



**Protecting Our Water Resources
West Metro Water Alliance Workshop
May 25, 2011**

Some things I have
observed about water
management and public
policy over the past four
decades

My public career in water policy

- A CPA who got sidetracked into public life in 1972
 - Coon Rapids City Council, 1972-1974
 - State Senate, 1972-1996
 - DNR commissioner, 2003-2007
 - President of Freshwater Society, since 2007
 - Boards and councils: Clean Water Council; Forest Resources Council; Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy ; Minnesota chapter, National Audubon Society; Conservation Minnesota

Mistakes and confessions

- Water is complicated...Sometimes we think we know the issue, but...
 - Storm water systems
 - Why did we build them that way?
 - Municipal water supply
 - Groundwater vs. river water

Conflicting governmental goals

- Coon Rapids aesthetics vs. Coon Creek Watershed District drainage
- Watershed districts originally created to drain farm fields or engineer flooding responses
- Nutrient management?

Planning and prevention vs. engineering solutions

- Watershed districts too often a reaction to absence of watershed planning
- Metropolitan Surface Water Management Act of 1982
 - An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of engineering

Wetlands Conservation Act (1991)

- 'No net loss' – A false promise
- 20,000 miles of drain tile still being installed each year in Minnesota

Barriers to linking policy to science

- Change is hard
- People want easy solutions that fit into conventional wisdom
- We often think too narrowly and are reluctant to be out in front of our constituents
- Anti-scientific beliefs

Scientific/engineering advances may treat symptoms, not causes

- 101 years ago, we started chlorinating Minneapolis drinking water from the Mississippi River
- It took another quarter-century to start treating sewage discharged to the river

Other barriers

- Institutional inertia
 - DNR promoted 'natural' shorelines and rain gardens for lake homes, while planting grass to the water's edge at boat ramps
- Cultural norms often immutable
 - Manicured lawns
 - Private property rights vs. public good

An exercise in changing opinions

- Twin Cities COMPAS exercise
 - 80 percent 'comfortable' with water quality
 - A few facts
 - Only about half the crowd still comfortable
 - Education matters

A Final Thought...

- “Anything else you’re interested in is not going to happen if you can’t breathe the air and drink the water. Don’t sit this one out. Do something. You are by accident of fate alive at an absolutely critical moment in the history of our planet.”

-Carl Sagan