**Minutes of the**

**Upper Mississippi River Restoration Program**

**Coordinating Committee**

**August 7, 2024**

**Quarterly Meeting**

**Edina, MN**

Kelly Keefe of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers called the meeting to order at 8:09 a.m. on Aug 7, 2024. Other UMRR Coordinating Committee representatives present were Jim Fischer (USGS) on behalf of Jeff Houser, Sabrina Chandler (USFWS), Dave Glover (Illinois DNR), Vanessa Perry (Wisconsin DNR), Matt Vitello (Missouri DoC), Grant Wilson (Minnesota DNR), Kirk Hansen (Iowa DNR). A complete list of attendees follows these minutes.

**Minutes of the May 22, 2024 Meeting**

Marshall Plumley requested that “Rock Island District” be replaced with “St. Louis District” in the third sentence in the FY 2024 Fiscal Update section on page A-1 of the draft minutes. Plumley also noted that there are a few minor editorial corrections to be made.

Jim Fischer moved and Matt Vitello seconded a motion to approve the draft minutes of the May 22, 2024 meeting as corrected. The motion carried unanimously.

**Regional Management and Partnership Collaboration**

*Fiscal Report*

Marshall Plumley announced that UMRR is scheduled to execute over 95 percent of its FY 2024 appropriation of $55 million by the end of the fiscal year. Plumley acknowledged the contributions of all UMRR partners who are involved in the program’s implementation.

Plumley House of Representatives and Senate Appropriations Committee have included $55 million in
their respective FY 2025 energy and water appropriations measures, aligning with the President’s budget proposal. With the Administration, House, and Senate Appropriations Committee all proposing $55 million for UMRR in FY 2025, the Corps anticipates being able to proceed with program implementation at
$55 million if the FY 2025 appropriations process is extended through a continuing resolution.

Plumley explained the anticipated internal program allocations at the $55 million appropriation scenario for FY 2025, as outlined below. Plumley mentioned that programmatic activities in FY 2025 will center around strategic planning, preparing for UMRR’s 40th anniversary in 2026, and selecting the next iteration of HREPs. In response to questions from Kirsten Wallace, Vanessa Perry, and Davi Michl, Plumley pointed to several other programmatic activities such as public participation and another iteration of the program’s habitat needs assessment. Plumley explained that these other programmatic activities are integrated into the strategic planning deliberations. In response to a request from Kirk Hansen, Plumley agreed that a conversation is warranted regarding the relationship among UMRR and NESP ecosystem investment planning – i.e., a next iteration of the UMRR habitat needs assessment and NESP reach planning.

UMRR FY 2025 Work Plan

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Regional administration and program efforts | ¾ | $2,225,000 |
| Regional science and monitoring | ¾ | $15,925,000 |
| * + - Long term resource monitoring
 | ¾ | $6,500,000 |
| * + - Science supporting rehabilitation/management
 | ¾ | $7,950,000 |
| * + - Regional integration/adaptive management
 | ¾ | $200,000 |
| * + - Habitat evaluation
 | ¾ | $1,275,000 |
| Habitat rehabilitation planning and construction  | ¾ | $36,850,000 |
| * + - St. Paul District
 | ¾ | $9,900,000 |
| * + - Rock Island District
 | ¾ | $13,925,000 |
| * + - St. Louis District
 | ¾ | $12,925,000 |
| * + - Model certification
 | ¾ | $100,000 |

*HREP Implementation Report*

The Beaver Island HREP construction is complete and a ribbon cutting ceremony is scheduled for October 1. Rock Island District will advance construction on other HREPs and initiate planning on a new project in FY 2025. The new project to begin planning has yet to be determined. Plumley reviewed the UMRR 10-year implementation strategy, including recent adjustments to account for realized project deliverables.

UMRR program partners continue to work through the process of evaluating potential project opportunities and selecting a suite of projects for implementation in FYs 2026 through 2030. The process schedule for project selection anticipates that the UMRR Coordinating Committee will review and endorse fact sheets by the third quarter of FY 2025 – i.e., April 2025 through June 2025. Following the Coordinating Committee’s endorsement of projects, the respective Districts will submit them to MVD for review and approval prior to initiating planning.The Rock Island District is allocating personnel to employ environmental justice analysis of potential projects.

