7- Mile Creek Watershed Visioning Conversation: Full Report

On September 7th, 2016, 61 individuals connected to the 7-Mile Creek Watershed came together to explore the question: *What can we do together to sustain and advance the long-term economic and environmental health of the 7-Mile Creek Watershed?* The group engaged in discussion and identified themes regarding the shared values of the group, the vision for the watershed, and tangible actions that will lead to a more economically and environmentally sustainable watershed.

During the conversation, the group examined together three subsequent questions:

1) What story do you want to tell about the watershed 10 years from now?
2) What are the most essential pieces of the environmental and economic health of the watershed?
3) Knowing it's up to us, what are the action required to build the essential pieces for economic and environmental health?

These three questions served as discussion points to address the 4 key goals of the conversation, which were to:

1) *Encourage a more collaborative effort that brings together diverse perspectives, innovation, and ideas*
2) *Foster a more balanced economic/environmental relationship*
3) *Build open communication*
4) *Increase water quality*

This report contains the responses to each of the questions through providing the themes and specific data points that led to the identification of themes. Additionally, once actions were identified, the group was broken into three categories – 1) Interested – individuals who are not directly impacted by the watershed, but who are supportive of the efforts and can help to tell the "story" of the work being done, 2) Endorsers – individuals who are connected to the work and can open doors, make connections, and provide pathways for the work on the ground to happen, and 3) Invested – individuals who are directly impacted by the work and who are on the ground at the heart of the effort. To capture the identified actions, a detailed strategic plan is provided at the end of this report.

1) What story do you want to tell about the watershed 10 years from now?

SUMMARY: In 2026, this community will tell the story of how we came together around 7-Mile Creek – we got to know each other and we worked at understanding each others' perspective. We focused on what we share instead of what divides us. Everyone committed to action, contributed what they could, and shared in the investment required to improve water quality while creating economic opportunity. We created a model for success that other watersheds in the Upper Midwest are adapting to create their own economic and environmental win-wins.

For each question, participants were asked to discuss the question at their table and identify common threads throughout the conversation. The patterns that emerged are the specific data points used to identify the themes. The following themes were identified and the specific data points from each conversation are provided under the theme:

Shared Investment

- Win-win
- Investments made today shared by all parties equally
- Better communication and collaboration among all involved in the watershed
- Shared stewardship practices

Tell the Story

- Vision for better ecological health and community (diverse) engagement of the park
- Telling the story of what farmers are doing now to improve watershed

Improved Water Quality

- Seven mile no longer impaired
- Improved water quality (3)
- Preserve and conserve for future generations
- Better water quality through better land management
- Minimize erosion and run-off of sediment into the waterways
- Improved water Quality and preserved the ecosystem and aquatic plants
- Cleaner water with engineered projects

Generate a Model of Success

- Model for other watersheds
- Create an outstanding model that can be used in other watersheds

Viable and Sustainable Actions

- Measurable and quantitative progress on watershed
- Long-term viability for farming (passing it on to future generations) (hunting and fishing)
- Not be an economic burden
- Maintain flow/not worsen

2) What are the most essential pieces of the environmental and economic health of the watershed?

The responses to this question were intended to identify and name the key components for a vision for the watershed. By naming the essential pieces, participants provided a "roadmap" for future success by naming the key areas that need our shared work and attention.

For each question, participants were asked to discuss the question at their table and identify common threads throughout the conversation. The patterns that emerged are the specific data points used to identify the themes. The following themes were identified and the specific data points from each conversation are provided under the theme:

Education
- Outreach and education
- Education - existence of park/resources unique ecosystem

Water Management
- land/water management beneficial to all parties
- Healthy water
- Water control - control sediment
- Clean water

A Willing Community
- Communication between farmers and environmental groups
- Willing participants for conservation practices with appropriate compensation
- Grassroots commitment/involvement in practices env. and econ health
- Humans = farmers and other residents
- Ecological systems = living and non-living
- Widespread community investment

Sustainable Land Management Practices
- Productive farmland with appropriate conservation practices where needed
- Maintaining productive farm systems and willingness to try new innovative practices
- The essential piece of economic health is drainage
- Critical BMP's installed i.e. buffers, nutrient management, wetlands
- Farming practices
- Keep soil and nutrients resources on land
- Critical BMPs established
- Topsoil
- Value of pork/park in whole watershed
- Soil quality
- Continue good stewardship

Identify Clear Problems
- Want to see the evidence that shows pollution level from present, 5, and 10 yrs ago
- What is town/urban contribution to pollution
- Fixing the bottom 10%
- Identify problems

Collaboration
- Collaboration and communication between all parties farmers/fed/state/community
- Cooperation
- Collaboration - water quality issues
- Co-operation
- Share in the cost of fixing problem
- Communication among all stakeholders

3) Knowing it's up to us, what are the action required to build the essential pieces for economic and environmental health?

In response to question 3, participants identified 6 key action areas that are represented as the "goals" in the strategic plan below. The specific data points for this question are the objectives and actions outlined under each goal area.

