

UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER HEADWATERS ROPE STUDY ENVIRONMENTAL TASK FORCE MEETING MINUTES

Date: 10 July 2002

Participants:

U.S. Forest Service (USFS): Chantel Cook

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR): Steve Marod, Donald Pierce,
Steve Colvin, Chris Kavanaugh, Howard Christman, John Steward

Leech Lake Division of Resource Management: John Ringle

Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA): Ken LeVoir

Corps of Engineers (COE): Dennis Holme, Steve Clark

On July 10, 2002, the individuals above met at the DNR Headquarters office in Grand Rapids for the first time as the Environmental Task Force of the Upper Mississippi River Headwaters Reservoir Operations Plan Evaluation (ROPE) Study. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss group functions and to begin a discussion of environmental issues concerning the headwaters region in relation to the ROPE. Prior to the meeting, Steve Clark sent out an agenda (see attachment).

Steve Clark opened the meeting with introductions and handed out a copy of the current Quality Control Plan (QCP) for the ROPE study.

OVERVIEW OF ROPE

Steve Clark presented some basic background information on the ROPE study: the ROPE is aimed at evaluating changes in operation that would be geared toward providing benefits to environmental resources, recreation, flood control, etc; the ROPE is aimed at changes in dam operation, but other work could result such as habitat projects under the 1135 and 206 programs; the ROPE will likely be a 4- to 5-year study and it is assumed that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will be needed; there are four major functional groups working on the ROPE – the Partnering Group (providing upper management oversight, review, and policy guidance), the Delivery Team (an interdisciplinary multi-agency team that will help adjust the QCP/scope and prepare technical reports and the EIS), the Task Forces (specialized interagency groups that will provide technical input, help identify problems and opportunities, and evaluate the impacts of plan alternatives), Lake Groups (local groups used to obtain local inputs, perceptions, and data, and to establish a means of two-way education and communication).

PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE HEADWATERS REGION

Following the presentation of the background information, the discussion was opened up for input from the agency representatives regarding environmental resource problems related to the ROPE.

Ken LeVoir mentioned a concern with septic systems that could be flooded as a result of changes in reservoir levels. He was also concerned with the total maximum daily load (TMDL) requirements and how they may be a constraint on changes in operation.

John Ringle pointed out that high water levels can cause major problems for wild rice, including complete crop failures.

Chantel Cook said there was concern with low flows and the artificial hydrology in the river below Lake Bemidji and throughout the whole system in general. She also pointed out a problem with bank erosion at Lake Winnibigoshish that could be affected by changes in reservoir levels.

Don Pierce had concerns with the meadows (sedge?) and the floating bogs of the area and how the reversed unnatural hydrologic cycle is affecting them.

The group in general seemed to be quite concerned with the unnatural hydrologic cycle in place now that it is essentially reversed from what it would be naturally. This led to two questions: what is the natural hydrology, and will the ROPE study make an attempt to determine what it is? Dennis Holme related a conversation he had with Kenton Spading of the Corps of Engineers recently regarding the type of hydrologic modeling planned for this effort. Basically, it is planned to model a number of chosen wet and dry scenarios, but not the entire period of record, which could make it difficult to determine what the natural hydrology would be. However, this should be discussed with Kenton further to gain a better understanding of the modeling process and capabilities.

CURRENT DATA AVAILABILITY AND NEEDS

John Steward felt that it would be useful to conduct an inventory of sensitive lands in the headwaters including aquatic vegetation sampling. He also thought it would be useful to conduct a survey of impervious surfaces in the headwaters.

Steve Colvin listed a number of available data sources that would be useful for the ROPE: County Biological Surveys, a State Mussel Survey, Aquatic Vegetation Surveys, and possibly some new bathymetric surveys.

Chris Kavanaugh talked about a survey the DNR conducted that indicated the river receives a large amount of fishing pressure relative to its area.

John Ringle cited a study conducted by the Corps of Engineers on Leech Lake water levels and walleye spawning. This study may be useful for the group and the information within it could help guide alternative formulation. Steve Clark will locate a copy(s) of this for use by the group.

Steve Clark informed the group that the Corps of Engineers has conducted an inventory of dwellings around the headwaters reservoirs and that some information was collected regarding septic systems. However, the exact location and elevation of those septic systems was not recorded as part of this effort. He also informed the group that some channel geometry data has been collected in selected rivers. This data will be used in hydrologic and habitat modeling.

MATRIX EVALUATION AND CRITERIA

Steve Clark informed the group about the use of a matrix to evaluate different alternative impacts and noted that it is intended to treat all effects equally (flood protection, recreation, natural resources, etc.).

Chantel Cook asked an important question – how will the group decide what natural resources are more important than others (reservoirs, rivers, wetlands, etc.)? Developing an answer to this question will be a major issue that the Environmental Task Force will have to deal with.

Howard Christman suggested that the group develop a graph to overlay the desirable hydrologic conditions for each resource of interest to help identify where conflicts and convergences of interest may lie. The group felt this was a good idea but anticipated more conflicts than convergences.

WORK ITEMS RESULTING FROM THE MEETING

A few work items were identified for completion prior to the next meeting.

Each member should begin to produce a list of resource problems in the region related to their area of expertise, and possible solutions to those problems that could be addressed by the ROPE. Collaboration with others within their organizations is highly recommended.

Each member should develop a list of pertinent available data and studies that could be used in analyses of reservoir operation alternatives.

Each member should work to identify the preferred hydrologic conditions for resources of interest such as wild rice, fish, wetlands, bogs, meadows, furbearers, etc.

At the close of the meeting, it was noted that the next meeting date would likely be in October.

Steve Clark, COE
Environmental Task Force Coordinator

Attachment
Agenda

**Upper Mississippi River Headwaters ROPE Studies
Environmental Task Force Meeting – 10 July 2002
DNR Headquarters Office in Grand Rapids**

AGENDA

Start at 10:00 a.m.

Introductions

Overview of ROPE

- What is a ROPE study?
- Functional groups and decision-making process for this ROPE study.
- Function of Environmental Task Force.

Structure/Organization of Environmental Task Force

- Members
- Meeting frequency
- Tasks

Problems and Opportunities for the Headwaters Region

- Bemidji
- Winnibigoshish
- Leech
- Pokegama
- Cross
- Sandy
- Gull
- Downstream River Reaches (Pokegama to Twin Cities)

Current Data Availability and Needs

- What basic physical data is available?
- What basic physical data is likely to be needed?

Possible Matrix Evaluation Criteria

- Discussion of Environmental criteria that should be used to screen alternatives

Close Meeting at 12:00 noon