

## **Integrated Watershed Management Committee Status Update September 2023**

In January 2022, the Wetland Study Council (WSC) passed a recommendation to clarify policies and develop guidance surrounding wetlands and storm water management and explore incorporating watershed-based considerations in the review and implementation of storm and flood water control projects. See [full recommendation](#).

Based upon this recommendation, the WSC Integrated Watershed Committee (IWC) completed background interviews with Department of Natural Resources (DNR) staff to gain a better understanding of department policies surrounding wetlands and storm water management.

The interviews were conducted with the following goals:

- 1) Identify key existing policies surrounding wetlands and storm water management;
- 2) Clarify how those existing policies are interpreted and implemented;
- 3) Gain knowledge of barriers that prevent watershed-based approaches to storm water management; and
- 4) Invite perspective on how watershed-based perspectives could be factored into the permit decision making process.

This research was completed by interviewing department permitting staff with at least 10 years of experience in the Waterways Program or Watershed Program (including Storm Water Program). In total, nine staff were interviewed, including five in the Waterways Program, three in the Storm Water Program, and one with management experience in both programs.

The IWC identified the following themes from these interviews:

- More collaboration is needed between programs that implement wetland and waterway regulations, storm water regulations, and water quality programs.
- Flexibility in decision-making related to wetland, waterway, and storm water regulations exists, but training is needed for when and how to apply flexibility.
- Regulations present some barriers to taking a holistic watershed approach in project review.
- DNR staff provided thoughts and suggestions for better incorporating watershed based needs into permitting decisions.

The Committee then worked with and advised DNR on the creation of the following set of internal recommendations to begin establishing watershed approach practices in the DNR Waterways, Storm Water, and other Water Quality programs.

## SEVEN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DNR

1) *Continue working cooperatively with Wetland Study Council on this effort.*

2) *Validate the stormwater- and watershed-related themes with less experienced staff.*

3) *Assign liaison roles in Waterways Program to DNR Storm Water and DNR Water Quality Programs.*

4) *Establish regular collaborative opportunities between DNR Waterways, Storm Water, and Water Quality Programs.*

5) *Develop one or more pilot projects with municipalities that need to implement MS4 water quality projects.*

6) *Distribute a list of watershed planning resources that can be shared with staff from the Waterways and Storm Water Programs.*

7) *Develop job aids for the Waterways and Storm Water Programs that provide considerations for utilizing flexibility.*

**Recommendation 1** is key to ensuring the WSC can provide meaningful assistance and direction as the department pursues these recommendations. **Status:** *Ongoing.*

**Recommendation 2** ensures the interviews that IWC conducted were representative of the programs overall. This step was completed by interviewing less experienced staff (approximately 5 years of experience or less) from both programs. Results of the validation interviews showed strong agreement between the less experienced and more experienced staff on the themes identified above. **Status:** *Completed in the spring of 2023.*

**Recommendations 3 and 4** create collaboration between staff from the relevant DNR Programs. A recent reorganization of the Waterways Program is expected to allow for stronger relationship building. Initial steps for these recommendations include assigning liaison roles and establishing regular meetings between policy managers in the Waterways, Storm Water, and Water Quality Programs. **Status:** *In process.* **Goal:** *Complete by spring 2024.*

**Recommendation 5** would develop one or more pilot project(s) with local governments to show how watershed considerations can inform decision making and permit review. Information supplied at the application process, considerations for reviewers, and resource concerns are some of the areas that would be detailed in the pilot project. Experience with pilot projects would inform resources developed in Recommendations 6 and 7 on this list. **Status:** *In process.* **Goal:** *Work with IWMC and others to identify pilot project(s) in 2024.*

**Recommendation 6** would provide permitting staff training and resources to understand how the projects they are reviewing fit within a local watershed context. These resources can inform permitting decisions such as the siting of preferred alternatives for water quality-based projects. **Status:** *Not yet initiated.* **Goal:** *Develop training materials and resources by end of 2024.*

**Recommendation 7** is intended to provide resources to Waterways and Storm Water permitting staff that outline how flexibility can be incorporated into the permitting process. Examples include but are not limited to the net environmental benefit and maximum extent practicable considerations allowed under statute and code **Status:** *Not yet initiated.* **Goal:** *Develop job aids by end of 2024.*