners of South Branch Buffalo River Restoration wmd, since Deerhorn Creek outlets into South Branch Buffalo River.

D. Umlauf stated he owns land in Section 5, Manston Township. D. Umlauf asked if BRRWD works with landowners to obtain permission to complete proposed restoration. Uhler stated BRRWD works with MNDNR to determine project design. Then BRRWD would work with landowners for easements. D. Umlauf asked if landowners would still be contacted if land is enrolled in RIM program. Uhler stated BRRWD may need additional easement depending on project design.

Swenson asked for clarification about breakout flow, particularly as it relates to property in Section 6, Manston Township. Uhler stated BRRWD would need to maintain current runoff elevation to prevent additional water downstream. If impoundment is constructed, elevation could be raised and breakout flows could be reduced. Swenson said in the last 10 years breakout flows have caused significant damage and formed deep gullies and asked if those could be repaired as part of proposed restoration. Uhler stated Board of Managers have not discussed if gully repair will be part of project, but Board of Managers could consider including work in proposed project plans. Sediment cleaned out from channel could be used to fill some areas during construction.

Fjestad noted BRRWD is participating in Water Storage Pilot Program through BWSR to identify areas for potential storage sites. Uhler noted South Branch Buffalo River Watershed is identified as a priority area in program. Fjestad noted participating in pilot program could bring additional funds to project. Uhler noted a single storage site could address concerns on the South Branch Buffalo River and Deerhorn Creek.

Uhler noted Section 31 and 32 of Atherton Township have been identified as possible storage sites if landowners are interested.

R. Maier stated he believes problems on South Branch Buffalo River began when Deerhorn Creek Project was constructed. R. Maier stated when there is flooding on downstream end of South Branch Buffalo River, land upstream of Deerhorn Creek is dry. D. Jerger noted land east of Deerhorn Creek is now tiled, which increases water reaching South Branch Buffalo River. R. Maier said storage upstream of Deerhorn Creek Project was part of original plan and hearing. D. Jerger stated elevation change from Lawndale Creek to South Branch Buffalo River drops 17 feet, causing problems on South Branch Buffalo River.

A. Maier stated breakout in Section 6, Manston Township are caused by elevation change and increased water flow. A. Maier noted bridge installed by County on Deerhorn Creek approximately 20 years ago tripled water flow through channel. J. Jerger stated Deerhorn Creek Project was one of the first channel restoration projects completed by BRRWD. A. Maier stated Deerhorn Creek Project likely accomplished project goals, however, it created some new problems downstream. A. Maier stated he would like Board of Managers to consider reviewing Deerhorn Creek Project and see if some of the problems can be addressed. J. Jerger confirmed she felt this was a good idea, especially since there are plans to have a combined wmd for Deerhorn Creek Project and South Branch Buffalo River Restoration.

Uhler stated based on landowner discussion, there appears to be two issues 1) sediment accumulation in South Branch Buffalo River downstream of Deerhorn Creek prevent water flow, and 2) and too much water flowing downstream of Deerhorn Creek on South Branch Buffalo River. Uhler noted project design will strive to address both concerns. Uhler noted in mid-1990s BRRWD looked at potential storage sites and did not have success moving forward with permitting. Once Mediation Agreement was signed, BRRWD looked at additional sites and landowners were not interested in utilizing their property for storage. Uhler noted if landowners are interested, BRRWD could consider designing impoundment site. Uhler stated if landowners are interested, BRRWD would appraise property to determine easement payment. Uhler stated levees would be built to hold water during large rain events and remainder of property would be prairie grassland. J. Jerger asked what percent of market value BRRWD would pay landowners for an easement for impoundment site. Altrichter noted Board of Managers have not discussed land values at this time. Van Amburg stated BRRWD hires consultants to provide a recommendation on payments for easement acquisition. Haick asked what BRRWD would pay if land is already enrolled in RIM. Altrichter noted on Phase 1 of project, Board paid flat rate for land already enrolled in RIM. If land outside of RIM easement is needed for proposed project, Board of Managers would approve a per acre rate. Haick asked if it would be a one-time payment. Altrichter confirmed.

Haick asked if outlet of storage site would be controlled. Uhler stated it is likely outlet would be controlled with weirs and stoplogs or culverts that meter flow. Uhler noted impoundment on South Branch Buffalo River would differ from Manston Slough because Manston Slough has a permanent pool and impoundment on South Branch Buffalo River would be a dry impoundment. South Branch Buffalo River would likely have some type of gated structure.

J. Jerger asked if Project Team has reviewed the proposed plan and asked if agencies have approved plans. Uhler confirmed.

