

# Questions to consider when beginning a farmer led watershed group

## What is your issue of concern? What do you need to focus on?

- ⇒ How are farms in your region of the state impacting water quality (surface waters and/or groundwater)?
- ⇒ What are the current farming practices that need additional understanding or evaluation?

Answering these questions allows your group to form a project that has the potential for results that are very usable and interesting to area farmers. These questions need to be answered by the larger group of farmers to serve the greatest good possible.

### Possible issues of concern

- Excess phosphorus in surface water contributing to algae blooms or degraded water quality in streams or lakes
- Excessive soil erosion within fields and/or delivering sediment to streams and/or waters of the state.
- Concerns about groundwater quality or quantity that are driven by regional farming practices

### Possible topics to focus on

- Soil conservation and erosion
- Building soil health
- Refining nitrogen application timing and/or nitrogen application rate
- Surface application of manure (timing or placement)
- Appropriate nutrient crediting from all sources, etc.

## Is there enough farmer interest?

To begin a watershed project that is led and accepted by farmers, a group of interested farmers needs to be engaged and informed enough to make decisions about the activities and goals of the group. This key group of farmers needs to be established before any other decisions can be made. Establishing farmer leaders and decision makers means that any data collected is used appropriately and trusted. It is ideal to have 5-12 farmers willing to serve together as the board of directors, while participants in the project can double or triple the amount of farmer leaders.



## How will you connect to and communicate with other established farmer led groups?



It is not about carbon copying what has already been done, but learning from past experience to shape your own group. Consider whether partnering with an established group could be helpful while building your program. Established groups could connect you with existing materials like newsletter articles, mailing lists or field day resources. Connecting with experienced participants from these groups offers an opportunity for communication across projects. This exchange of information could augment your efforts in the early years and can quickly increase the effectiveness of a new watershed group. Feed off of what others have done to kick start your program, but carefully forming your own group's personality is critical to success.

## Do you need monitoring? What assessments are available?

Wisconsin is in a very advantageous position regarding on-farm research and water quality research. There are a variety of sources to tap into before investing money or time into additional monitoring.

- ⇒ Is there any existing monitoring data for your area or a similar landscape?
- ⇒ Are there assessments that could be conducted to augment the existing data and build local knowledge?

The UW Discovery Farms® Program has a large dataset of surface water runoff information. Chances are these data are a great starting point for understanding runoff dynamics of phosphorus and sediment and addressing the issues your group defines. Utilize the existing sources of information to make decisions about what needs to be added. This will save your group time and money.

If you do decide to collect data or do any monitoring as part of your project, make sure you set a clear standard at the beginning for data sharing and privacy expectations. It is important to walk a fine line between appropriate privacy needs and sharing information that is helpful to other farmers and water quality protection in general.

### Monitoring and assessment options

- In-stream grab sampling using WisCALM methodology to assess stream and lake water quality
- Assessments of nitrogen use
- Manure and legume crediting
- Measurements of residue cover
- Visual soil loss assessment (walkovers): a good way to identify issues and gain information about management suggestions.



### Useful links:

- [WisCALM methodology for grab sampling](#)
- [UW Discovery Farms Nitrogen Use Efficiency Project](#)
- [Yahara Pride Farms](#)
- [Grants for Producer Led Watershed Protection Projects](#)



## How much time do you (as the farmer leadership of the group) plan to invest in the group?

Leaders of currently active watershed groups in Wisconsin have invested a tremendous amount of time into the success of their groups. Success is measured by implementation, participation, and positive changes in water quality. Being realistic about the amount of time and leadership your group's goals will require is critical to success. Not all watershed groups will be of the same scale, and the real strength is in being able to make the choice of which scale is right for your group at this time.



## Elements to consider including in your watershed group:

*Agribusiness sponsorship opportunities* – Would companies that you do business with be interested in offering incentives to area participants? Do they have services to offer that could be used as match or in-kind support?

*Formalizing the organization* – is that necessary or desired? Some already established groups have taken extra steps to formalize (e.g., form into a non-profit organization or similar). Groups should determine their own goals, scale, and level of formality, and expect that to change over time.

*Educational opportunities* – As the group is starting, think about using meetings as a way to learn what others are doing or what we have information on in the state. Using project collaborators as a starting point, these educational meetings can fuel the decisions on what the next steps for the group should be.

*Linking up with established groups* – There are great farmer resources in Wisconsin that have been 'working out the kinks' of forming a watershed group for several years. Consider learning what other groups have to offer. All farmer participants in watershed groups already have full time jobs farming. How can groups work together to grow the success of the effort without increasing the time commitment to an unsustainable level?

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## Planning to apply for funding through the Producer Led Watershed Grant Program?

If so, make sure your group meets the application requirements. Producer led groups must meet a certain set of criteria to be eligible for this state-funded program. Eligibility criteria are established for participation, collaboration and budgeting. Be sure to visit [the DATCP webpage](#) for more details.

## How will you use the state funding if your proposal is accepted?

A farmer led organization is not defined by whether you get a state grant or not. There are currently several existing farmer led groups that have a wide range of funding structures and program elements. Things that funding from the Producer Led Watershed Protection Grants can be most helpful with include: administrative costs like printing, postage, data storage fees, hosting events, staff time, data organization, and honorariums for participants intended to offset cost of practices. The Producer Led Watershed Protection Grant is not ideal for funding monitoring, paying for performance or providing funds for implementation of practices. Other sources of funds including outside sponsorship and/or cost share programs are more appropriate for those efforts.