Clean Water Minnesota

Learning Community Project Evaluation + Recommendations
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Sponsored by:

McKNIGHT FOUNDATION

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Project background + overview

McKnight Foundation's Mississippi River Program engaged SDK Communications + Consulting in late 2017 to explore the question: "How can McKnight leverage its credible influence to support and further Minnesota-based grant-making aimed at improving water quality in the Mississippi River?"

McKnight has a 25-year history of investing throughout the Mississippi River, from the headwaters in Itasca, MN to the Gulf of Mexico. In the fall of 2017, the Mississippi River Program engaged SDK Communications + Consulting as a strategic partner to explore opportunities for more deeply engaging with Minnesota water stakeholders to compliment and accelerate the impact of grantmaking. SDK conducted interviews with stakeholders from a variety of perspectives, and the results of those interviews were released by McKnight Foundation in July 2018.

The key conclusions:

1. Water is a key ingredient in many of Minnesota's top priority issues – but it's less understood as a priority in its own right.
2. Perceptions of water's impact and importance are limited and inconsistent across stakeholder groups.
3. Information sources where people learn about water issues are highly fragmented, creating the potential to perpetuate inconsistent understanding.
4. The existing water policy narrative is heavily weighted toward economics.
5. Minnesota has a statewide "Land of 10,000 Lakes" identity, but water contamination concerns and policy agendas are far more geographically targeted.
6. Expanding the stakeholder groups who see clean water as part of their success offers the greatest opportunity for deescalating water politics and advancing a statewide clean water policy.

Table of Contents

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Armed with this survey of the Minnesota water policy landscape and broad set of recommendations, McKnight and SDK began work to co-design three strategies: 1) Building bridges between water advocates and public health; 2) Convening current Minnesota advocacy grantees to agree on a shared narrative to ground work; and 3) Developing a cohort of leaders from diverse sectors that touch water to participate in a learning community. The balance of this report and evaluation summarizes the learning community's goals and participant evaluations.

Clean Water Minnesota Learning Community Goals

The Clean Water Minnesota learning community aimed to achieve three goals, supported by the stakeholder research and conclusions:
1) Engage stakeholders across sectors – both actively working in water, and those less engaged in the topic -- to build relationships.
2) Provide a consistent narrative, supported by real life examples, of water issues impacting the health of the Mississippi River and Minnesotans.
3) Equip leaders across sectors with fresh relationships and compelling narrative that can provide the groundwork – a clear case, relationships and early momentum – to support statewide policies that help get to clean water.

Creating the learning community in pursuit of these goals began in July 2018 with an assessment by SDK probing three questions:
1) Who are the key audiences to engage that will have a positive impact in decreasing the tension around water issues?
2) What does McKnight Foundation hope will happen for its grantees and their working environment because of this project and presumed ongoing support that would follow?
3) What other efforts and initiatives are already underway? That is, who else is taking actions that address some or all of the project goals?

The project was co-designed by McKnight Foundation and SDK Communications + Consulting. Julia Olmstead, Mississippi River Program Officer, led the project for McKnight and Stephanie Devitt, Owner + Principal Consultant, led SDK Communications + Consulting contributions. Anna Peterson provided research, event coordination and project management support to SDK's work. Sarah Marquardt, Mississippi River Program Administrator for McKnight Foundation, managed vendor contracts for the project, provided input on tour logistics, stories and vendors, and supported learning community events.

Learning Community Outreach + Structure

Attendees were cultivated from a variety of sectors that are traditionally involved with water policy debates, as well as those new to the field. Stephanie Devitt began outreach in July 2018 to introduce the idea of prioritizing water to stakeholders from key sectors like local governments, business and community development and public health. A small event was held at McKnight Foundation offices in September

to test appetite for engagement and new frames for expanding the water conversation. Lessons of this event deeply informed the audience and content planning for Clean Water Minnesota.

Learning community outreach by Stephanie Devitt began in December 2018, with a goal of building a cohort of approximately 50 people total, with an expectation of 35 attendees for each of three learning tours. Two engagement strategies informed the outreach: 1) Get beyond the agriculture vs. water frame by deepening relationships among those working in water and expanding the stakeholders who see water as part of their work. 2) Ground relationships with the Walz Administration, state agencies and NGOs in a shared understanding of the key water issues in Minnesota, as told through on-the-ground stories and experiences. The project's February to April timing supported these strategies by pacing trips close enough to solidify relationships and early enough to complete before session's end. Local influencers whose stories were featured in the tours were also invited to participate in their community's full day tour, expanding the relationships built through the project.

Tours were held in the Metro Area, St. Cloud and Mankato. These locations were selected because of their proximity to some of the key water issues facing Minnesota: The impact of phosphorus and nitrates, often as runoff from agriculture fields, on well water (common near St. Cloud) and in the Minnesota River (near Mankato). The convergence of water from these two regional hubs (Mankato and St. Cloud) in the Metro Area illustrates the importance of water as an issue that should connect urban and rural areas around shared solutions, rather than divide us. The Metro Area tour was held on February 6 and concluded with a reception celebrating the 10-year anniversary of Minnesota's Legacy Amendment at the History Center. This event was coordinated by the Freshwater Society. The St. Cloud Area tour was held March 14 to 15, and the Mankato tour was held April 25 to 26.

Tour stories and ideas were developed in consultation with a small group of stakeholders from different perspectives, referred to as the Clean Water Minnesota Editorial Committee. This group participated in calls before and after each tour to give feedback on draft agendas, identify key local water issues and stakeholders in each community visited, and provide feedback following completed tours. The following people participated in the editorial committee: Paul Austin, Conservation Minnesota; Greg Bohrer, Environmental Initiative; Tannie Eshenauer, Minnesota Department of Health; Don Hickman, Initiative Foundation; Carrie Jennings, Freshwater Society; Karen Jensen, Met Council; Craig Johnson, League of Minnesota Cities; Sam Paske, Met Council; and Deanna White, Clean Water Action. Julia Olmstead and Sarah Marquardt, McKnight Foundation, participated and Stephanie Devitt, SDK Communications + Consulting, facilitated the calls.

Community-based leaders provided additional guidance on stories to highlight. The Stearns County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) provided critical input in the St. Cloud Area. In Mankato, Kim Musser with Mankato State University, Mankato, Theresa Keaveny of the Minnesota Sustainable Farming Association, and Julie Tesch of the Center for Rural Policy & Development provided input.

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Learning Community Recruitment + Attendance

The Clean Water Minnesota learning community aimed to engage stakeholders across the following sectors and perspectives: State agencies that work on water, environmental NGOs, local / regional governments, agriculture, small business and economic development, public health, and equity-focused organizations. Following the final tour, an electronic evaluation survey was sent to all attendees across the three tours for a total survey distribution list of 76 people, including both cohort members and local speakers / influencers. A total of 27 people completed the survey, for a response rate of 36%.