Uhler noted completion of Phase 1 east of HWY 9 will provide some storage to South Branch Buffalo River. Restoration of 4.5 miles was designed to reconnect floodplain, allowing water to spill out into floodplain during larger rain events.

Haick asked if there would be sediment catch basins in channel that could be cleaned out. Uhler stated sediment catch basins are not part of design because meandering channel should maintain itself.

A. Maier clarified the channel downstream of Deerhorn Creek to the Clay/Wilkin County line would not involve creating new channel but involve removing sediment and restoring some oxbows. Uhler confirmed. South Branch Buffalo River downstream of Deerhorn Creek appears to have adequate sinuosity.

J. Jerger said river by their property works well except when beavers are present. R. Maier stated beaver activity changed flows in Section 12, Deerhorn Township. D. Jerger stated beaver dams have caused river bank to erode. D. Jerger stated spring in Lawndale Creek feeds channel and keeps water in channel. D. Jerger said landscape can handle 3 inches of rain, but 11-inch rains cause problems. Uhler noted it is difficult to eliminate effects from large rain events. Even if a storage site is constructed, landowners could still be impacted by flooding under those conditions.

J. Jerger asked what event project will be built for. Uhler stated stream restoration is built for 1-2 year event, floodplain is built for the 10-year event, and impoundment site would be built for a 100-year event.

R. Maier stated he believed if water was stored east of HWY 52 for 48 hours, it would take pressure off system. R. Maier requested BRRWD consider constructing storage site east of HWY 52. He stated there is a lot of non-agricultural land in that area.

R. Maier stated it is the same water, it just comes faster since Deerhorn Creek Project was constructed. Uhler stated storage site can only be constructed if a landowner is willing to have it on their land.

Volk asked if there is an estimate for how many acres are needed for storage. Uhler stated preliminary plan has not been developed. Acres needed for storage will depend on elevation of storage site and how much water can be stored. Larson noted it costs money to create preliminary design, so that will not be completed until there are landowners interested in participating.

J. Jerger asked if BRRWD is going to contact landowners that have identified potential sites. Uhler confirmed.

Haick asked if BRRWD has been in contact with Minnesota Department of Transportation (MNDOT) to see if they are going to clean out the ditches along HWY 9. Uhler stated BRRWD has not been in contact about cleaning ditch, however BRRWD has been working with MNDOT on culvert sizing. Haick asked when that project would be complete. Uhler stated he heard it is planned for 2027 or 2028.

Haick asked if BRRWD could remove beavers out of South Branch Buffalo River. Schlauderaff confirmed. Landowner asked if they can be reimbursed by BRRWD for beaver removal. Altrichter noted BRRWD has a Beaver Management Policy, which states "BRRWD will be responsible for beaver management on all jurisdictional legal ditch systems and projects with benefiting areas within their jurisdiction. BRRWD will manage beavers if they are a nuisance to legal ditch systems, restored stream channels with benefiting areas, or other project features. If landowners manage beavers in these areas, without prior authorization from BRRWD Board, it will be at their own expense."

Haick asked how BRRWD would fund beaver removal and weed management. Uhler noted long-term maintenance would be funded through the wmd.

J. Jerger and D. Jerger discussed frustration with BRRWD not managing beavers on Deerhorn Creek since there is no wmd. Altrichter stated Board of Managers could proceed with developing wmd for Deerhorn Creek Project ahead of South Branch Buffalo River Restoration Hearing. This would establish wmd and under Beaver Management Policy, BRRWD could manage beavers within the Deerhorn Creek Project area. Uhler stated wmd is similar to ditch benefiting area, except methodology to determine assessment is different. J. Jerger asked what the typical assessment is for existing wmds. Uhler stated typically agricultural land is assessed \$1.90 to \$2.50 per acre. Volk asked how often there would be an assessment. Uhler stated wmd would be perpetual and there would be an assessment as needed for project construction and maintenance. Uhler stated assessment would be based on current land use when wmd is established.

A. Maier asked why Wilkin County Ditch No. 13 is included in wmd. A. Maier stated water from Wilkin County Ditch No. 13 enters system just before South Branch Buffalo River enters Clay County. A. Maier stated Wilkin County Ditch No. 13 was assessed a lot with Manston Slough Project. Uhler stated Wilkin County Ditch No. 13 is currently included in boundary

because downstream end of restoration is the Clay/Wilkin county line and water enters system upstream of end of restoration. Uhler noted Board of Managers could discuss shifting downstream end of project area to remove Wilkin County Ditch No. 13 from wmd. Altrichter noted analysis has not been completed for wmd. Presented watershed boundary is preliminary for discussion.

Landowner asked if properties in Clay County would be included in wmd. Uhler said currently, they are not included.

President Fjestad adjourned meeting at 6:25 PM.

John E. Hanson
Secretary