BEAR PARK MODIFICATIONS
PROJECT TEAM MEETING MINUTES

Location: 101 Washington Avenue NE
Sand Hill River Watershed District, Fertile, MN
Date: March 24, 2026

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 9:00am.

2. Roll Call (Attendees)

Attendees: April Swenby (Sand Hill River Watershed District Administrator); Zach Herrmann (Houston Engineering); Roger Black (Landowner); Scott Olson (Bejou Township and Landowner); Mike Gunderson (Landowner); Nathan Olson (MnDNR); and Nick Kludt (MnDNR).

3. Meeting Procedures and Disclosures

Swenby provided a review of the Project Team structure, roles and purpose, and process to the attendees. The Project Team's role is to develop a feasible, fundable, and permissible project and to provide a thumbs up/thumbs down consensus recommendation. Final decisions remain with the Sand Hill River Watershed District (SHRWD) Board of Managers. The conflict-of-interest statement adopted by the SHRWD Board of Managers was distributed to attendees.

4. Review of Prior Findings

Herrmann reviewed the previous Sand Hill River Ecosystem Restoration Project Team's recommendations. Several project concepts were carried forward from the Sand Hill River Ecosystem Restoration Project Team, including modifications to the Bear Park Dam. Outcomes from that effort—and discussions with landowners near the existing Bear Park Dam site—led to the SHRWD Board of Managers establishing this Project Team to further evaluate modifications to Bear Park Dam to better manage low and moderate flows and to optimize flood attenuation when downstream flood damage reduction is needed.

Herrmann reviewed the existing structure, including details and construction specifications for the principal spillway. He also discussed current system behavior and the intent of flood storage operations.

5. Discussion Items

5.1 Landowner Concerns and Observations

Landowners discussed several concerns regarding current channel and habitat conditions. Gunderson noted that sediment buildup is reducing channel efficiency, and participants observed that water is not receding as quickly as expected due to existing channel conditions and a lack of a clearly defined river channel. Beaver activity was identified as a contributing factor to system challenges, perceived beaver obstructions downstream of the jurisdictional constraints, and attendees noted a decline in habitat quality compared to historical conditions. Additional concerns included public safety considerations and roadway elevations.

5.2 Technical Challenges

Technical challenges were discussed related to flood storage operations, sediment transport, and feasibility considerations. Prior modeling results suggest that flood storage is not currently optimized for timing or effectiveness, and that use of the emergency spillway can reduce downstream flood control benefits. The group also discussed constraints on sediment transport through the system, citing the relatively flat channel slope and existing flood attenuation patterns. Uncertainty remains regarding potential impacts between Bear Park Dam and Sand Hill Ditch, how the system would perform during flood events other than the previously modeled 10-year scenario, and the environmental and technical feasibility of proposed changes. Dredging was discussed but identified as difficult due to high-cost, permitting constraints, and the limited local tax base.

5.3 Opportunities Identified

The Project Team identified several opportunities to improve system performance while maintaining the overall intent of the project. Participants expressed general consensus that the focus be on optimizing existing storage rather than increasing or decreasing total storage. The group also discussed reprioritizing when flood storage is used by allowing more flow during low and moderate events and reserving available storage capacity for severe flood events. Additional opportunities included increasing the hydraulic capacity of the principal spillway, improving sediment transport through the system, and enhancing fish passage and riparian corridor function. Ecological restoration was identified as a more cost-effective alternative to dredging.

5.4 Concepts Previously Analyzed

For simplicity, modifications to the Bear Park Dam principal spillway were previously modeled assuming an equivalent hydraulic capacity of an 8’ x 8’ box culvert to simulate increased low and moderate flow passage through the Dam. This alternative would not require manual operation and would improve performance during high-flow events; however, it would also increase outflows during all events, including smaller floods.

A second scenario was analyzed assuming capacity would be manually added through gate operations. The added capacity was assumed to have equivalent hydraulic capacity of a 5’ x 5’ box culvert and would be opened during flood operations to reduce likelihood of flow over the emergency spillway. This would reduce potential downstream impacts for lower or moderate floods, however, would require active management and timely operation.

The modeled 10-year spring flood scenario indicates that both options would reduce peak flows at County Road 213 and further downstream at the Texas Crossing. The group generally agreed that a non-gated option would be preferrable, however additional analysis would be required to determine if a gate is required to mitigate downstream impacts during flood scenarios other than the modeled 10-year spring flood scenario.

5.5 Additional Discussion

Observation of the downstream side (west) of the dam embankment suggests significant scours have occurred from dam outflows. Given the history of beaver dams and the relatively flat channel gradient, deposition of the scoured sediment may have occurred, resulting in tailwater impacts at the outlet structure. Swenby noted that the SHRWD has been active in trapping beavers and removing dams as they are observed and reported downstream from eh county line to the Krogstad Bridge. The group agreed that further investigation and analysis of the downstream channel is necessary as part of this effort to ensure any modifications operate as intended.

6. Purpose and Need

Herrmann presented a draft purpose and need statement focused on flood control for consideration by the SHRWD Board. Following discussion environmental opportunities, the Project Team directed that the purpose and need statement be revised to better align with potential funding sources.

7. Action Items

- Revised draft purpose and need: Herrmann will develop a revised draft purpose and need statement for modifications to Bear Park Dam, with focus on flood damage reduction, riparian restoration, and water quality improvements.
- Downstream channel survey: Herrmann will perform a survey of the Sand Hill River channel downstream of Bear Park Dam. The survey will continue downstream until flood levels no longer have a tailwater impact on Bear Park Dam. The survey will be used to assess sediment build up in the channel and aid in future modeling analysis.
- Downstream flood impacts modeling: Using the downstream channel survey, Herrmann will complete an impacts analysis on the Sand Hill River downstream of Bear Park Dam that could result from spillway modifications.
- Budget review: Swenby presented budget options for evaluations through July 1, 2026, including a $10,000 allocation for Project Team assessments. SHRWD will coordinate with Herrmann to confirm project goals relative to available funds, as funding levels may affect the schedule.
- Funding-readiness deliverables: The Project Team discussed the need for a concept plan, cost estimate, and measurable results to improve competitiveness for state grants. The Project Team set a target completion date of November 2026 to support potential application to Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage funding (typically due each February).

8. Next Meeting

The Project Team is scheduled to reconvene at the end of April 2026. The anticipated agenda includes presentation of technical data (subject to available funding), updates regarding funding opportunities, and review of the revised draft purpose and need statement.

9. Adjournment

The Project Team adjourned at 10:30am.