SECTORS PARTICIPATING IN CLEAN WATER MINNESOTA
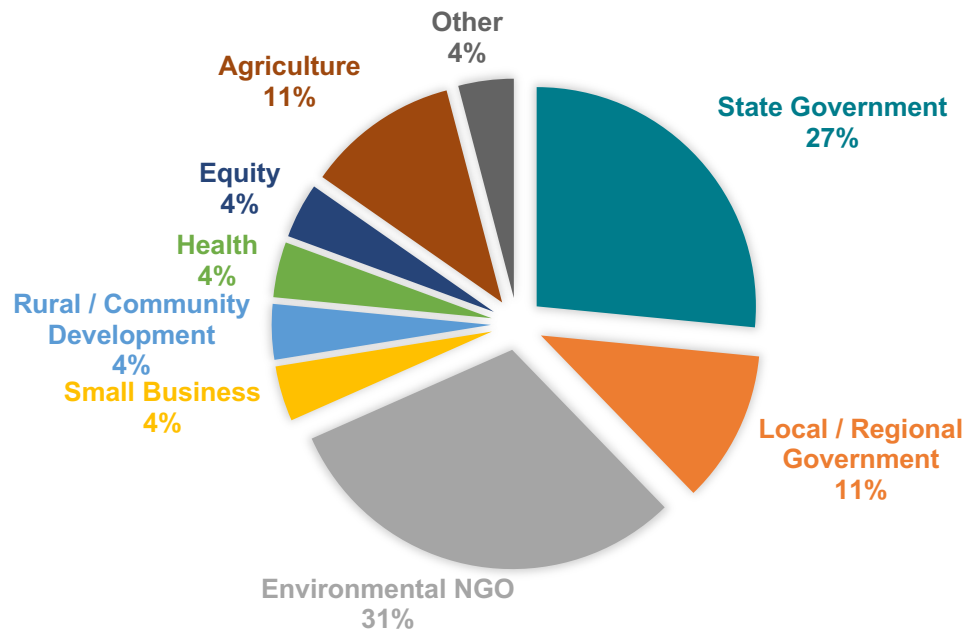
As expected, sectors working directly on water policy issues were better positioned to commit staff time to participate in all three tours. State government and environmental NGOs were the best represented sectors on the tours, representing a combined 56% of survey respondents and the most consistent attendees of all three tours. Agriculture represented 11% of survey respondents, achieving the attendance targets set in planning. The choice to focus less on agriculture than other sectors new to the conversation (like public health, equity) has roots in research findings and engagement strategy: Water issues in Minnesota have become trapped in a dynamic of water and environment versus agriculture.

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The goal of Clean Water Minnesota was to expand the base of stakeholders who understand what's at stake in water conversations – to get clear and consistent understanding of "the Why" -- not to negotiate solutions on the topic (which is where other projects tend to start). Equity and public health perspectives were represented across tours, but these stakeholder groups also tended to have less capacity to participate in the full series. The outreach process and communication about the project has introduced water as relevant to issues these stakeholder groups care about. Actions that follow will determine whether these cultivated relationships can blossom into greater future collaborations. Additional sectors participating in at least one tour include small business, local / regional government, rural / community development, philanthropy and public policy.

Clean Water Minnesota Participants Tend To Engage On Water

Overall, a majority of Clean Water Minnesota attendees – and especially those completing the survey – think about water as a large part of their daily work. Only 5 of the 27 people completing the survey (19%) spend less than 10 hours a week on water issues.

However of the 76 attendees, almost half would be expected to spend less than 10 hours a week on water issues. The discrepancy highlights the strong project commitment received from those working closely on water issues – and the opportunity to more deeply engage other perspectives.

A majority of respondents attended St. Cloud and Mankato tours (78%). Fewer attended the Metro Area tour on Feb. 6 due to severe weather the day prior and the evening following the tour.
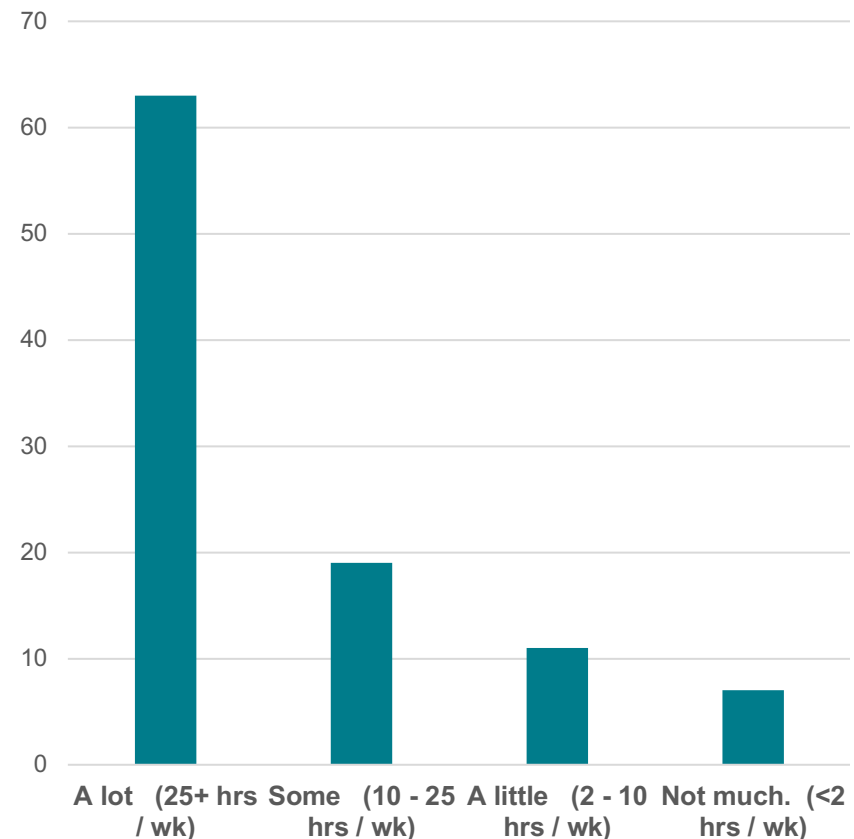
Relationships Were The Consistent Priority

Survey respondents reported participating in the Clean Water Minnesota learning community with a goal of building new relationships and strengthening weak ties. This finding is especially positive because one of McKnight Foundation's early goals was to use its convening power as a philanthropic leader to support grantees and stakeholders coming together for clean water policy. The graph below depicts survey respondents' goals for participating in the Clean Water Minnesota learning community.

