SAND HILL RIVER FLOOD STORAGE PROJECT TEAM MEETING MINUTES

Location: 101 Washington Avenue NE
Sand Hill River Watershed District, Fertile, MN

Date: March 24, 2026

SAND HILL RIVER
WATERSHED DISTRICT

1. Call to Order

The meeting was called to order at 11:00am.

2. Roll Call (Attendees)

Attendees: April Swenby (Sand Hill River Watershed District Administrator); Zach Herrmann (Houston Engineering); Paul Englestad (Landowner); Henry Van Offelen (BWSR); Tanner Timms (MnDNR); Stephanie Klamm (MnDNR); Nick Kludt (MnDNR); and Nathan Olson (MnDNR).

3. Meeting Procedures and Disclosures

Given attendees' prior participation in the project team process, expectations were not reintroduced. Members were reminded that 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, which focused on flood storage along Sand Hill Ditch in Section 20 of Liberty Township. Conceptual analysis estimated up to 6,170 acre-feet of storage at a cost of $11–$15 million, though it did not fully assess soil suitability, land acquisition, spillway details, or construction costs. Hydrology and hydraulics studies suggested a potential reduction of flood levels by about 1.8 feet during a simulated 10-year event at County Road 213 and Texas Crossing, prompting the SHRWD Board to form a new team dedicated to Section 20.

5. Discussion Items

5.1 Water Supply for Agricultural Use

Water was recognized as having additional potential benefits for regional agriculture. Participants discussed operational strategies to ensure water availability without sacrificing flood storage capacity. Past conversations with landowners indicated that major flood losses usually happen during spring runoff, while damage from heavy summer rainfall is minimal. This approach would likely involve a greater drawdown before the spring snowmelt, enabling water retention through summer and autumn to satisfy agricultural needs.

A main concern for using floodwater in agriculture is the reliability of the supply—essentially, how frequently the watershed can provide enough water to meet demand. The exact workings of the impoundment site's inlet and the challenge of balancing flood storage needs with dependable supply must be investigated further to fully assess source reliability.

Project Team members also reviewed regulatory requirements connected to drawing water for agricultural purposes. Water stored from flooding could face different regulations than water taken from Sand Hill Ditch during periods of low flow. Ultimately, how these rules will apply depends on the inlet conditions needed to consistently fulfill agricultural water demands.

5.2 Environmental Considerations

Project team members discussed possible environmental enhancements. Since the area was once a wet meadow and marsh, with little channel or floodplain structure, the team considered ways to recreate pre-settlement conditions while also meeting agricultural water needs. The site's closeness to the historic Sand Hill River channel could allow for potential channel restoration as part of the inlet to the impoundment site. These ideas are still at the conceptual stage and require further assessment to balance environmental goals with the SHRWD's flood control objectives.

The team also talked about how improving water quality and reducing erosion—particularly by lowering channel velocities in the highly erosive stretch east of MN Highway 9—could be advantageous. Spring flooding typically causes the most erosion here, so using flood storage to augment peak flows might help decrease these damaging velocities.

Regulatory challenges weren’t deeply explored yet and will need further clarification as the project scope becomes better defined through detailed analysis and design.

5.3 Land Rights

The Project Team briefly discussed land acquisition options, noting that land rights differ by Watershed District and individual landowner needs. If the project site remains feasible, direct discussions with landowners will determine acquisition methods costs. Although one team member owns most of Section 20, Liberty Township, other impacted landowners were not present. The team agreed to further evaluate water supply and environmental factors before involving landowners and considering modifications.

6. Purpose and Need

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

7. Action Items

- **MnDNR Wildlife advisor:** The Project Team recommended adding a non-voting MnDNR Wildlife advisor (Nick Brown, Tammy Baden, or Emily Hutchins) to the Project Team.

- **Agency coordination:** Staff were encouraged to coordinate with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture.

- **Landowner outreach:** Two additional landowners were identified. Broader engagement with landowners and renters was discussed and considered premature pending additional technical information; outreach will occur after further technical evaluation.

- **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 2027** to support potential application to Lessard-Sams Outdoor Heritage funding (typically due each February).

- **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.

- **Revised draft purpose and need:** Herrmann will develop a revised draft purpose and need statement for temporary flood storage in Section 20 of Liberty Township that incorporates water supply and environmental considerations.

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 12:30pm.