

**Upper Mississippi River Basin Association  
Water Quality Executive Committee  
and Water Quality Task Force Joint Meeting**

**September 25-26, 2024  
Highlights and Action Items Summary**

**September 25, 2024**

**Approval of the WQTF February 1, 2024 Meeting Summary**

The UMRBA Water Quality Executive Committee (WQEC) and UMRBA Water Quality Task Force (WQTF) approved the February 1, 2024 draft highlights and action items summary.

**UMRBA Update**

Josh Wolf introduced himself as the new Water Quality Coordinator at UMRBA. He detailed his role in the Upper Mississippi River nutrient reduction strategy and the Hypoxia Task Force.

**UMRBA Water Quality Program**

Lauren Salvato reviewed the [UMRBA 2022-2035 Water Quality Program Plan](#), which outlines a vision and long term plan for improving water quality conditions on the Upper Mississippi River System through interstate cooperative management. During 2023, the WQEC and WQTF had discussions on how to focus work over the next two fiscal years. Those include: partial implementation of an Upper Mississippi River (UMR) Interstate Water Quality Monitoring Plan (Monitoring Plan) from October 2025 to September 2026 ; management of water quality monitoring data generated from implementation of the Monitoring Plan; the Upper Mississippi River (UMR) Nutrient Reduction Strategy (NRS) project, primarily funded by the Gulf Hypoxia program; shared water quality assessments and standards for the Upper Mississippi River, a public use survey across the Upper Mississippi River to understand perceptions of water quality and other uses of the river; and building work plans or statements for emerging contaminants and nitrogen. Salvato suggested later to pivot away from the focus on shared water quality assessments and standards, the public use survey, and the workplan statements and instead focus on harmful algal blooms and chloride.

**Water Quality Executive Committee Charter**

Kirsten Wallace reviewed that the UMRBA Board established the WQEC in 2006 for the purposes of facilitating collaborative decision-making, cooperative action, and information sharing among the five upper basin states and to provide a policy link between collective actions and individual actions by the States and Federal government.

In 2021, the WQEC finalized the 2022-2035 UMRBA Water Quality Program Plan. The Committee agreed to revisit the Charter to ensure its relevance to the Plan. UMRBA's water quality program has slowly and deliberately grown since 2006. Over the past five years, the states' vision for UMRBA's water quality work has grown substantially.

The WQEC convened a few focused conversations on the existing Charter's terms and reflected on the 10-Year Program Plan's trajectory of growth in UMRBA's water quality program. Areas of focus and direction have included:

- Purpose, membership, scope, and roles and responsibilities. These sections were edited to be more reflective of today's language but remain largely the same as the original/existing Charter.
- Potential expansion of membership of federal agencies beyond USEPA – e.g., USGS, NRCS. Ultimately, the WQEC agreed to maintain only USEPA as a non-voting member, but to invite the participation of other federal agencies to the public meetings and any non-public meetings as appropriate.
- Appropriate annual meeting cycle (frequency and location). The WQEC agreed to convene three meetings per year. One meeting per year is to be held jointly with the UMRBA Board and one meeting per year is to be held jointly with its designated committees or work groups.
- Assigned interstate collaborations. The Committee debated the potential of assigning standing or ad hoc interstate collaborations. While the Committee recognizes the growing need for interstate collaboration on a variety of topics (e.g., nutrients, HABs, chloride), the Committee was not prepared to name the potential organizational bodies in the Charter. In part, the Committee wanted to wait until UMRBA has the organizational capacity to support any new interstate collaboration and until the work was more refined and specific. With that direction, UMRBA staff propose transferring from a focus on the WQTF to a more open and flexible approach – i.e., “Establish standing committees and/or working groups to advance priorities of the WQEC...”

Wallace discussed how updating the charter language can help clarify WQEC's role, in particular each year when Water Quality dues assessments are billed to the five states. Adam Schnieders agreed that would be helpful and added that he is not aware of the UMRBA Board's priorities. Brian Stenquist reinforced that there is a deliberate connection between the UMRBA Board and the WQEC as the Water Quality program plan was endorsed and approved by the UMRBA Board. In reviewing specific changes to the Charter language, Glenn Skuta stated that he was in support of the more succinct revised statement regarding the individual authorities of each state but requested that some language from the original wording be retained, ‘actions taken by the WQEC are not binding on any agency unless the agencies explicitly enter into a binding agreement’.