Q: What were your goals for participating in the learning community?
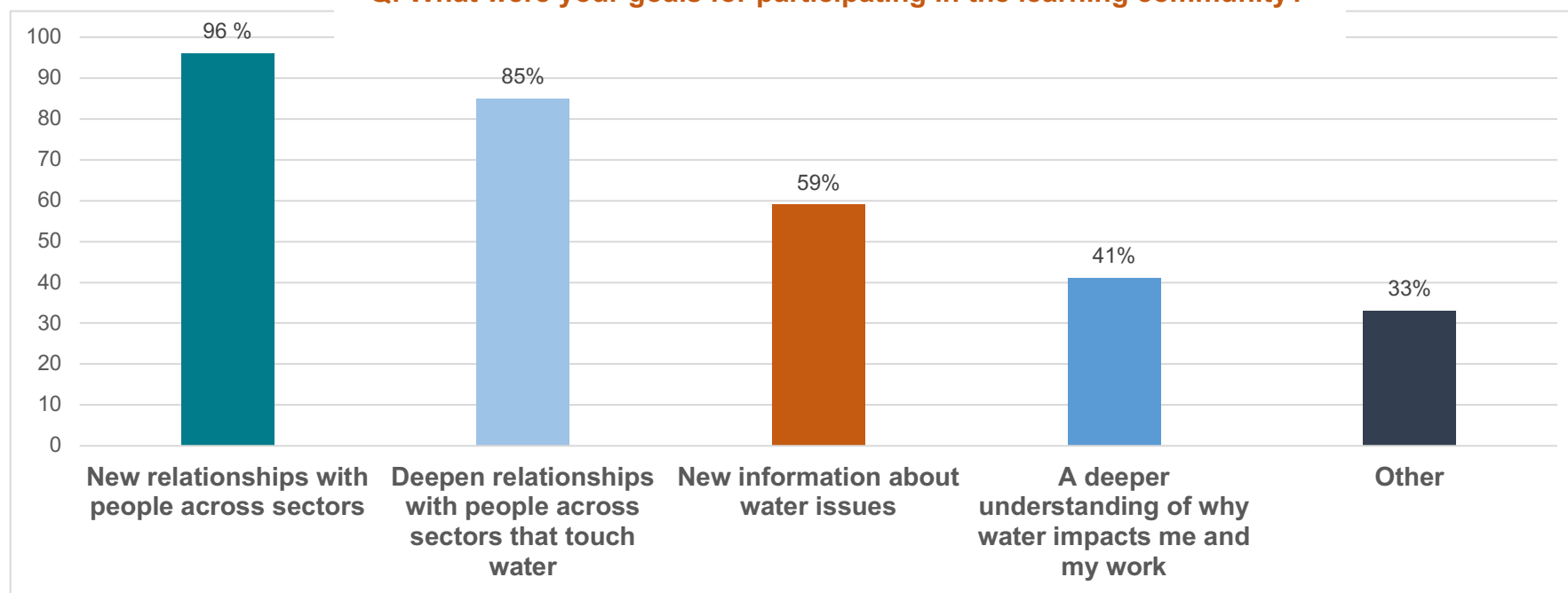
In addition to the goals offered, some respondents shared their own goals. These volunteered responses centered around two themes: 1) Understanding urban/rural dynamics of water issues, or others' perspectives broadly; and 2) Identifying people and solutions to work on immediately. A sampling of specific quotes includes: "Solutions and identification of influencers," "A different perspective," or "Explore rural-urban collaborations."

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Learning Community Content Evaluation

Survey respondents rated the Clean Water Minnesota tours very highly. Two-thirds of attendees rated the tours they attended as "excellent" and only one respondent chose a less than positive rating ("Fair"). The responses are provided below:
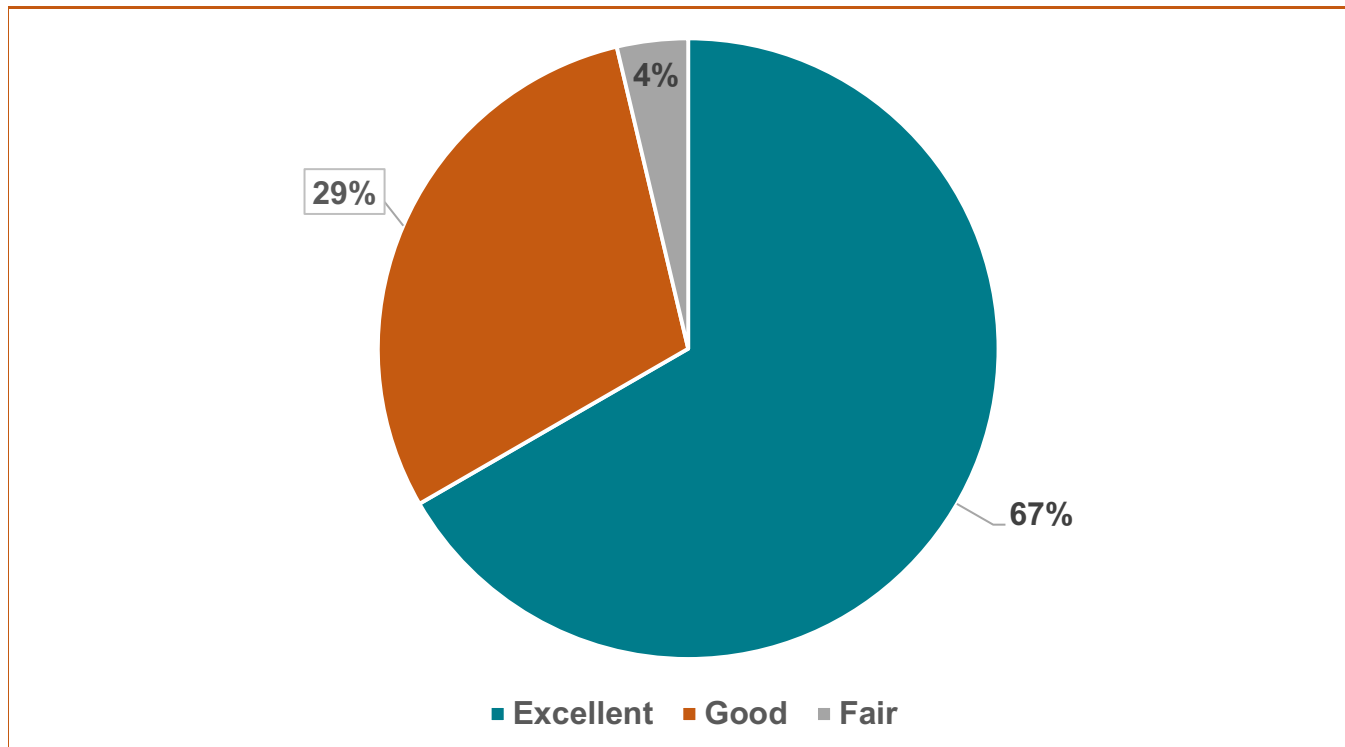
Participants reported finding value across sessions, the tour format, and the experience overall. Sessions that stood out most to participants featured a novel reframe of traditional regulatory issues or personal stories of people managing water issues on the front lines, like farmers and small-town administrators. A chart of survey responses is provided on page 11, ordered from highest to lowest ranking session.

The Clean Water Minnesota learning community included 11 sessions exploring different aspects of getting to clean water through personalized stories and on-the-ground case studies, as well as sessions specifically set aside to debrief and explore strategic opportunities across the cohort.

Across sessions, the stories told built from three key frames:

1. **We take care of land to take care of our water**. From fertilizer on farmland to salt on roads, what we put on our land and how we treat our soil every day is the biggest determinant in whether or not we have clean water.

