

MEETING SUMMARY

Freshwater Wetland Restoration Strategy Topic Meeting 1
August 3, 2010, 1:30 PM to 3:30 PM, RIDEM, Room 280 C1/C2

Project coordinators present:

Christine Caron, NEIWPC
Carol Murphy, DEM Office of Water
Sue Kiernan, DEM Office of Water

Advisors present:

Wendy Gendron, Army Corps of Engineers
Caitlin Chaffee, Coastal Resources Management Council
Gregg Cassidy, DEM Office of Planning and Development
Joe Casey, DEM Office of Water, Wetlands
Peter Holmes, EPA Region 1
Margherita Pryor, EPA Region 1
Tom Ardito, Narragansett Bay Estuary Program
John Richard, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Joe Klinger, RI Association of Wetland Scientists
Jane Sherman, RI Rivers Council
John O'Brien, The Nature Conservancy
Chris Mason, University of Rhode Island Dept. of Natural Resources Science
Denise Poyer, Wood-Pawcatuck Watershed Association

Others present:

Russell Chateaufeuf, DEM Office of Water, Chief of Groundwater and Wetlands Protection
Greg Mannesto, US Fish and Wildlife Service
Marisa Mazzotta, EcoBenefits Research
Linda Steere, Applied Biosystems

Welcome

Christine Caron opened the meeting with a brief welcome and introduction.

Review of URI Process and Actions in Phase 1 and Phase 2

Carol Murphy reviewed the process that was used in the Woonasquatucket Watershed Plan using a flowchart to illustrate the decisions made. In this case, the first decision was to work at a watershed scale in the Woonasquatucket. The goals were to maximize the amount of functions and values restored, while allowing for focus on single functions. The plan focused on two impact types, which were fill sites and upland adjacent removal sites. If there was active land use, the site was not considered as a restoration opportunity. The site identification process was selective within the watershed, focusing on the two impact types. URI developed a function and value analysis to prioritize fill sites to a list of tiered restoration opportunities. Buffer sites were prioritized by sensitive wetlands and threatened land use. These were still all potential sites. Steps to confirm the sites as real opportunities included landowner research and contact, cross-referencing of the enforcement files, field verification of potential sites, and field feasibility analysis of sites on public lands.

Wetland Restoration Strategy Development Tool

Christine Caron explained the "Wetland Restoration Strategy Development Tool" which could be used as a framework to show decision points in the restoration process and help guide discussion. The goals

listed on this flowchart were: Restore Fish and Wildlife Habitat; Improve Water Quality; Protect from Floods; Restore Heritage Values. These goals were listed as possibilities because wetland restoration can contribute to them. It would be possible to select one or multiple goals from this list. The flowchart also lists some of the existing efforts that we know are going on, many which address specific impact types. Once restoration goals are identified, the next logical step would be to select a geographic area in which to work, which could include one or more of the following: statewide, watershed wide, by town, or a local site. Once goals and area have been chosen, then there could be an effort to ID sites, which could be a comprehensive or selective effort. The flowchart lists many examples of how site ID could be a selective inventory (i.e. on protected lands or associated with large wetland complexes). The process could end at this point or after site ID, the process could continue with ranking/prioritization, which would then follow with further selection and confirmation before implementation.

Restoration Goals

Comments and discussion related to restoration goals occurred throughout the meeting. Some of the points that emerged were:

