



Division of Ecological & Water Resources
Region 4 (Southern Region)
21371 Highway 15 South
New Ulm, MN 56073

February 7, 2024

Turtle Creek Watershed District
1408 21st Ave NW
Austin, MN 55912

Subject: Preliminary Engineer's Report for Proposed Improvement of Freeborn County Ditch 8

Turtle Creek Watershed District,

Thank you for the opportunity to review the proposed Freeborn County Ditch 8 (CD8) improvement project and preliminary engineer's report. We offer the following comments in accordance with Minnesota Statute 103E.255 on behalf of the Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

Compatibility with Local Landuse Plans

The Preliminary Engineer's Report (PER) states that the proposed improvement is consistent with and works towards the goals and objectives of the Freeborn County Comprehensive Water Plan, Cedar River Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategies Report, and Cedar-Wapsipinicon Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan, primarily through the inclusion of a 4-acre wetland restoration. However, on page 12, the PER states:

"The alternative practices identified in this report involve voluntary participation by the landowners. Landowners understand that there are outside funding resources which may fund the conservation practices discussed in this report. Currently, the landowners are not interested in pursuing a wetland restoration."

Including a wetland restoration in the PER without intending to implement does not constitute compatibility with the previously mentioned plans. Without a storage component, there will be an overall increase in flow leaving the system, as documented in the PER. Combined with the incremental increase of drainage throughout the watershed, this project will significantly impact Geneva Lake water levels and the Cedar River, contributing to the flooding of the City of Austin. Potential impacts to the Geneva Wildlife Management Area should also be identified and discussed. The PER also shows a 0.26' elevation increase at the downstream 780th Ave crossing for a 100-year storm event and a 0.13' elevation increase at the downstream railroad crossing for a 100-year storm event. Potential impacts to the township road and railroad should be discussed.

Were other areas currently enrolled in conservation programs with depressional areas considered for storage practices? Pursuing the project without mitigating increased flow volumes works directly against the goals of decreasing flooding and increasing watershed-wide storage.

Tile Outlet

The proposed improvement will nearly triple outlet velocities where the tile outlets into the CD8 open ditch. Practices to reduce erosion at the tile outlet and stabilize the bank should be adopted and monitored to ensure the area's stability. Drainage coefficients exceeding NRCS recommendations could also be reexamined and adjusted to minimize the negative impacts of increased water quantity.

Blanding's Turtle

Blanding's Turtles (*Emys blandingii*) have been observed close to the proposed project. Blanding's Turtles are listed as Threatened under the Minnesota Endangered Species Act, and project construction must reflect the species' potential presence. The DNR has developed an [Environmental Review Factsheet](#), [Nesting Factsheet](#), and [Flyer](#) that should be reviewed and distributed to individuals involved in project implementation. For further information regarding Blanding's Turtles, please get in touch with Haley Byron, Regional Environmental Assessment Ecologist (haley.byron@state.mn.us).

Please send the response to this letter, the meeting minutes, the Finding of Fact, the Viewer's Report, and any Order issued by the Drainage Authority regarding this proposed improvement to the DNR when they become available. Please submit these documents to Region4Drainage.dnr@state.mn.us.

Regards,



Todd Kolander, EWR Southern District Manager

CC:

Tim Gieseke, DNR, Assistant Regional Manager
Haley Byron, DNR, Regional Environmental Assessment Ecologist
Todd Piepho, DNR, Area Hydrologist
James Fett, Turtle Creek Watershed District, Administrator
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