Plumley acknowledged the UMRR partnership’s consideration of how the program might advance environmental justice principles or objectives. Plumley anticipates further partnership discussions on environmental justice approaches through UMRR, including in the ongoing strategic planning process and at a possible future workshop.

Plumley explained the Corps’ request for the information provided in individual fact sheet proposals, including type of material, transportation distance of construction materials, flow conditions, constructability issues, and water depths at feature locations. The Corps will need at least two to three weeks to develop cost estimates associated with those variables prior to submitting the fact sheets to the executive-level river teams. De-scoping will need to occur for projects with an estimated cost exceeding $40 million. This includes the costs associated with planning, design, construction, and contingency.

Sabrina Chandler reported on the concerns being expressed by agency staff regarding the level of information being requested. Chandler said the instructions have caused confusion among the river teams and that the level of information being sought is challenging from a workload perspective. The concern is also being heightened because the information being requested may become obsolete before project fact sheets are concerned for approval and moved into planning. Plumley explained that the Corps is coordinating with agency leaders and river team chairs to clarify and simplify the requests for information. The purpose of the request for more detailed information is to refine potential cost estimates. Plumley explained that recently completed feasibility study cost estimates were significantly higher than the corresponding 2020 fact sheet estimates. This gap has caused implementation challenges for the program. Plumley explained that the Corps has received bids for construction that are markedly different than the construction cost estimate. The Corps will monitor whether the issue is unique and short-term or whether it might represent a larger trend for UMRR HREPs.

*Strategic Planning*

Chrissa Waite updated the UMRR Coordinating Committee on the process and content of UMRR strategic planning. The purpose of the process is to support the strategic management of the UMRR program and to enhance collaboration among the partnership. The process involves a collaboration among the UMRR Coordinating Committee, strategic planning team, an independent facilitator (i.e., Waite), and various stakeholders, individuals, and organizations. The products or outcomes will include a program mission, vision, goals, objectives, and strategies as well as articulated strategic issues and response, an implementation plan and evaluation, and stronger relationships among the UMRR partners.

UMRR partners have successfully completed the first two phases of a strategic planning process: understanding strategic issues and developing strategic goals and objectives. UMRR agency partners were joined by several leaders in the conservation community for an in-person strategic planning session on July 23-25, 2024. The next phases of the strategic planning process are to draft strategies and actions, employ a public review process, and finalize the strategic plan.

Waite provided a preview of the July 23-25 highlights and outcomes, including statements of success, opportunity, partnership, weaknesses, threats, and critical issues. Plumley reflected on the cordial environment of the partnership collaboration at the strategic planning session, and thanked the various partner agencies and leaders for their contributions. Chandler echoed Plumley’s acknowledgment of the partnership, and also commemorated Plumley for his leadership of the program in ways that facilitate healthy partnership collaborations. Kirk Hansen and Jim Fischer provided their gratitude for the facilitation and partnership participation in the strategic planning session, including the contributions of non-governmental individuals and organizations.

Brian Stenquist commended Waite for her effective facilitation leadership. In response to a question from Stenquist about anything that might be missing or any blind spots, Waite noted the value of the strong relationship among UMRR partners. The strength of the partnership is unique and an important asset, and maintaining the partnership, particularly with more frequent anticipated turnover, will require continuous care and feeding. Waite underscored the value of UMRBA in continuously maintaining consistency in partnership collaboration.

*Authorizing Legislation*

Congress is drafting the Water Resource Development Act of 2024. On July 22, 2024, the House of Representatives passed its Water Resources Development Act of 2024 bill. The Senate passed its version of the legislation on August 1, 2024. The timeline for the two chambers to reconcile the legislation and proceed to enactment is unknown.

The current annual authorized appropriation for UMRR is $90 million; with $75 million authorized annually for HREP implementation and $15 million authorized annually for long term resource monitoring. The House of Representatives and Senate are proposing to amend the appropriation limit for long term resource monitoring to $20 million annually and $25 million annually, respectively.