   To illustrate this principle, Clean Water Minnesota tours visited the Mill Creek Dairy – a dairy with more than a century of work in Stearns County highly regarded for its land management, conservation and commitment to community. The group also visited Anthony Farms outside of St. Peter, Minn. This century-farm grows a mix of traditional corn and beans, cover crops and experimentation with new perennial crops. The group heard from University of Minnesota's Forever Green researchers, who are investigating the next generation of perennial crops designed to meet conservation, climate and economic goals for tomorrow's agriculture.
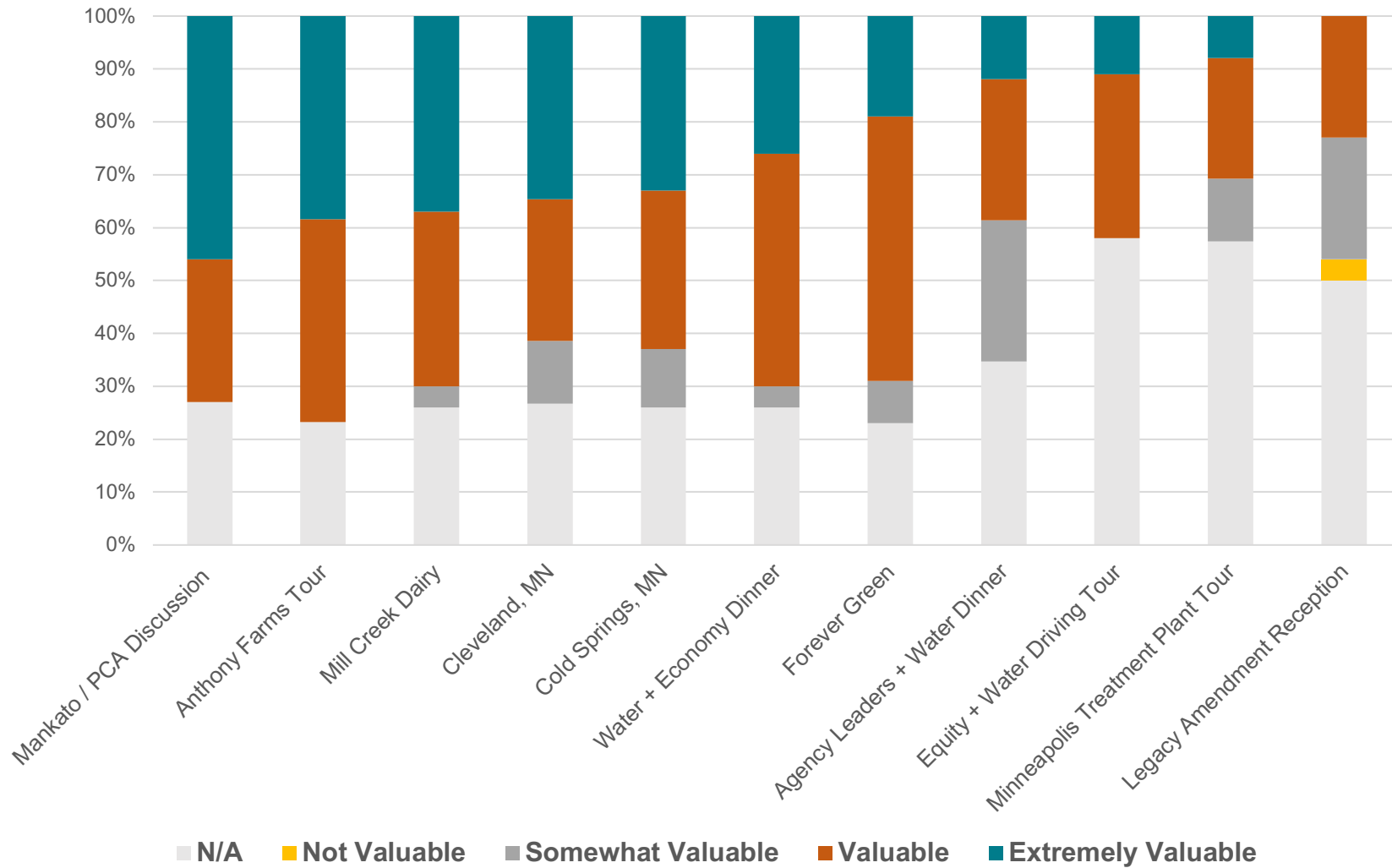
2. **Water is life, and we all deserve fair access**. Our zipcode shouldn't determine whether or not we have access to clean water. Unfortunately, that's not always the case. Opportunities that contribute to a great quality of life like clean water, up-to-date infrastructure, and access to green spaces and natural filtration aren't available equally to everyone, with communities of color, low income areas, and small rural communities most often left behind. We must do better.

   To illustrate this principle, participants heard from equity leaders working on water and environmental justice issues from a variety of perspectives: community, state and development. A driving tour of the Upper Harbor Terminal in North Minneapolis provided Clean Water Minnesota participants with an illustration of the need for equity in environmental access and opportunity.

3. **Water connects us and so should our clean water solutions**. We all want clean water. Getting there means we need to work together and work differently – urban and rural, and no matter your heritage -- because we're all in this together.

   To illustrate this principle, Clean Water Minnesota tours brought together a discussion on the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's (PCA) alternate permitting strategies negotiated with Mankato and other cities and engaged small towns and farmers in the discussion of how we can reward upstream land practices in city permitting decisions. Conversations with leaders in Cold Springs and Cleveland, Minn. showed other examples of cities working with farmers and rural land practices to provide clean water for residents.

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Survey Feedback: Ranking Clean Water Minnesota Sessions

Legend: N/A | Not Valuable | Somewhat Valuable | Valuable | Extremely Valuable

N/A respondents typically did not participate in a particular session.

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What Made Sessions Valuable

Overall, survey respondents report feeling touched or inspired by the favorite sessions. In addition to the sessions of organized content, some survey respondents also volunteered that the facilitated discussions were the most valuable sessions of all. Participants were asked why they found value in their favorite sessions. Responses are provided below.

Why did you find your favorite session valuable?
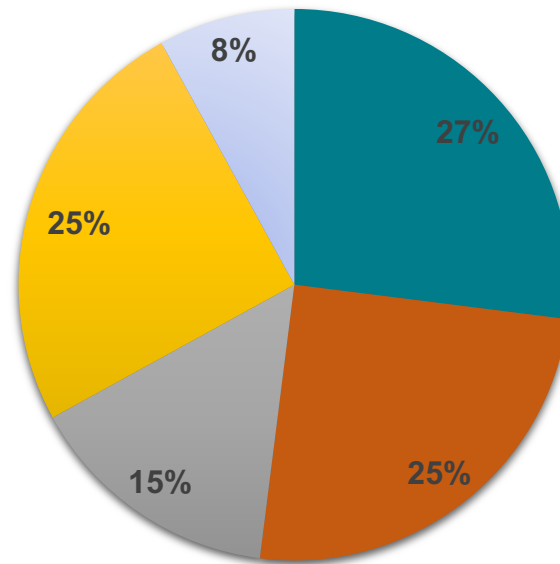
- ■ It gave me a new way of thinking about water issues
- ■ The story shared was engaging or impactful
- ■ The story shared was helpful to convey in another aspect of my work
- ■ It helped me think differently about the perspectives important to water
- ■ Other

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Agriculture Systems, The Municipal Water - Agriculture Connection, And The Social Science Of Change Are Areas Of Added Interest.

Survey respondents identified these three topics as content that would have been helpful to include more, in addition to what was covered:

1) More information on the agriculture system. Survey respondents mentioned crop consultants and insurance programs, as well as soil health experts and experts in the overall agriculture system, as examples of valuable content.

