

A Summary of “Lessons from Drinking Water Professionals: An Assessment of Drinking Water Governance in Minnesota”

Prepared by Clean River Partners, February 2024

Having equitable access to safe and reliable drinking water is foundational for Minnesotans to be able to thrive. The current drinking water system in Minnesota is quite complex. Various state agencies regulate parts of the system. Local governments provide drinking water to their residents. Private well owners are responsible for the testing and safety of their own supply. Pollutants can enter our drinking water sources from many different places and in many different ways. Various government agencies regulate those potential polluters and pollutants.

In 2022, the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) began formal work to develop the plan to guide drinking water in Minnesota from 2024-2033. MDH wanted to gather perspectives and insights from drinking water professionals and community members as part of this process. It worked with the University of Minnesota and two Minnesota nonprofit organizations, Freshwater and Clean River Partners, to lead these conversations. The purpose was to try to understand what's working now, what needs to be improved, and where there might be gaps in providing safe and reliable drinking water equitably. The University of Minnesota, Freshwater, and Clean River Partners began to gather perspectives from these two groups in 2023.

Freshwater led the team in gathering insights from drinking water professionals in Minnesota. These professionals shared their experiences with drinking water governance and thoughts on what was needed to improve our drinking water systems over the next ten years. A full description of what was learned and the conclusions from that report, “[Lessons from Drinking Water Professionals: An Assessment of Drinking Water Governance in Minnesota](#)” can be found online. A brief summary follows.

Freshwater brought together four focus groups of water supply professionals and conducted an online survey to discuss how effective, efficient, and trusted the processes controlling drinking water in Minnesota are. These professionals included staff who manage community water supplies; local government staff who oversee the protection of source water or water

supplies; regional, state, or federal government staff; non-government water and environmental advocates; people working for private businesses such as labs or engineering firms; and researchers.

Overall, water professionals felt that **communication and coordination** should be strengthened. Drinking water is complex, involving many government and non-government groups, and there is a lot of effective communication happening now. However, there are still gaps. There is confusion about roles and responsibilities and who has the authority to make certain decisions. There is a significant **lack of coordination between management of withdrawals and quality of groundwater** and a **lack of clarity on how to support private well users**. Professionals also feel that they don't always have the information to evaluate whether programs are performing as they should. Tools and resources are needed to help state agencies such as MDH, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, and regional and local governments more seamlessly coordinate and communicate findings with one another. Recommendations from participants included creating collaborative databases and resource repositories to aid in sharing information, resources, and communications.

Other key takeaways from the conversations with water professionals were:

- **Hand-offs between agency responsibilities should be intentionally identified and better coordinated.** Many agencies and entities have distinct responsibilities in drinking water management. At the edges of an agency's authority or where authority overlaps, governance sometimes breaks down. For example, different agencies manage aquifer withdrawal permits and well drilling rules, yet these activities need coordination. Understandings across departments about these roles and intentional information sharing will be important.
- We need more **innovative and collaborative thinking**. Drinking water professionals need a thorough understanding of the full system they're working in. Offering more job-sharing/shadowing opportunities, professional development, and networking will help drinking water professionals learn about what others are doing and spur partnership opportunities and chances for more innovative thinking to occur.
- **More financial resources are needed**, especially in small communities with a limited tax base.
- Lots of data is being collected, but it is not always relevant, necessary, or accessible. **Making data more relevant and actionable** – which requires providing the translations of data – is important to prioritize.

- **More intentional, targeted community engagement** – especially working to build relationships and engage with historically excluded populations – will be challenging but important. We need to prioritize learning from community members and not just sharing information with them. It is especially important to engage community members in **conversations about trade-offs**, for example between protecting water sources at the expense of agricultural productivity versus more investment in clean-up technologies.
- **Proactive communication and planning** are essential both for communication with the public, professionals, and other agencies and for building trust.
- When looking at gaps, more emphasis should be placed on **private well drinking water management** and engaging this population of water users. There is recognition that this population of water users is vastly overlooked in the current drinking water governance system.

Freshwater and the University of Minnesota fully detail the thoughts shared by the focus group and online survey participants in their report, “[Lessons from Drinking Water Professionals: An Assessment of Drinking Water Governance in Minnesota](#).” The full report is the best way to understand what these professionals viewed as strengths of Minnesota’s current systems and their concerns.

Suggested citation for the full report:

Calow, Peter; Lewandowski, Marcelle. (2023). Lessons from Drinking Water Professionals: An Assessment of Drinking Water Governance in Minnesota. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/259166>.

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