*Memorandums of Agreement*

The Corps has submitted to the Office of the ASA(CW) on July 11, 2024 a model Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) for the agency’s use in advancing UMRR HREPs that are on federal lands and that are managed by a state or local government. Marshall Plumley will report to the UMRR Coordinating Committee when the ASA(CW)’s Office has reached a decision on the Corps’ proposed model agreement. A similar agreement for NESP projects was developed and submitted at the same time.

**UMRR Showcases**

*Thin Layer Placement: Lessons Learned from McGregor Lake HREP*

John Henderson presented on UMRR’s implementation of thin layer placement as a part of the McGregor Lake HREP. Thin layer placement is the strategic placement of small lifts (i.e., between 6 inches and
36 inches) of dredged material onto existing surfaces to raise the ground elevation to a more suitable hydraulic position for bolstering vegetation growth and survival. Henderson explained the state of knowledge of using thin layer placement as a restoration tool and the various considerations and factors for implementing thin layer placement at McGregor Lake HREP.

Henderson concluded that thin layer placement proved to be a worthwhile technique at McGregor Lake HREP and recommended that UMRR continue to test and refine the technique at future HREPs. Henderson offered the following questions for consideration in using the technique:

* What is the impact of material placement on top of and around existing vegetation?
* How can the design of thin layer placement be improved to increase constructability?
* What is the impact of flocculant on settlement times in large project features?

Kelly Keefe applauded the innovation and pointed to a change in Corps’ policy to implement nature base solutions that is allowing for this kind of positive innovation.

*Sturgeon Spawning Reef Planning at Robinson Lake*

Kacie Grupa explained the analysis and planning of the Robinson Lake HREP to restore the conditions that support sturgeon spawning reef. Grupa explained the planning variables and thresholds for creating spawning reef conditions (i.e., water temperature, depth, velocity, and substrate) and how the Robinson Lake HREP was designed to generate the favorable conditions. Ultimately, the feasibility design includes four spawning reefs. The project is designed so that the reefs remain free of sediment.

Grupa offered the following suggestions for future projects intended to restore sturgeon spawning habitat: refine reefs to be aligned with water flows, analyze velocities for minimum substrate gradation to avoid mobilization, and refine chosen substrates.

*Phytoplankton Assemblage Dynamics in Relation to Environmental Conditions in a Riverine Lake*

Rob Burdis explained the results of a recent study on the phytoplankton assemblage dynamics in Lake Pepin, located in Pool 4. With monthly samples spanning from 2012 to 2014 in four locations in Lake Pepin, the results lend insight into the controlling variables affecting the phytoplankton assemblages. Year, month, and year and site showed the greatest statistical significance as influencing factors.

**Program Reports**

*Long Term Resource Monitoring, Research, and Other Science*

Fiscal Report

UMRR is planning to allocate $13.85 million of its FY 2024 appropriation (i.e., $55 million) to long term resource and monitoring. This includes $5.5 million for base monitoring, $1.5 million for scientific investigations using that base monitoring for analysis (analysis under base), and $6.85 million for scientific investigation related to river restoration and management information needs. In FY25, total budget allocation for LTRM will increase to $14.45 million: $6.5 million for base monitoring, $2 million for analysis under base, and $5.95 million for science in support of restoration and management. This increase is in recognition of increasing base monitoring costs over the past several years.

Quarterly Progress Report

Jim Fischer reported that the accomplishments of the third quarter of FY24 include the publication of the following six manuscripts:

1. Reduction of large vessel traffic improves water quality and alters fish habitat-use throughout a large river.
2. Identifying conditions where reed canarygrass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) functions as a driver of forest loss in the Upper Mississippi River floodplain under different hydrological scenarios.
3. The where and why of large wood occurrence in the Upper Mississippi and Illinois Rivers.
4. Invasive Round goby *Neogobius melanostomus* distribution, relative abundance, and establishment in pools of the Illinois Waterway following 30 years of invasion.
5. Smallmouth buffalo (*Ictiobus bubalus* Rafinesque) population trends and demographics in the Upper Mississippi River System.
6. Distribution of invasive scud, *Apocorophium lacustre* (Vanhoffen, 1911) in the Illinois Waterway, USA: Do habitat and water quality variables influence spatial distribution and relative abundance?