In response to a question from Skuta about additional background on the naming change from Water Quality Executive Committee to Water Quality Executive Council, Wallace explained that there are many UMRBA committees and wants to ensure the naming is reflective of the WQEC's role as a body meant to be focused on policy, budget, and strategic direction, which is more suited to a Committee.

Skuta reflected on next steps for finalizing the WQEC Charter:

- Coordinate with Missouri and Illinois WQEC representatives individually on Charter changes
- Present the updated charter draft to the UMRBA Board and WQEC at its upcoming November 18, 2024, meeting for endorsement

## **UMRBA Nutrient Work**

Salvato described the UMR NRS Project, which includes the development of an interstate UMR NRS, an adaptive management and continuous learning framework, and a communications plan. As this project is starting, Salvato also requested dialogue on the work of the nutrient committee and how that committee will collaborate with the UMRBA Board, WQEC, and WQTF. Salvato suggested that the Nutrient Committee include state nutrient reduction strategy coordinators. Their functions would be to scope the UMR NRS, participate in the project, connect expertise and review within and among state agencies, and advocate for the implementation of workplan components. Her estimation is that this would take 2.5 % of each representative's time. If any requests from UMRBA consume too many resources, UMRBA can shift its priorities accordingly. Functions beyond the Gulf Hypoxia program funding could be other interstate nutrient needs, such as serving as a forum, and developing advocacy strategies. A potential approach for the UMR NRS development would be to review the five state NRSs, host individual conversations with the NRS coordinators, and then outline a skeleton draft. UMRBA would then convene the Nutrient Committee to review iterations of the UMR NRS

Skuta asked if states were ready to name representatives to the Nutrient Committee. Skuta nominated Corrie Layfield, Minnesota's NRS Coordinator. Schnieders suggested that he and Matt Lechtenberg from the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship can be involved, with the potential to include Iowa State University. Adrian Stocks suggested Karl Gesch as the representative for Wisconsin. Gesch agreed he would like to be involved but would have to discuss this request with his supervisor, adding that the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection will likely nominate the staff person that is taking over the liaison position, formerly held by Coreen Fallat. Illinois and Missouri both have additional internal coordination before naming a representative.

Stenquist asked how success would be defined for the UMR NRS. Schnieders defined success as a meaningful action being implemented on the landscape and a project being implemented. He added that a shared agreement to increase wetlands in the UMR watershed could be a good starting point for collaboration. Skuta reinforced that no one wants to see a document created that then just sits on a shelf.

Wallace suggested that the Nutrient Committee can have additional interstate functions, not necessarily funded by the Gulf Hypoxia Program. For example, an opportunity for the Nutrient Committee to interact with UMRBA's ecosystem program is through nutrient cycling in the context of flooding and drought. Congress is considering a systemic flood authority in the 2024 Water Resources Development Act. If the language is included, Wallace suggests future conversations on the role of nutrient and water quality in floodplain reconnection through flood risk reduction with nature-based solutions and environmental sustainability. Schnieders agreed with Wallace that floodplain reconnection is a benefit to nutrient loading reduction, particularly because floodplain reconnection has the potential to increase denitrification.

## **Communications and Public Participation in UMRBA's Water Quality Program**

UMRBA will be working on interstate communication and public participation organization-wide, including as a work product specified in the UMR nutrient reduction strategy project. Stenquist asked participants

to reflect on three questions to help UMRBA formulate its potential interstate communication approaches:

1. What are three messages your organization has tried to deliver about water quality in the Mississippi River over the last two years?
2. What audiences were those messages intended to reach?
3. What communication vehicles (e.g. web, news article, speech) did your organization use to send the messages to the intended audiences?

Kim Laing shared news articles to highlight the communications approaches Minnesota PCA used to announce its plans for water quality and Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substance (PFAS) monitoring conducted on the Mississippi River during summer 2024:

- [Entire Mississippi River within Minnesota borders to be sampled as part of new initiative- KSTP.com 5 Eyewitness News](#)
- [State regulators launch big Mississippi water monitoring project | MPR News](#)
- [MPCA to sample entire Minnesota portion of Mississippi River for pollutants | FOX 9 Minneapolis-St. Paul](#)

Skuta mentioned MPCA's reissuing of feedlot permits and how, different from previous years, MPCA staff conducted advance communication and engagement with permittees. He explained the work that MPCA does is often controversial and should provide for more involvement and engagement with the public. Skuta then described MPCA messaging shifts around the impaired waters list. Past communications had focused on the number of existing problems and how much work needed to be done. Communications surrounding the list were shifted to more positive reporting, with the crafting of messaging around good things happening and concrete examples of success stories, while continuing to highlight challenges such as PFAS. Skuta also remarked that in the past 10 years, public perception around the NRS has changed dramatically and that MPCA now has a dedicated communications strategist for this work.