2) Social science of change. Two survey respondents suggested this topic as a value-add to content already presented. At a macro-level, the Clean Water Minnesota project is a first step in the social science of change – building relationships and a baseline of shared understanding across cornerstones of Minnesota's current water policy system, which has the potential to deeply influence broader changes in how work is implemented and who is engaged in those conversations. It's possible that both articulation of the Clean Water Minnesota strategy and key principles of change strategy could contribute to this suggested goal.

3) The municipal water-agriculture connection. The Cold Springs, MN and Mankato – PCA sessions began to explore this topic through their respective case studies. Some survey respondents would like to see the cohort go deeper on the topic and give real thought to what effective partnerships that deliver on the promise of cleaner water and lower costs could look like in practical terms.

People-Centered Perspectives Provided The Biggest "A-ha!" Moments And Stand-Out Facts For Attendees.

At the final session, attendees were asked to reflect on the most stand-out facts and a-ha moments across sessions. Overall themes shared were: 1) Participants felt they understood what's needed for behavior change in a different way as a result of the tours; 2) Participants understood the interconnection between payment systems and land management practices at a deeper level because of the tours; or 3) Collaborations and systems-level strategies are essential to making positive change for clean water. A sampling of stand-out fact and a-ha moment quotes is provided below**.**

> *"Behavior can change but we need to understand why we are the way we are before we can leverage our opportunities…..We need to learn like this to understand better how we can help each other and make the connections between multiple groups and similar problems."*

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"We are too fragmented to be effective right now…. We need to find a way to remove power structures and create a common ground."

"Minnesota ag land is rented. Looking at success in terms of decreasing inputs to increase profits, rather than the traditional growth model, can help conservation land management be more successful."

"Small towns are stretched for people and people are on the landscape because they love it."

"Farmers who are experimenting with alternative systems are in close relationship with each other for learning and support. Farmers are taking big risks and it's not supported by our system to result in public benefit. Something needs to change so that these folks are seen as pioneers, not weirdos."

Clean Water Minnesota take-aways point to an appetite for new approaches to tackling Minnesota's water issues.

Survey respondents were asked "What was your biggest take-away?" from the series of tours and Clean Water Minnesota project, overall. Responses point to a real and growing appetite for new approaches to addressing Minnesota's clean water challenges. A sampling of feedback received is provided below.

"The scale of change needed, and the importance of equity in decision making."

"People have a lot more in common than we think. We just need to know how to better communicate our differences and shared goals if we are going to be successful."

"Our existing government systems need a new paradigm."

"We need to listen and not assume we have answers since we don't know the question."

"There is a real disconnect between urban and rural folks understanding water issues and solutions to those issues."

Catalysts for Change: Cohort Opportunities Feedback

Clean Water Minnesota participants were asked about the perceived collective strengths and gaps in the cohort assembled both at the debrief session in St. Cloud and through the evaluation survey. Reponses were qualitative in both formats, and are best synthesized as follows:

- **The cohort's diversity and commitment are seen as its best strengths**. Participants recognize that about half of the cohort at any one tour was comprised of people working in state agencies, environmental NGOs or other water-related roles directly. These perspectives appreciated having space to get to know each other through time spent on the bus moving from session to session, and in sessions crafted in the spirit of learning (rather than negotiating a specific policy or project). Specific quotes from attendees on the groups' strengths include:

> *"Cross-sector pollination [is our best asset]. Building trust, exploring rural expectations and real, practical learning for the purpose of exploring strategies and finding a common ground."*

> *"[The group is] solutions-oriented, with many long-term relationships, trust and understanding, combined with new attendees. Stories told well break through our background, roles and assumptions to help us see things differently."*

> *"[The cohort has] a wide breadth of knowledge, learning opportunities and opportunities for networking. There is a big diversity of sectors and subsectors represented."*

- **Engaging Native American Tribes, equity perspectives generally, local governments and farmers are seen as areas for growth**. Participants believe the strengths of the cohort assembled could be improved with greater engagement of communities of color and farmers. Doing the work to build relationships with these stakeholders and reaching a shared understanding of the issues at hand before developing solutions are realities that may or may not be recognized by those who identified this need. Others would like to see more farmers and different agriculture perspectives – crop insurance agents, seed dealers, etc. – involved in a cohort of this nature. Specific quotes from attendees on perspectives they'd like to see included are:

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"Big agri-business. They drive a lot of how the whole system operates and should play a big role in making it work better for farmers interests and environmental sustainability."

"The diversity of participants was instructive and helpful. Rural water professionals would have rounded out the discussion."

"More opportunities for local governments [cities, counties] to participate in the tours to share and cross-learn."

"Native American or tribal voices." (x3)

"There are plenty of communities impacted by the quality of water, or cost of water or accessibility of water that were not present. Particularly communities of color and impoverished communities. I'd like to see them integrated into the cohort so that their issues are integrated into the larger dialogue."

Relationship Take-Aways Point To Value In Relationships Built, Appetite For More.

Survey participants were also asked "What was your biggest relationship take-away?" from the Clean Water Minnesota experience. Respondents found value in building new connections and deepening connections with existing contacts. A sampling of feedback received is provided below.

"Relationships enable change"

"I met several new people I have already reached out to them to see how we can work better together."

"Deepening connections with those who I have worked with before, meeting people from other regions of the state."
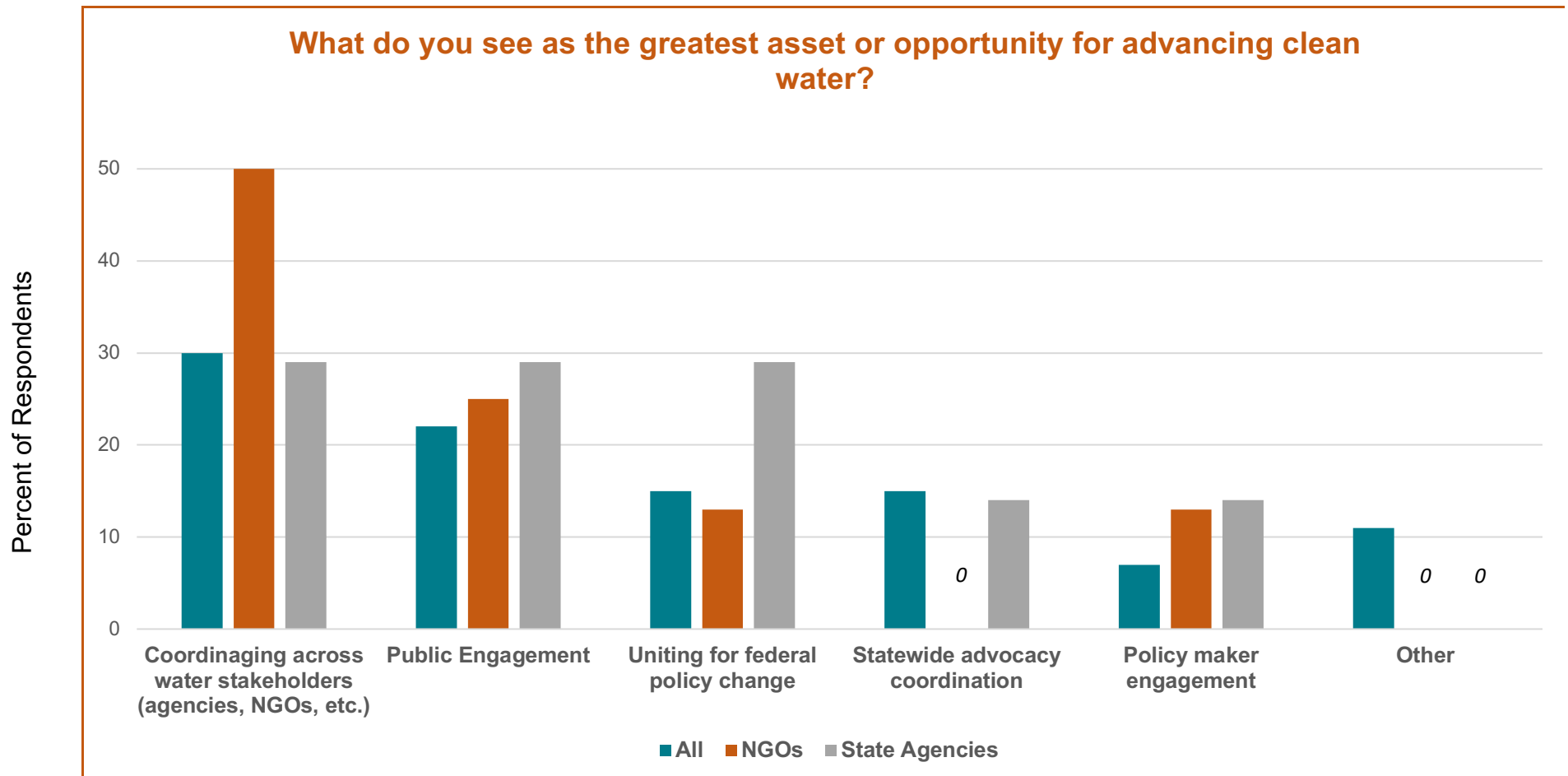
"Bus time is good. Random seating and exploratory conversations are essential."

