

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE OF NATURAL RESOURCE LAND MANAGEMENT IN WASHINGTON COUNTY

RESILIENT COMMUNITIES PROJECT



About the Partner

Washington County is on the eastern edge of the Twin Cities Metropolitan area, composed of 423 square miles of land, and possessing a distinct set of landscapes and resources. The physical environment is very diverse; its surface and underground features vary throughout the county. The county is framed by unique and exceptional water features - the St. Croix River forms the entire eastern border and the Mississippi River forms the southern and southwestern border. In addition to the rivers, important natural features are: the bluffs and ravines in the St. Croix valley; the county's abundant streams, wetlands, lakes, forests, and groundwater; and the prime farmland soils of the agricultural areas of the county. While much of Washington County has retained its rural atmosphere, it includes urban, suburban and rural communities.

The County parks system consists of seven regional parks, one county park, two regional trails, and one historic courthouse site. The parks and trails provide a gateway to aforementioned scenic landscapes and treasured natural resources. With more than 4,400 acres of parkland, there are a variety of ways to discover and enjoy the outdoors.

Project Description

As the Twin Cities Metropolitan region continues to develop and experience the impacts of climate change, public agencies are experiencing more pressure to protect the last best natural areas for public good and public use. Land acquisition and easements for conservation and preservation are common tools used by public agencies to protect sensitive natural areas and resources, which can capture carbon and protect water quality, in addition to many other benefits.

Developing goals and methods for responsibly managing and stewarding this land is crucial. Currently, land management approaches typically fall into two categories:

1. "active" management focused on eradication of undesirable non-native vegetation and restoration to historical land covers; and
2. "passive" management focused on managing the natural succession of the land and adapting the land to prepare for new environmental and climate conditions.

Active and passive management methods apply different principles and lead to different outcomes. Through this project, Washington County seeks to better understand the advantages and disadvantages of these contrasting approaches to be better equipped to address climate change.

Key Issues, Questions, and Ideas to Explore

1. What are the advantages of disadvantages of active land management and passive land management approaches?
2. What is a step-by-step process or framework that could help guide land managers in developing the most responsible approach? What criteria make land best for a more active approach and what types of land are best for a passive approach?
3. How can land managers and policy makers find the right balance for managing existing land within the park system and evaluating new land to potentially add to the park system?
4. What can traditional ecological knowledge teach us about land management and stewardship?
5. Are there additional frameworks, principles, stakeholder groups, or best practices the County and other regional agencies should consider?

How Student Work Will Be Used to Build Community Resilience

- To inform the decision-making and natural resource plan development process so that the County can be more sustainable and resilient

Potential Community Partners or Stakeholders Existing Plans & Reports

- Anoka County Parks
- Dakota County Parks
- Pollinator Alliance
- Great River Greening
- Washington County 2040 Comprehensive Plan: Chapter 7: Parks, Trails and Open Space

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