7-Mile Creek Watershed Vision Conversation: Strategic Plan

Goal 1: Apply farming (and other land management) practices that have a positive impact on the environment

- Objective 1: Increase use of strip tilling
  - Action 1: Hold a strip till field day
  - Action 2: Increase the acreage that is strip tilled by 25%
- Objective 2: Increase the use of cover crops
  - Action 1: Hold a cover crops field day
  - Action 2: Increase usage of cover crops by 25%
- Objective 3: Increase use of controlled drainage
  - Action 1: Increase usage of controlled drainage by 25%
- Objective 4: Improve adoption of N BMPs
  - Action 1: Start a soil test program (like Hewitt Creek Watershed in Iowa)
  - Action 2: Interview cooperators about current N fertilizer management practices to identify areas for improvement
  - Action 3: Work with 5 farmers to make 4R Nutrient Stewardship-type improvements

Goal 2: Increase cooperation and communication between key stakeholders in the 7-Mile Creek Watershed

- Objective 1: Communicate current and past projects with farmers, agencies, and general public
  - Action 1: Supply quarterly articles and reports to be shared via online sources and through email lists
  - Action 2: Package and sell watershed story to major regional news outlets
  - Action 3: Present watershed story at professional conferences
  - Action 4: Present watershed story at local events – e.g. Co-op, coffee shop, history center
- Objective 2: Create spaces and opportunities for different people to come together and to understand each other
  - Action 1: Periodic get-togethers of those "invested" in the watershed
  - Action 2: Annual watershed meeting open to the general public – "interested" people

Goal 3: Provide educational opportunities for the general public about the watershed, farming (and other land management practices, and regulations

- Objective 1: Provide educational resources to the general public regarding farming economics and environmental challenges
  - Action 1: Develop a video and/or article series to help "lay people" understand farm economics, risk, and how conservation activities factor in
  - Action 2: Collect "stories from farmers" that can be shared with a broad audience
- Objective 2: Create space for agencies and farmers/landowners to share knowledge
  - Action 1: Create a "core team" of farmers/landowners and agency representatives that engage in monthly and quarterly conversations, sharing best practices, new learning, and share in creating change
  - Action 2: Generate quarterly reports that share out stories from the "field" and provide new learning to be shared with a broader audience

Goal 4: Explore new crops and new markets that generate income and achieve conservation objectives

- Objective 1: Get more farmers involved in current biomass crop effort,
  - Action 1: Host a breakfast meeting to present the economic analysis about biomass
  - Action 2: Identify at least 2 more farmers to start getting up-to-speed about the biomass opportunity
- Objective 2: Define biomass supply logistics from field to market
  - Action 1: Seek an intermediate market for, as well as a long-term strategic partner for processing a biomass crop
  - Action 2: Document transport, storage, and agronomic considerations and guidelines for biomass crops
- Objective 3: Work with individual farmers to identify areas where it "sucks to farm"
  - Action 1: After breakfast meeting, sit down with individuals and document areas that would be good candidates for a biomass crop
  - Action 2: Use information to feed into estimates of how much biomass could be produced
  - Action 3: Establish small scale production/demonstration project

Goal 5: Improve level of conservation customer service to farmers

- Objective 1: Seek replacement of farmer services in Nicollet County (e.g. FSA, NRCS)
  - Action 1: Deliver letters/place calls to elected officials
  - Action 2: Deliver letters/place calls to USDA state/federal level

Action 3: Communicate the level of difficulty involved in accessing services to decision makers that can change location of services

Objective 2: Influence planning and design processes to generate more flexibility for farmers

Action 1: Identify people who are "levers" within the system – passionate, open-minded, mission-driven, influential

Action 2: Interview "levers" about opportunities to influence the system

Action 3: Summarize recommendations from "levers" and identify next steps

Objective 3: Diversify funding for conservation assistance (beyond government)

Action 1: Complete a study that identifies alternative funding options

Action 2: Pursue new opportunities for non-traditional funding sources in conjunction with stakeholders

Goal 6: Increase the shared collection, use, and distribution of data

Objective 1: Collect, analyze, and publish data at a scale that is useful for making management decisions, demonstrating success, and elevating collective understanding of water dynamics

Action 1: Facilitate an interagency and inter-stakeholder committee on data – specifically answering: how can agencies provide data to serve farmers? How can we get data faster? How can we present data that honors its complexity and communicates in the way we need it to? How can our data holders/stewards do a better job of serving the people?