Fischer said USGS provided several presentations about long term resource monitoring research and analysis at the June 2-7, 2024 Association for the Sciences of Limnology and Oceanography Annual Meeting.

Per the UMRR Implementation Planning Recommendations, USGS and the broader LTRM partnership are focused on evaluating floodplain vegetation change across the Upper Mississippi River System and researching the lower trophic contribution – i.e., zooplankton and phytoplankton.

Large-scale system topobathy acquisition of all Illinois River pools (La Grange to Lockport) and the southern portion of the Open River reach tracking to award contracts by September 30, 2024. Additionally, a pilot study of the Lower Pool 13 HREP area will be awarded this fiscal year to support project planning and design.

A-Team Report

Matt O’Hara reported that the A-Team met on July 26, 2024. The A-Team reflected on the 2024 Science Meeting and discussed the ranking of science proposals. O’Hara noted that A-Team members called for additional time for review, perhaps by initiating the review process earlier in the year. In addition to programmatic updates by the Corps and USGS, Shawn Giblin presented information about nutrient loading trends at Trempealeau Lake and LTRM field stations shared their experiences and impacts of monitoring during summer flood conditions. The next A-Team meeting is scheduled for October 2024.

*HREP Planning and Construction*

Angela Deen, Julie Millhollin, and Brian Market reported on the progress in implementing UMRR HREPs, including the following milestones:

* + MVD approved the feasibility report for the Big Lake HREP located in Pool 4.
	+ The St. Paul District is soliciting bids on Stage 1 of the Lower Pool 10 HREP.
	+ The Rock Island District submitted to MVD the Quincy Bay tentatively selected plan. Upon approval, the project would advance to construction.
	+ Construction on Beaver Island HREP is nearing completion, and the Rock Island District has scheduled a ribbon-cutting ceremony for October 1.
	+ Construction of HREPs in the Rock Island District is being affected by ongoing high water.
	+ The St. Louis District has submitted to MVD on July 30, 2024 the draft Feasibility Report for the West Alton Islands HREP. Upon approval, the project would advance to construction.
	+ The St. Louis District is currently solicitating a construction bid on Harlow Islands HREP, anticipating that construction will extend into FY 2025.

*Communications*

Simplifying Complex Communications

Greg Husak stated that the ultimate goal of communications is to encourage specific actions from the audience. Husak offered the following advice for simplifying complex communications:

* Use simple, high-level messages and allow time for the audience to absorb the information.
* Focus communications on the benefits to the audience (i.e., the why). It is imperative to understand the audience’s perspective and to tailor the messages accordingly.
* Structure the communications strategy to be sequential and integrated.

Husak acknowledged that the current landscape, shaped by political events, social changes, and the pandemic, demands a more focused and engaging approach to communication. Traditional methods like posters are no longer effective, and people are less inclined to engage. It is essential to understand how the audience receives information and tailor the message to resonate with them.

Communications and Outreach Team

Rachel Perrine reported on the accomplishments and ongoing activities of the Communications and Outreach Team. On August 1, 2024, UMRR initiated a photo contest among UMRR partners in an effort to obtain visuals for use in UMRR’s program materials and communications. The contest is scheduled to close on October 31. Other activities include posting on social media in conjunction with related broad scale events such as World Migratory Bird Day and World Rivers Day. Perrine also anticipates that the Communications and Outreach Team will support communications of the 2022 UMRR Report to Congress.