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Participants Have Different Ideas About The Barriers, Opportunities And Strategies For Clean Water.

The evaluation survey asked for participants' perspectives on the biggest barriers to clean water in Minnesota. Overall, participants were divided across all options. However, analyzing responses by sub-groups unveiled stronger and different perspectives among state agency and environmental NGO cohort participants. This divergence held true across perceived barriers to clean water, opportunities for progress, and desired future role of McKnight Foundation.

What do you see as the biggest barrier to clean water?

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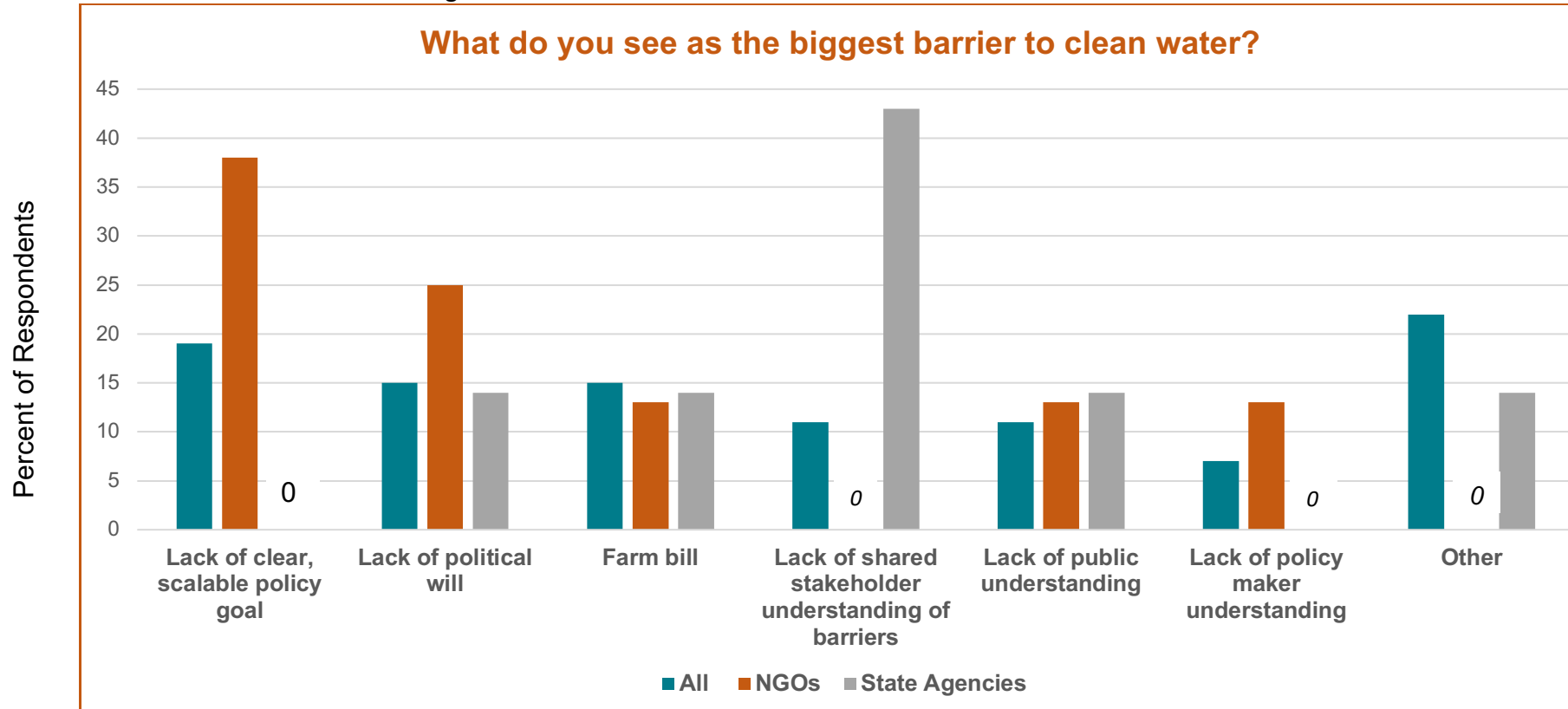
As depicted in the graph below, environmental NGOs and state agencies have strong, but differing, ideas about what Minnesota's best clean water solutions might include. NGOs see coordination across stakeholders as the overwhelming opportunity for clean water policy, where state agency respondents equally favor public engagement, coordination and federal policy change. Clean Water Minnesota attendees that do not belong to either of these stakeholder groups had even more varied ideas about what new opportunities for advancing clean water policy might look like.

What do you see as the greatest asset or opportunity for advancing clean water?

Percent of Respondents

Legend: ■ All ■ NGOs ■ State Agencies

Clean Water Minnesota, as a project, represents a new effort by McKnight to support the work of grantees. Given this newness, the evaluation survey asked for opinions on what McKnight's best role for engaging with this group forward might look like. Responses varied greatly – especially between NGOs and state agencies. For example, both NGOs and agencies appreciate McKnights' convening role in this project and hope it will continue. But state agencies favor seeing McKnight supply ongoing coordination, while NGOs favor funding inspired projects. In terms of support needed for work, NGOs favor opportunities to consult with outside experts, where state agency respondents would find the most value in a peer group to call on for support. Access to information is a need for NGOs, but not agencies.