Action 2: Set up a weather station/live stream weather and stream level on web

Action 3: Provide "snapshot" updates of pollutant loads under different weather conditions

Objective 2: Clearly identify highest priority areas and projects

Action 1: Summarize PTMApp findings for 7-Mile and ground truth with site visits and conversations with landowners of high priority projects

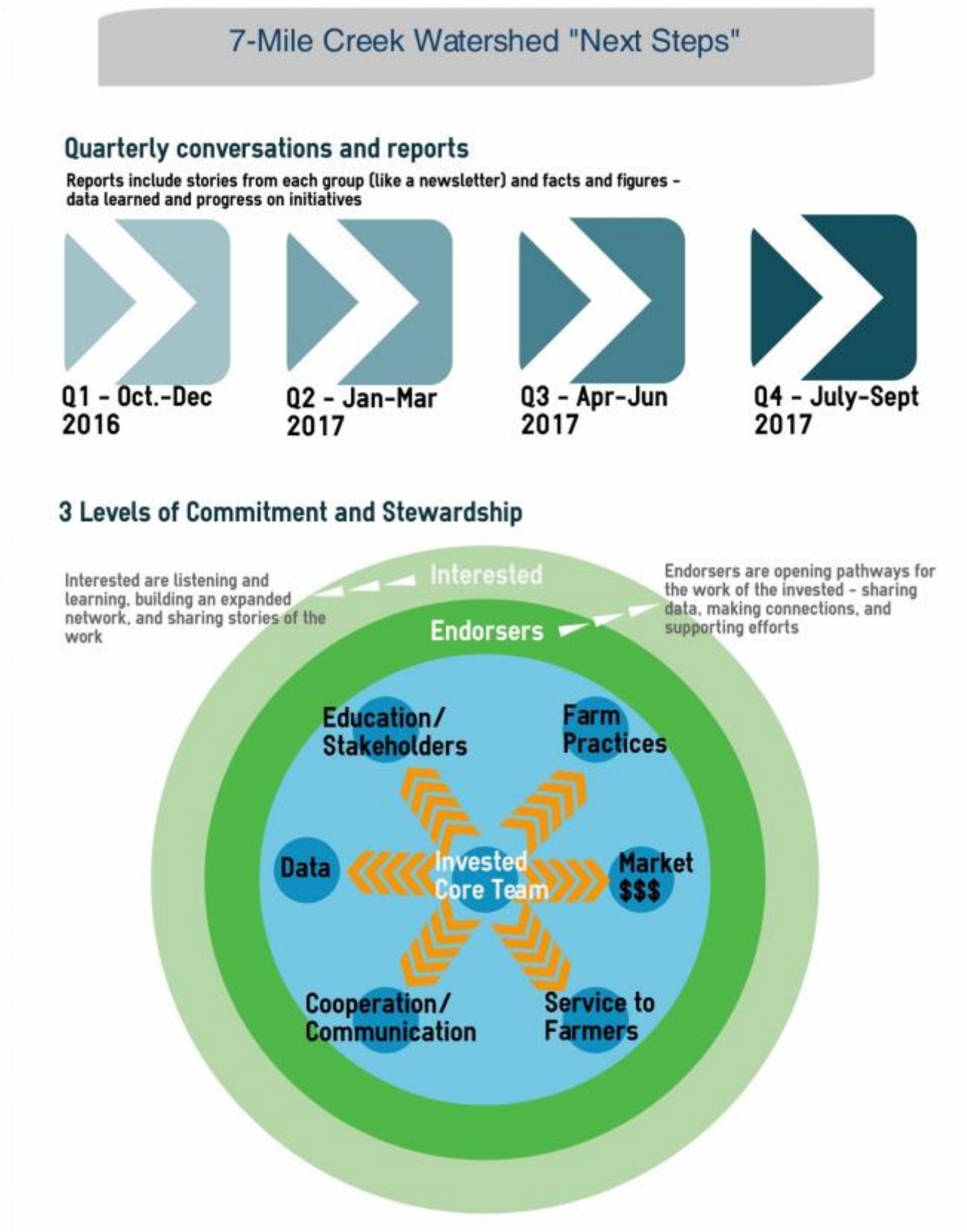
Action 2: Generate concept designs for highest priority projects and estimate cost/benefit

Next Steps

The diagram in Appendix A outlines the next steps in the process to complete the action items identified in the strategic plan. The 7-Mile Creek Watershed Partnership is in the process of developing a Core Action Team. The Core Action Team consists of two members from the Interested category, three members from the Endorsers category, one from each of the key action areas (6 Invested), and one process facilitator/steward for a total of 12. The CAT will be responsible for the ongoing stewardship of the strategic plan and engaging others in the process of completing the actions. All that were engaged in the visioning conversation, and others that have a connection to the watershed, will be engaged throughout the process.

The CAT will provide quarterly reports that will detail progress on actionable items, provide success stories to be shared with a broader audience, and highlight successes and opportunities to engage. Additionally, the CAT will connect monthly to share ideas, resources, and progress, and will invite a broader audience to participate in quarterly community conversations.

Appendix A


7-Mile Creek Watershed "Next Steps"
Quarterly conversations and reports
Reports include stories from each group (like a newsletter) and facts and figures - data learned and progress on initiatives
Q1 - Oct.-Dec 2016
Q2 - Jan-Mar 2017
Q3 - Apr-Jun 2017
Q4 - July-Sept 2017
3 Levels of Commitment and Stewardship
Interested are listening and learning, building an expanded network, and sharing stories of the work
Interested
Endorsers are opening pathways for the work of the invested - sharing data, making connections, and supporting efforts
Endorsers
Education/ Stakeholders
Farm Practices
Data
Invested Core Team
Market $$$
Cooperation/ Communication
Service to Farmers