

## ERA Committee Notes September 19, 2024 – Winona, MN

### Participants:

Xinyi Qian  
Sammi Boyd  
Grant Wilson  
Kelli Bruns  
Anne Conway  
Marni Karnowski  
Michelle Burrell  
Scott Sherman

The meeting began with Round Robin recap of past, ongoing, or upcoming activities.

Thanks to Nani Bowmik who has served on ERA committee for many years and has retired and moved to Colorado to be closer to his children. We are looking for a volunteer to join Sabrina as ERA Co-Chair.

MN DOT is continuing to work on Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances for Monarch butterflies and Rusty Patched bumblebees for Endangered Species Act relevant activities.

Right of Way management is also ongoing and was discussed by the group.

There was a suggestion to consider the implementation of a Great River Road Pollinator Plan for roadside management, leveraging TN DOTs pollinator playbook.

MN DNR is working through the University of Minnesota to acquire information about public water access and State Water Trail needs. This is part of a larger effort from U of MN and a grant funded in part by EPA for a project led by Bonnie Keeler. The project uses signage at MS River access points that have a phone number to a “chat bot” that initiates a question and answer opportunity for MS River visitors to provide input on their perspectives and experiences.

There was a robust conversation about accessibility and efforts to better understand accessibility limitations and opportunities such as canoe ramps, track chairs, and other adaptive equipment.

MN DNR has a Get Out M.O.R.E. effort funded through state appropriation for projects on state managed lands in MN to improve access to state lands, including shoreline fishing, water trail access and other improvements on state lands.

WI DNR Office of Great Waters (includes the MS River) has a 5 year Strategic Plan that prioritizes working with partners including MRPC that helps DNR connect to and with people on the river.

Upper Mississippi River Conservation Committee annual meeting will be held in La Crosse, WI March 18-20, 2025 and is looking for non-traditional partners and projects to present on work and engagement on the River. There are several technical committees as part of the overall group and the OREIT (Outreach, Recreation, Environmental Education, Interpretation technical section) is a great place for members of MRPC to plug in. <https://umrcc.org/focus-areas/outreach-recreation-education/>

Conversations about e-bikes and other modes of transportation increasing along the GRR and surrounding public lands and how that should be taken into consideration for accessibility and planning purposes.

A discussion on bike trails and bike users along the GRR prompted an update on the Mississippi River Trail and the work the Transportation Committee is undertaking on that front.

Conversations about increasing public lands along the GRR and some new properties acquired by states and feds along the GRR.

We discussed pollinator activities and how there are many areas that are incorporating native/pollinator plantings into their design. Disc Golf courses were one example in Winona where they worked with the Prairie Enthusiast group to incorporate prairie plantings in areas of the course. This stimulated a lot of discussion about the amount of work that goes into the transition from manicured to more natural/native landscape and acknowledging that upfront is critical to success.

There were conversations about public perceptions of “overgrown” public areas and public safety with regard to ticks and other tick borne illnesses as well as physical safety when transitioning to native/pollinator areas where it was formerly manicured lawns. There were also conversations about invasive species and managing those in plantings. Some discussion about decommissioning disc golf and other recreational areas on state lands due to cultural and habitat concerns/impacts. Overall the take home was that perception is important so we should plan accordingly and ensure we have resources to support communication and education on the transition and address safety concerns.

We also talked about maintenance and costs associated with implementing changes with landscapes and providing recreational opportunities. Many of these are not “set it and forget it” approaches or resources so taking maintenance into account at the planning stage is critical. Communication and Education should be interchangeable. Funding these items takes planning and creativity. Several examples such as public/private partnerships, pay to play, private donors, fundraising events, memberships, outreach, etc. were discussed as successful options to fund projects and/or maintain projects long term.

Lastly we discussed how the “Upper” and “Lower” River stretches are very different in many ways and we should remind ourselves of those differences when we discuss or target activities. Many of the activities in the upper river may be directly adjacent to or even within the river itself, where others in the lower river may be well beyond the river and not much occurring actually on the river. A good remind of the GRR itself meandering along or further from the river in many places as well.

The meeting ended with a wrap up outlining our next call currently scheduled for November 19, 2024 at 10 am virtually via zoom. Call schedule for 2025 will be modified based on requests from committee members with conflicts.