- Biologists are increasingly aware of connectivity/enhancing some of those wildlife habitat values.
- From a policy perspective, rivers are wetlands under the law (don't have a rivers law) – issues with regulations/planning if rivers stove piped – tried to reunite them. Support for the idea of looking across the landscape.
 - Carol Murphy explained the methods that were developed previously were for vegetated wetlands; since then, there have been lots of leaders and interest in river restoration; all trying to get to the same goals.
 - Sue Kiernan explained the thrust of this project is for wetlands because of funding; know that it intersects, what to build on. (Not goal to fix water quality in all rivers; not how to implement TMDLs.) Example: how to facilitate wetland restoration through NPS planning process; connections.
- Regarding goals listed on Wetland Restoration Strategy Development Tool – could put more detail on functions, could describe more.
- Restoration goals – why to restore wetlands? process goal and outcome of this.
- Joint efforts.
- Look at goals for strategy – goals for Woon may be very different than Wood-Pawcatuck.
- Big picture – what are we all trying to do? Trying to undo some of the damage, bring back some of the lost benefits; variations on goals – recreate destroyed wetland/rehabilitate degraded wetland; reinstate functions/values that have been destroyed/degraded; what are the functions/values want to restore?
- People with money have to find wetland sites to restore; this is a good opportunity to direct opportunities – many people are doing restoration because they have to, but there are different options.
- Framework should accommodate protection as well.
 - Protection planning hindered because of lack of updated wetland maps.
 - Maintenance component (as part of protection) - lacking some in this area.
- Goals articulated as functions and values (i.e. flood abatement) – articulate to people in a way that will appeal to them.
- Idea of some sort of goal setting at local level – variability across the state; capture advice to give to people – ideal way for a group that hasn't started yet?
 - Tools – some function/values assessed with some internet based mapping (CRMC using a connectivity tool – but used more for where to focus development).

- Get RI conservation commission and planners involved; have that local level, particularly for areas with strong watershed groups.
- Goal setting would be very helpful for watershed groups – some work is opportunistic, local knowledge is very important, would not want to be stuck; if understood goals from state and other funders that perspective would be enormously helpful; would welcome the process with being able to provide their own input though.
- In past, funding was not available for urban rivers – created value for these areas (funding should not be the only guide); social value important – could have been very small wetland in urban area but it was the only one and had very important recreation/heritage value.

Geographic Scope

- Office of Water has made decisions to use watersheds as a larger organizational tool; often implementers are municipalities – try to tease out the info by municipal info; have watershed groups volunteer for stormwater, but still dealing with 39 cities/towns and DOT. Have one place people can go to get information compiled by watershed and by town to see synergy.
- There were no disagreements raised about watersheds as an appropriate planning unit.
 - Point made that wildlife does not use watershed boundaries.
 - Watersheds in RI are a mishmash of scales (HUCs/watershed groups) but it works and there is utility there.

Site Identification Methods

Comments and discussion related to site identification methods occurred throughout the meeting.

Some of the points that emerged were:

- The URI process in the Woonasquatucket was labor intensive.
- URI evaluated and considered many available data sources and methods for indentifying potential restoration sites (Phase 1, Appendix E1). Time lapse photo analysis with 1939 aerials was used to ID fill sites. Using soil types with RIGIS wetlands allowed for ID for fill sites that may have been impacted prior to 1939. 1890 topos were not used, but are also an available data source that could be used (include rivers and streams and some wetland symbols).
- On a landscape level, a lot happens away from first order streams. For example, Aquidneck Island with ditching/filling/draining – these don't show up as wetlands – this is a class of drainage modifications that doesn't fit into stream restoration, but not wetland fill sites either. URI did identify that 6 of the functions listed could be gained from restoration of ditching.
- Regarding comprehensive or selective site ID: would be useful to cherry pick the “doable” projects/sites; funding sources could be a good place to start – which target certain functions and values; example of river recreation opportunities, water quality improvement.
- Level of detail (like Woon plan) not doable (or desirable?) statewide; desire to get top sites in a geographic area.
- Stream continuity type work (road related impacts to wetlands) – excellent opportunity for volunteers
 - NRCS funds this work; can run queries on the data for private land; can prioritize based on funding; can take into account what is up/down stream
- Channelization/floodwalls not captured in the Strategic Fish Plan (2002), but other hydro alterations
- Possibility to focus in proximity to other efforts/most bang for time and effort or in places where dams/fish ladders/riverine adjacent; could proactively look at proposed projects for what could be done with wetlands

