

Streamlining Minnesota: A single natural resource agency?

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DNR. SWCDs. WDs. PCA. BWSR. EQB. MDH. MDA. WMO. ESD. LCCMR. LOHC. CWC. These acronyms represent a partial list of Minnesota's natural resource management entities. Each has a unique and largely independent history leading to overlapping bureaucracies with conflicting mandates.

Our DNR developed from nineteenth century conservation commissions focused on efficient use of public resources. SWCDs grew out of the dustbowl to help private landowners conserve soil and water resources. Watershed Districts first appeared in the 1950s in response to farmland flooding. PCA was created to address environmental issues emerging in the 1960s. BWSR, a 1980s fusion of prior entities, supports activities of SWCDs, WDs, and other WMOs. EQB provides policy guidance to the Governor and Legislature. The Department of Agriculture and county Environmental Services Departments (ESDs) add more layers of complexity. Legislators intervene directly creating the LCCMR and citizen commissions to allocate Clean Water, Land, and Legacy Amendment dollars.

Over one hundred and fifty years history has produced a confusing maze of processes that are neither efficient financially nor effective ecologically. We have agencies staffed with dedicated and professional resource managers constrained by convoluted, highly politicized, morale-sapping bureaucracies.

Clearly, we need to simplify natural resource management. Ironically, previous proposals faltered not because they were too ambitious but because they were not ambitious enough. Instead of trying to merge established and resistant entities, we should simply dissolve current agencies and establish an entirely new 21st century agency overnight, from the ground up.

Our on-going global economic crisis coupled with passage of the Legacy Amendment provides a unique opportunity for strategic reform. Because combined natural resource management activities consume a tiny fraction of our state budget, savings resulting from a shift to a single agency will not alter our immediate financial picture. However, Amendment revenues could catalyze lasting structural changes leading to significant cost savings and far greater efficacy over the long term.

Three ideas should frame a single comprehensive natural resource management agency.

First, it must recognize the fundamental difference between managing public resources and shaping practices occurring on private lands. Historically, the DNR has been responsible for public resources while SWCDs (and BWSR) have worked with private landowners. The current placement of the Private Forestry Management program with the DNR illustrates current and confusing blurring of domain boundaries.

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Second, it must provide clearly defined functional roles within public and private management domains. Monitoring public surface waters, for example, is a PCA function under our current multi-agency system. However, monitoring pesticide levels in surface waters falls to a five-person Department of Agriculture unit that has no enforcement authority.

Finally, it must provide a means to deliver well-coordinated programs and activities. We currently have conflicts among spatially incongruent mandates from state agencies and local units of government. If we truly want a sustainable Green Economy, we need a resource management structure recognizing river basins and watersheds as natural and fundamental landscape units.

What might this new agency look like? Imagine a citizen Board appointed top-down and bottom-up by diverse units of state and local government. This Board would set strategic policies and present to the Governor a slate of three Commissioner candidates with appropriate technical qualifications and management skills. A small central staff would coordinate clearly defined functions across regional basin-aligned management units. At a local level, watershed-based entities similar to DNR area offices (public domain) and SWCDs (private domain) would deliver services.

A single natural resource agency would mean more local field staff and fewer central administrators. This is what Minnesotans want. This is what sustainable resource management demands. Future generations will realize major gains from our short-term, transitional pains.

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