What Role Would You Like To See McKnight Play?
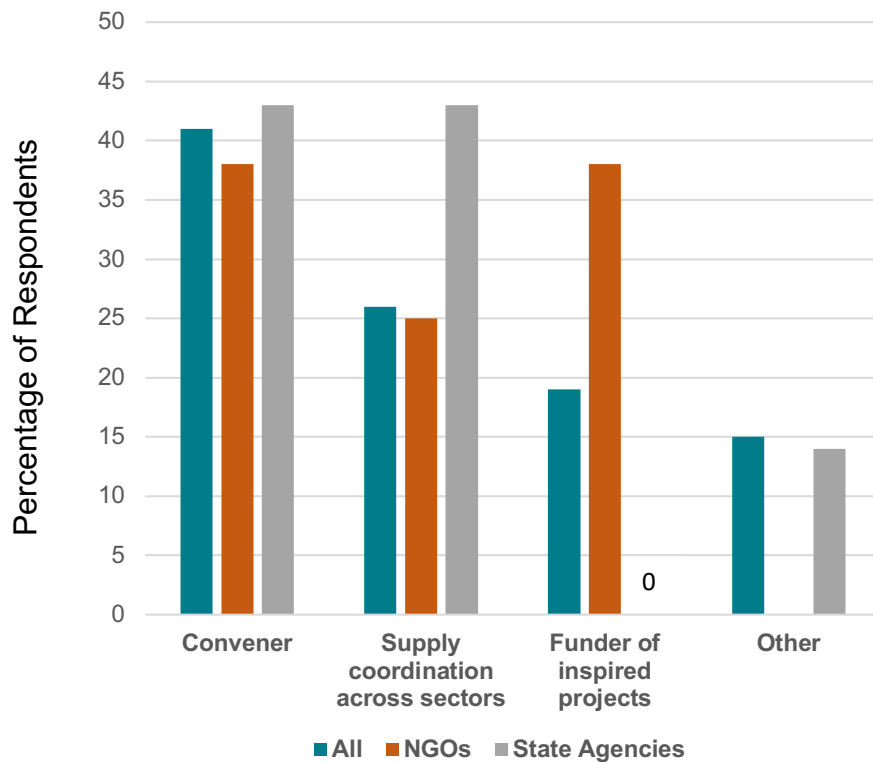
What Support Do You Need To Play The Role You See For Yourself?
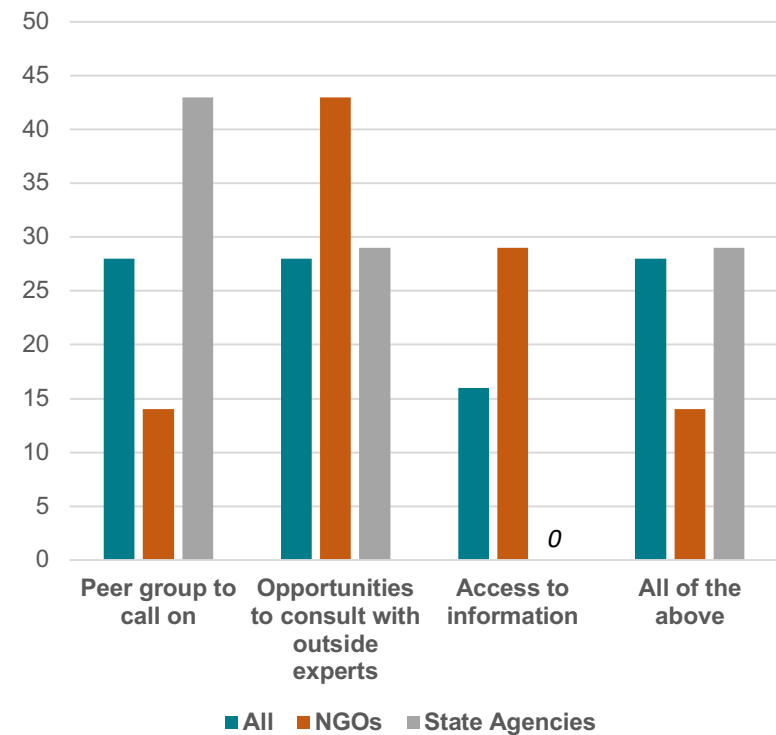
Participants Have Concrete, Diverse Ideas Of What Success Looks Like.

At the conclusion of the St. Cloud tour, participants spent an hour reflecting on collective lessons of the learning community project and what they see as essential strategies to making greater progress. Feedback provided ranged from tactical ideas (e.g. "public education campaign") to long term strategies (e.g. "change the value chain in the agriculture system). The Farm Bill's impact on on-the-ground land practices and incentives was also a focus of the group's overall conversation. A sampling of responses to the question "What would your wildest dreams of success look like if we worked together for clean water?" submitted by attendees is provided below.

"Large public campaign is needed for more basic public education before addressing concerns. For example: watersheds, where do you get your water? Storm drains – where does the water go?"

"Connected partners at the local level and aggregated regionally sharing information and strategie. .Savoring, enjoying and celebrating the resources [water and people]."

"Create local ownership of clean water. Families and communities; hunters / anglers and habitat. Young people better connect to land and water. Wide public engagement. Don't impose our values and learning on others without hearing their needs, too."

"1) State money funneled to local priorities, 2) Newest citizens empowered, and 3) local expertise and watershed-based training."

Key Lessons

The Clean Water Minnesota learning community project offered a refreshed approach to stakeholder engagement for Minnesota's water policy and advocacy community. Cohort feedback, evaluation survey results and reflection, combined with professional analysis, inform key lessons of the project overall.

1. **The Clean Water Minnesota learning community approach developed valuable assets that can supplement and support existing investments in supporting clean water policy for Minnesota**. "Assets" here is about the relationship and information infrastructure necessary to define and advance clean water policy goals. The connections built through an effort like this are best seen as a service to the field. This ecosystem support is an important and often overlooked aspect of building capacity for positive, proactive change. This potential change expands beyond clean water. For example, benefits of improved soil health and conservation practices include both cleaner water and reduced carbon emissions, which has positive benefits for addressing climate change.

    a. **Relationships.** More than 65 people participated in the Clean Water Minnesota learning community across three tours, with almost 25 of those people consistent across all three tours. Only 9 were representatives of environmental NGOs. The end result is new relationships built across organizations in the water policy ecosystem that provide important infrastructure for supporting positive, proactive change.

    b. **Stories.** Survey feedback shows that even those who work in water day-to-day found the stories and conversations shared during Clean Water Minnesota illuminating, novel or otherwise helpful for their work. The fresh, people-centered lens of shared experience has potential to inform future strategies across attendees. Opportunities also exist to capture the stories developed through the tours in more concrete ways, such as video, blog post-reflections from attendees, or other.

    c. **Fresh perspectives.** The combination of new relationships and new perspectives – and especially when these variables were combined for closing sessions of group reflection – provided participants with energizing opportunities to consider fresh perspectives in their work, according to survey responses.

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2. **The cohort succeeded in engaging key stakeholders in Minnesota's clean water discussion, as well as new voices.** Learning community participants represent a diverse cross-section of sectors and perspectives from across Minnesota. The group's intentional size – big enough for diversity, but small enough for focused relationships – may prove to be an enduring asset of the project. Additionally, outreach to other leaders who may not have attended the sessions but recommended attendees offers a broader audience of awareness and influence for future engagement.

