



Learning, networking, organizing at 6th Minnesota River Congress

The 6th Minnesota River Congress was held Thursday March 10, 2016 at the New Ulm Event Center, with 78 people attending. Doors opened at 4:30 p.m. for a network fair with 12 booth displays from organizations across the river basin.

Anthony Sindt, a Minnesota River fisheries specialist with the DNR, gave a presentation on the fish populations in the Minnesota River. Brian Hicks from rural Tracy gave a presentation on innovative agricultural drainage management research at his farm.

The Congress business meeting began with an introduction of the applicants to the Action Board. They were presented by the nomination committee of Louis Knieper, Jeff Nielsen and Jessie Shaffer.

The list of new applicants are: Betsy Neilsen, Chippewa River watershed; Chris Hughes, non-government; James A. (Tony) Thompson, Watonwan River watershed; Julie Beatty, Lower Minnesota River watershed; Tim Buysse, local government; Amy Lynch, Dept. of Health; Mark Dittrich, Dept. of Agriculture; Robyn Ceurvorst, at-large; and Kim Musser, at-large.

Yvonne Shirk applied to be on the Action Board and was in the current slate of applicants and will be an at-large member for the present time. The current slate of applicants was unanimously approved by the full congress. Clark Lingbeek, Cottonwood County SWCD District Supervisor from rural Comfry, was nominated by Jeff Nielsen and voted unanimously to another SWCD representative on the board.

Openings still remain for two Native Americans, Dept. of Transportation, Minnesota River Headwaters, Cottonwood and Pomme de Terre watersheds. New applicants will be considered for those categories at the annual meeting in November. All other Action Board positions which are not 'at-large' are a two-year commitment.

Congress participants were then urged to distribute the Interest Network Survey to as many people as possible and to use their contacts and any other means to get them to potential interested people.

The interest areas reflect the collective desires of Minnesota River Congress participants from the past two years. The categories relate directly to the prioritized purpose statements developed by the Congress organizing team and approved by the full Congress.

Following the business portion of the March 10 Congress, attendees moved to tables labeled with a particular interest area. Team leaders began to create a team contact list, and lead brainstorming on a list of potential specific actions. The actions will be prioritized and a time line set for acting on them.

Discussion leaders reported back to the full congress towards actions within their specific interest area. There were numerous actions identified and team leaders were encouraged and instructed to begin the process of communicating electronically and interacting with their team to coordinate actions going forward and subsequently keep both the communications liaison (Forrest Peterson) and the facilitator (Scott Sparlin) informed on actions and accomplishments.

Ron Harnack, who has been working with the Lower Minnesota River Watershed District, gave a report on the Minnesota River Commission bill, which was introduced in the Minnesota State Senate as #2204. He reported that it met with considerable negative feedback and as a result they have decided to not pursue it any longer at this time.

In its place a bill has been dropped in the Senate that would implement the so called "One Watershed-One Plan" pilot project in the entire Minnesota River Watershed. This pilot project is currently underway and being administered by the Board of Water and Soil Resources in several watersheds across the state.

There was a discussion on the proposed bill with several questions and explanations of what the bill included. Some of the questions included who was accountable for outcomes and who would be involved in creation of priorities and implementation of actions.

Harnack stated that this approach was received well at the county and local level and that he had not been given any significant negative feedback at this point in time. Congress attendees were asked to review the bill on their own and that communications on its movement would come to them electronically. It was then mentioned that at some point the Minnesota River Congress would be asked to endorse or abstain from the bill. It was noted that the Minnesota River Congress is identified in the bill as the on-going local advisory to the plan.

Network fair participants included: Friends of Pool #2, Agricultural Drainage Management Coalition, Agricultural Water Resources Center, Clean Up the River Environment, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, Coalition for a Clean Minnesota River, Mankato Paddling and Outings Club, Minnesota Earth Sabbath Team, Le Sueur River Citizens Watershed Network, Joseph Brown Center, Tatanka Bluffs Corridor, and Minnesota Valley History Learning Center. Much interaction and information sharing took place with a number of new attendees who had not attended a previous congress.

Event sponsors included: Minnesota State Mankato Water Resources Center, Minnesota Agricultural Water Resources Center, Clean Up the River Environment, Coalition for a Clean Minnesota River, Joseph Brown Center, Friends of Pool #2, The Minnesota Earth Sabbath Team, Agricultural Drainage Management Coalition, Tatanka Bluffs Corridor, Minnesota Valley History Learning Center, Mankato Paddling and Outings Club, Le Sueur River Citizens Watershed Network, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Friends of the Minnesota Valley, Rural Advantage, New Ulm Area Sport Fisherman, Minnesota River Watershed Alliance, Lower Minnesota River Watershed District and Lake Pepin Legacy Alliance.