IT STARTED WITH A MEETING AT THE WARREN FIRE HALL

Spring floods are not uncommon in Northwestern Minnesota. In fact, before the big flood of 1976, the Wild Rice Watershed had been declared a disaster area in 35 of the past 40 years.

Senator Roger Moe of Norman County (center) introduced legislation to authorize the establishment of the Lower Red River Watershed Management Board. The bill passed on April 4, 1976 and the LRRWMB was formally organized on August 3.

“Something had to be done,” said Don Ogaard, a Norman County farmer. Finding a way to stop the cycle of flooding became his passion.

Ogaard found a way - in a document given to him by a colleague and mentor, Richard Canning, who was also chairman of the Water Resources Board (now known as the Minnesota Board of Water & Soil Resources).

The document was Minnesota Statute 103D, the Watershed Act. The Minnesota Legislature authorized the establishment of the Water Resources Board and the creation of Watershed Districts in 1955. This law allowed citizens and counties to petition the Watershed Districts to establish rules and regulations to address water management issues.

But it did not give these local units of government authority to enforce rules and fund the construction of flood control projects. However, a provision in that law allowed for the creation of a “joint powers board” that could collect an ad valorem tax (ad valorem is Latin for “according to value,” in this case, taxable market value of all property within the district). Ogaard proposed that half of this levy would remain with the local watershed district to fund projects and programs of benefit to the district while the other half would go to the Joint Powers Board to fund flood damage reduction projects that would benefit the entire Red River basin. Convinced this was the best solution, Ogaard took out a loan to cover the cost of establishing a Joint Powers Board. Then he went from city to city, county to county and watershed district to watershed district asking them to support a joint powers agreement.

In the spring of 1976, a meeting was held with Minnesota county officials at the Warren, Minnesota Fire Hall. That meeting led to the signing of a Joint Powers Agreement that established the Lower Red River Watershed Management Board.

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Ogaard served as President until 1990, when he became Executive Director, a position he held until his retirement in Dec. 2002.

The original board consisted of each watershed district located within the counties of Kittson, Marshall, Polk, Pennington, Red Lake, Norman, Clay, Mahnomen, Clearwater, Roseau, Wilkin, Otter Tail, and Becker.

The legislation was later revised to include additional counties which expanded the jurisdictional area of the Joint Powers Board, and two additional watershed districts: Buffalo-Red River Watershed District in 1980, and Bois de Sioux Watershed District in 1994. (The Buffalo-Red River Watershed District withdrew their membership from the RRWMB in 2002.)

Today, the Red River Watershed Management Board is comprised of eight watershed districts: Joe River, Roseau River, Two Rivers, Middle Snake Tamarac Rivers, Red Lake, Sand Hill River, Wild Rice and the Bois de Sioux.

In 1980, the RRWMB commissioned a study that would ultimately have great impact on...
the Board's policy with respect to prioritizing flood control projects for financial support. Completed in 1984, this study established the concept of “flood wave timing” as a unique characteristic of Red River Basin floods. The study determined the severity of flooding on the Red River main stem is directly related to the time flood waves travel within the headwaters and tributaries to the main stem.

This concept is still used today by the RRWMB to fund flood control projects with the most main stem flood reduction benefits. Ogaard noted that prior to 1992, the board had funded 35 projects and 35 more were in the planning stages within member watershed districts. However, concern about the potential cumulative environmental effects of these proposed flood control projects led the United States Army Corps of Engineers and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources to initiate a joint Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

After the EIS was completed, it was designated a Generic EIS by the state. This designation was challenged in state district court by the watershed districts and the RRWMB. In May 1997, the Minnesota Legislature authorized funds for a “mediation” process to resolve the disputed EIS which had created gridlock on issuing necessary permits.

The goal was to resolve the issues in a positive manner and allow for the implementation of the most effective and environmentally-friendly alternatives to accomplish flood damage reduction. The 1998 “Mediation Agreement” document was the result of this effort.

To date, the RRWMB has participated in 43 floodwater retention projects in the Red River Basin. The Board is currently considering financial support for several more.