Partner Activities

UMRR Coordinating Committee members and partners shared the communications or engagements over the last quarter that relate to UMRR, as follows:

* + Missouri Department of Conservation hosted public river boat tours on August 21 and September 28.
	+ Missouri Department of Conservation is participating in a water quality user perception survey that is being conducted by the University of Minnesota.
	+ The Mississippi River Parkway Commission convened its annual meeting on September 18-20, 2024 in Winona, Minnesota. The Commission discussed partnering opportunities with various organizations and individuals who work on Upper Mississippi River matters.
	+ The Minnesota Governor Tim Walz celebrated the annual Minnesota fishing opener on the Mississippi River at Lake City. The event included a tour of the Minnesota DNR mussel facility.
	+ The USFWS Upper Mississippi River Refuge celebrated its 100-year anniversary with various festivities hosted by the Service as well as partner organizations. Presentations of UMRR’s habitat restoration and long term resource monitoring received positive response.
	+ Wisconsin DNR Office of Great Waters is employing a strategic planning process. The planning is largely focused on communications, engagement strategies, and community collaborations for monitoring, restoration, and science.
	+ On July 22, 2024, USFWS published a ‘Fish of the Week’ podcast episode about Smallmouth Buffalo. Levi Solomon and Kris Maxson of the Illinois River Biological Station were interviewed about the fish.

**Other Business**

*Future Meeting Schedule*

* November 2024 in Alton, Illinois
	+ - UMRBA quarterly meeting – November 19
		- UMRR Coordinating Committee quarterly meeting – November 20
* February 2025 through a virtual platform (not in-person)
	+ - UMRBA quarterly meeting – February 25
		- UMRR Coordinating Committee quarterly meeting – February 26
* May 2025 in La Crosse, Wisconsin
	+ - UMRBA quarterly meeting – May 20
		- UMRR Coordinating Committee quarterly meeting – May 21

**Attendance List**

*UMRR Coordinating Committee Members*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Kelly Keefe | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers |
| Sabrina Chandler | U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, UMR Refuges |
| Jim Fischer | U.S. Geological Survey, UMESC [On behalf of Jeff Houser] |
| Dave Glover | Illinois Department of Natural Resources |
| Kirk Hansen | Iowa Department of Natural Resources |
| Grant Wilson | Minnesota Department of Natural Resources |
| Matt Vitello | Missouri Department of Conservation |
| Vanessa Perry | Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources |
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| *Others In Attendance* |  |
| Brian Chewning | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVD |
| Thatch Shepard | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVD |
| Angela Deen | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVP |
| John Henderson | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVP |
| Kacie Grupa | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVP |
| Samantha Thompson | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVP |
| Marshall Plumley | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVR |
| Davi Michl | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVR |
| Julie Millhollin | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVR |
| Jessie Dunton | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVR |
| Davi Michl | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVR |
| Rachel Perrine | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVR |
| Steve Gustafson | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVR |
| Brian Johnson | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVS |
| Brian Markert | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVS |
| Jasen Brown | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVS |
| John Peukert | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVS |
| Ryan Swearingin | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, MVS |
| Chrissa Waite | U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, SAC |
| Richard Vaughn | U.S. Department of Agriculture, NRCS |
| Kraig McPeek | U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ecological Services |
| John Winter | U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ecological Services |
| Matt Mangan | U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, UMR Refuges |
| Christopher Churchill | U.S. Geological Survey, UMESC |
| Kristen Bouska | U.S. Geological Survey, UMESC |
| JC Nelson | U.S. Geological Survey, Midcontinent Region |
| Matt O’Hara | Illinois Department of Natural Resources |
| Greg Husak | Minnesota Department of Natural Resources |
| Neil Rude | Minnesota Department of Natural Resources |
| Rob Burdis | Minnesota Department of Natural Resources |
| Sammi Boyd | Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources |
| Brent Newman | Audubon |
| Anshu Singh | Corn Belt Ports |
| Chris Smith | Corn Belt Ports |
| Greg Orum | Idaho Power |
| Madeline Castle | Senator Josh Hawley |
| Kirsten Wallace | Upper Mississippi River Basin Association |
| Brian Stenquist | Upper Mississippi River Basin Association |
| Mark Ellis | Upper Mississippi River Basin Association |
| Natalie Lenzen | Upper Mississippi River Basin Association |
| Sadie Neuman | Upper Mississippi River Basin Association |
| Lauren Salvato | Upper Mississippi River Basin Association |
| Laura Talbert | Upper Mississippi River Basin Association |