Owen Gallagher provided an example of stakeholder engagement. Missouri DNR staff met with its stakeholders for three years before proposing new wastewater treatment phosphorus discharge rules of 1 mg/L.

Schnieders expressed the challenge of trying to explain water quality to the public, particularly with the impaired waters list. Iowa DNR held a press conference in advance of the release of the impaired waters list to be able to gain more control of the narrative. This was done to provide more context on what the lists are and are not (e.g., an impaired water can still be used for recreation but may have a chronic nutrient problem). This approach had limited success due to a lack of engagement by the press and was ultimately discontinued.

Stenquist asked what audiences UMRBA should be thinking about when working on the UMR NRS. Schnieders recommended focusing on the 'doers', or the people that would be actively participating in implementation of conservation. Additionally, focusing on interstate stakeholders as UMRBA's main audience.

Gesch said Wisconsin DNR recognizes the importance of communication needs with their NRS but does not have a dedicated communications person for their rewrite. Tim Asplund explained that social science staff at the DNR office interviewed staff in advance of the rewrite. Gesch shared that they are seeking new ways to work across program lines and collaborate for an approach that is inter-agency and shared.

Stenquist asked the group what they are doing for their NRS re-write communications. Skuta stated that MPCA is roughly a year out from having their NRS update finalized and that the Minnesota plan is getting to a higher level of detail while deemphasizing areas of the plan that have not been utilized. Gesch stated that Wisconsin is updating their plan on a similar timeline to Minnesota. Schnieders said Iowa's updated NRS would be published by the end of calendar year 2024. Robert Voss stated that the 10-year date is coming up for the Missouri plan and in October 2024 Missouri is going to review each action item from the original plan to review progress. However, no official timeline has been developed. Wallace stated that UMRBA needs to be thinking about what public participation means for the Association and asked participants to think about the ways UMRBA can support the states in their NRS and monitoring programs.

## **September 26, 2024**

### **Using a Nutrient Lense to look at the Midwest Conservation Blueprint**

Alex Wright introduced the Midwest Landscape Initiative (MLI). The MLI is a collaborative of conservation partners engaged in the Midwest and a formal committee of the Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. The MLI identified the need for a Midwest Conservation Blueprint as a synthesis tool used to identify priority networks of healthy lands and waters that support ecosystem and wildlife. The Blueprint consists of datasets such as the US Forest Service's Forest 2 Faucet drinking water layer, federal threatened and endangered species, and The Nature Conservancy's climate resiliency data layer. The datasets overlain help reveal the darkest areas, or zones of highest conservation priority. MLI's additional functions include connecting partners to work across boundaries, facilitating collaborative efforts, and supporting grant proposals. MLI can support grant proposals with letters of support, assisting with grant proposals, and in the application of the Blueprint. Wright confirmed some limitations of the Blueprint as the Forest 2 Faucets layer does not include groundwater. He suggested using the public feedback tool to make suggested changes. MLI evaluates the tool and potential upgrades each year. The 2024 version will be released in a few weeks. Updates to the tool include the carbon sequestration potential and the incorporation of revised state wildlife action plans in 2025.

### **USGS Integrated Water Availability Assessments**

Lori Sprague with USGS presented *USGS Integrated Water Availability Assessments* looking jointly at quality, quantity, and use. The three outcomes of this project are: National Water Availability Assessments, Regional Water Availability Assessments, and Water Availability Model Delivery. The USGS is looking at the balance between supply and demand and focusing on areas where demand comes close to or exceeds

demand. Albert Ettinger expressed concern about dropped monitoring sites. Sprague sympathized with the concern and explained that the removal of monitoring sites is funding dependent.

UMRBA is involved in a water availability assessment, in partnership with USGS and the University of Minnesota. Wallace thanked Sprague for her cooperation on the project and the financial support of the project.