- Don't discount local knowledge – rapidly getting sites that are doable, most cost-effective; people know the areas, troublesome crossings, etc.
- The Department does not have a handy list of the next 15 wetland sites to restore; TMDL does not focus on wetlands for water quality.
 - Nothing comprehensive (other than fish plan and updates); could be part of the process – there is expertise out there to do that.
- If strategy does not ID specific sites, maybe indicate these are the types of sites for TMDL/319; these are the characteristics of wetland restoration sites for satisfying NOAA open rivers/anadromous fish (anadromous fish, seen as a keystone/indicator species – lots of others will benefit) – is there certain species that could be used for wetlands? Citizens groups not coming up for as much (i.e. red maple swamps) – other areas have charismatic species or scenic vistas – could highlight/take advantage of these in FW wetlands.
 - Need public support (something that a politician can take a picture in front of).
- Urban waterways are undervalued – these areas still used and they are where people live.
 - Corps gets lots of requests for taking down flood walls.
 - Great work done in Minnesota (took down flood wall of channelized river through city)
- State should draw from programs – already identified.
 - TNC doing revisions to wildlife action plan; goal to make it more functional and more applicable to other agencies; the original document was very comprehensive, but never prioritized – looking to change this with revisions.
- Answer question about need for project – picking sites people feel want to invest public money in – get bigger bang for the buck.

Prioritization

- Funding as part of the ranking process (NRCS uses a process with a technical team).
- Habitat/environmental values as part of ranking.
- Lots of groups are volunteer, if had priorities, it would help, might encourage other watershed groups to go forward.
- USFWS has been funding projects for many years; if priorities set – could start funding and put money towards these projects, have not been working with wetland restoration because project not identified.
- If watersheds are the base, get separate plans that can overlay for priorities in their watershed.
- Prioritization will probably be one of the topics at a future meeting.

OTHER TOPICS

A number of other topics arose during the discussion. Those comments are noted below.

- Discussion of Strategy document:

- How is the strategy going to be used going forward? (for coastal, needed a strategy to select projects coming to them as proposals for funding; contains some of the broader goals, but not always the ones to initiate projects).
 - DEM does not have a similar restoration fund.
 - Core elements include voluntary restoration and protection; trying to grow the program in restoration; also based on interest from outside.
 - There is latitude to pick functions/values to focus on, set state priorities, or watershed units; strategy to guide restoration opportunities in watersheds

- Will provide a framework for where different levels and scales of restoration fit in – ideally tie together state, watersheds, private; how RI organizes its work; at some point the state has to make investments; describing what we need to do and process to get to site ID.
- The strategy will not ID specific sites, but could be used to inform site ID.

- Permitting:

- Would having the strategy help with wetland permitting?

- Invasives:

- Issue of invasives comes up on a site specific level – is there any watershed wide invasive planning?
 - WP attempted but no funding for the planning part – takes a lot of staff/volunteer time – comes out of operating budget; helpful for assistance or for the state to do it.
 - NRCS plans for the Hunt and Little Compton, purple loosestrife – sites IDed, protocols, started picking off sites; they had student staff ID sites by paddle/walk/wade
 - Does this lend itself to tackling more than one species at a time?
 - Remote sensing can be used to ID certain species (i.e. phrag), depending on timing (i.e. barberry).
- What are we doing this for? Can we control it all over the state?
 - NRCS funds cudsew removal.
 - NRCS started with purple loosestrife because in infancy and can be controlled.
 - May also be useful for sensitive wetlands or newly problematic areas.
 - Complex site selection; Different in areas of the state.
 - Could fall under wildlife habitat improvement.
 - Moving target – requires continued management.
 - Monitoring – surprised no monitoring at Galilee anymore.

- Monitoring:

- Not always requirements for monitoring of restoration sites; even when required – no one to pick up the file and say that materials were not sent back; talked about a group within the program to handle that.
 - Follow-up is more on response to calls.
- This project will make recommendations for better tracking.
- Different sell to convince budget.
 - Could pick 3-4 as examples, then continue to monitor.
 - Make it easy for stakeholder (i.e. middle school) – could gets lots of data (different because a core resource used vs. mandatory).
 - Could get sites incorporated into watershed watch or photos.
 - Certain checklists that trained volunteers could do.
 - If strong monitoring program with rotating basin – will get the information.
- Cavallaro study – enforcement files – of 26 restored sites, 23 or 24 were still performing at least one wetland function; found 52% of sites with invasive species present