### **Producing Cover Crop Seed for Public Lands Benefiting Water Quality and Wildlife**

Schnieders and Justin Clark presented on the Iowa DNR Cover Crop Seed Production Project. The Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy team saw an opportunity to better utilize conservation practices listed in its NRS and expanded the use of cover crops for multiple benefits on publicly owned lands. Iowa DNR manages 500,000 acres of public land and 29,000 acres are in use as row crop agriculture. With a Farmer-to-Farmer grant, Iowa DNR produced seeds for row crops and planted them on public grounds. For five seasons, nearly a million pounds of rye and triticale seeds were produced and planted on over 7,000 acres of row crop. DNR created dozens of partnerships with cooperating farmers and saved hundreds of thousands of dollars by producing the seeds themselves.

### **UMRBA Water Quality Program Workplan**

Salvato presented the UMRBA's draft water quality workplan components for fiscal years 2025 to 2027:

- Monitoring and data management
- Nutrient reduction
- Harmful algal blooms
- Chloride

Key components: communications, public participation, and environmental justice

For the monitoring and data management piece, the planning for the fixed site implementation of the UMR Interstate Water Quality Program is underway. UMRBA, in partnership with Illinois Department of Natural Resources, was recently awarded a USEPA Exchange Network grant to build a database management system for its water quality data. For harmful algal blooms, Salvato suggested expanding UMRBA's role in interstate collaboration beyond the HAB Resource Response Manual. In August and September 2024, Salvato was involved in conversations with Illinois American Water regarding algal bloom conditions in the Alton, Illinois area. The experience coordinating across partners revealed a few themes: 1) algal toxin monitoring and event-based response for suspected cyanotoxin blooms are not consistently implemented across the Upper Mississippi River, and 2) improved coordination and partnerships can help better address response timing to suspected cyanotoxin conditions. There are many potential actions that UMRBA can take but Salvato suggested further scoping of a gap analysis and a discussion with the UMRBA Board and WQEC during its upcoming November 18, 2024, meeting. Schnieders suggested not creating anything that results in the public water suppliers being dependent on UMRBA. Additional suggestions around HABs included looking at the potential of satellite data in HAB prediction and utilizing Wisconsin's guidance for swimming advisories, as both Wisconsin and Minnesota do not have public water supply intakes on the UMR.

For the chloride work item, Salvato discussed scoping the implementation of the UMRBA Chloride Resolution. Shawn Giblin suggested looking at the Wisconsin workgroup chloride recommendations for overlapping opportunities. Schnieders recommended planning for joint press releases with environmental regulatory agencies and departments of transportation in advance of Winter Salt Awareness Week in January 2025. Voss suggested Congressional action around limited liability would be most impactful to reduce chloride loading. Wallace said staff can work on a limited liability issue assessment to understand the sensitivities around this topic.

#### **Administrative Items**

#### ***Future Meeting***

Salvato will send out a Doodle poll to schedule the virtual winter meeting of the WQTF.

## Participants

Kent Johnson	Illinois Environmental Protection Agency
Alex Terlep	Illinois Environmental Protection Agency
Dan Kendall	Iowa Department of Natural Resources
Adam Schnieders	Iowa Department of Natural Resources
Reid Christianson	Minnesota Department of Agriculture
Heather Johnson	Minnesota Pollution Control Agency
Kim Laing	Minnesota Pollution Control Agency
Glenn Skuta	Minnesota Pollution Control Agency
Justin Watkins	Minnesota Pollution Control Agency
Owen Gallagher	Missouri Department of Natural Resources
Robert Voss	Missouri Department of Natural Resources
Micah Bennett	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 5
Alia Kirsch	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 5
Janette Marsh	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 5
Megan Rebechini	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 5
Paul Walkup	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 5
Dane Boring	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 7
Lauren Salvato	Upper Mississippi River Basin Association
Brian Stenquist	Upper Mississippi River Basin Association
Kirsten Wallace	Upper Mississippi River Basin Association
Josh Wolf	Upper Mississippi River Basin Association
Tim Anderson	Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection
Tim Asplund	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Karl Gesch	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Shawn Giblin	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Gina Laliberte	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Adrian Stocks	Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
Alex Wright	US Fish and Wildlife Service
David Dupre	US Geological Survey
Lori Sprague	US Geological Survey
Albert Ettinger	Mississippi River Collaborative