3. **Additional work is necessary to build lasting buy-in and trust with voices new to the water discussion.** Clean Water Minnesota succeeded in generating new relationships for the water sector, both in attendees and through the extensive strategic outreach that led up to the project. However, sustaining these new relationships and deepening buy-in – especially with sectors traditionally less-connected to clean water, like public health and equity – will take ongoing attention and cultivation.

4. **Investing In Efforts To Align The Work Of Environmental NGOs and State Agency Work For Clean Water Can Maximize Efforts.** Survey responses show a common appreciation for the stories shared and relationships built through the learning community. But they also show that the two sectors most fully-involved in shaping clean water policy in Minnesota – state agencies (many of which administer Clean Water Fund projects) and environmental NGOs – have different ideas about what challenges these stories show and what's needed to move forward. Clean water policy simply doesn't have the constituency or resources to make meaningful progress in the face of strategic misalignment among its key actors.

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Recommendations

SDK Communications + Consulting offers the following recommendations for next steps to support the ecosystem of clean water advocacy in Minnesota:

1. **Continue to build on the ecosystem infrastructure developed in Clean Water Minnesota.** Ecosystem support is best provided by organizations with relationships and credibility across issue-stakeholders.

    a. **Convene the cohort to maintain relationships.** This role could take many forms, from passive actions like occasional speakers and events, to a more involved and deliberate process of engaging and aligning the cohort around shared priorities. Above all, keeping the relationships built fresh and active provides fertile soil for future action.

    b. **Capture + share stories developed.** Real world examples add life and depth to the topic of clean water policy, which can otherwise get technical or policy-heaving. Consider saving the stories developed for each Clean Water Minnesota session through video, written case studies, and other means. Share developed content with cohort members and encourage them to leverage their organizations' communications assets (newsletter lists, blogs, websites, etc.) to share the content, too. These small actions can build up over time to help reframe understanding of how we can get to clean water for Minnesota.

    c. **Deepen + expand relationships with new sectors and stakeholders.** The Clean Water Minnesota learning community provided opportunities to build relationships with people and sectors not typically engaged in water conversations, such as more focused engagement of public health and equity perspectives. Yet engaging these perspectives in water policy will require dedicated time to deepening relationships, understanding perspectives and finding shared goals to have a lasting impact. Dedicating capacity to building these connections would be time well spent.

2. **Support development of a refreshed, aligned definition of the challenges facing clean water in Minnesota, and possible solutions.** Survey results are clear: state agencies and environmental NGOs have different ideas about the barriers facing clean water policy in Minnesota and the strategies and support needed to make progress.

These two sectors tend to lead on state water policy overall as principle investors in, and framers of, strategic solutions. Other sectors typically less – or more narrowly – involved in clean water policy are even more diffused in their perceptions of the policy challenges and solutions. The diversity of perspectives points to a need for a strategic reframe of water issues in Minnesota. An effort of this nature would be a substantial undertaking but could help drive refreshed and reenergized clean water strategies for a decade or more. The recommended actions below presume a best-case-scenario of capacity and resources.

a. **Collaborate to define the problem.** Minnesota's Legacy Amendment was approved by voters in 2008 and the robust planning effort of that time brought together environmental NGOs, state agencies and other stakeholders around shared clean water strategies. The first years of the Legacy Amendment spending focused on data collection and monitoring to accurately define Minnesota's water challenges. Data is now in place, and attention among the Clean Water Fund agencies is shifting toward solutions. A process by Freshwater Society in 2018 assessed progress on Clean Water Fund spending to date. A lot in the external environment has changed since 2008, too: Climate change and racial / gender equity have emerged as top-tier issues that can provide a broader frame for how water is understood. Farmers are in a different financial position: when the Legacy Amendment passed in 2008 corn was $5.30 per bushel; in 2019 the average closing price for corn is only $3.74 per bushel. Minnesota has its first new governor in 8 years and its first rural governor.

These external variables make the timing ripe for coming together to define Minnesota's clean water challenges and opportunities for the next decade. Bringing new stakeholders (for example, public health and racial equity leaders) into these conversations early can strengthen the process by adding new, different perspectives from those traditionally involved in water planning processes.

b. **Explore new approaches to reaching Clean Water goals.** Some cohort participants talked about the need for a "paradigm shift" in how all water stakeholders approach clean water advocacy, others have talked about a need to move toward "systems change" thinking or a "policy, systems and environment" approach to water strategy. At the Clean Water Council, recent conversations have focused on the "social science of change." Each example points to a growing recognition among deeply invested water stakeholders that engineered solutions and regulation alone cannot affordably solve Minnesota's clean water challenges. The group that assembled to define Minnesota's clean water challenges may also be a well of new ideas and approaches for reaching Minnesota's clean water goals.

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c. **Craft a Theory of Change and supporting roles to deliver on new ideas.** Environmental NGOs, state agencies, and the broad mix of other stakeholder groups essential to supporting clean water in Minnesota each have important roles to play in any new approaches developed. Working with the same assembled group of stakeholders to articulate a shared "Theory of Change" can help ensure that stakeholders playing different roles can appreciate how the actions of others contribute to shared goals – and have reasonable expectations of when to expect success and what success looks like. This exercise also enables stakeholders from multiple perspectives to define the roles they play in reaching shared goals, which is another important aspect of setting shared expectations across dispersed organizations and stakeholder perspectives.

d. **Develop and deploy impactful messages that define Minnesota's clean water challenges in clear, non-partisan and values-based terms.** McKnight Foundation has worked with its Mississippi River grantees to agree to a shared narrative about why clean water matters to Minnesota. This frame can provide a base for impactful messages and be expanded upon with input from the different stakeholder perspectives that will be essential to engaging and influencing in any clean water policy. Unified frames can provide a backbone to effective communication across organizations and sectors, accelerating public understanding and action over time.

e. **Unite around protecting Minnesota's essential clean water investments.** The Clean Water Council contributes about $100 million each year to projects and activities aimed at keeping Minnesota's water clean. The Environment & Natural Resources Trust Fund, which is paid for with lottery proceeds, is another key source of revenue for conservation and clean water. These two funding sources provide critical resources for clean water in Minnesota, and both are facing expiration without a taxpayer vote to continue them. The Environment & Natural Resources Trust Fund is set to expire in 2024 and the Legacy Amendment will expire in 2034, but the legislative process to get these funds on a public ballot and organize the statewide campaigns needed to ensure passage can take years to organize and execute. This is the best time to begin planning for these future campaigns so that philanthropy's investments in clean water for Minnesota can pay dividends for years to come.

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MᶜKNIGHT FOUNDATION

About McKnight Foundation

McKnight Foundation, a family foundation based in Minnesota, advances a more just, creative and abundant future where people and the planet thrive. The Mississippi River program of the foundation works to restore water quality and resilience of the Mississippi River, with a special focus on addressing agricultural runoff and restoring the river's natural hydrology. This is one of nine program areas at McKnight Foundation. Founded in 1953 and independently endowed by William and Maude McKnight, the Foundation has assets of $2.3 billion and grants about $90 million per year.

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About SDK Communications + Consulting

Since 2012, SDK Communications + Consulting has blended big-picture strategy and savvy implementation to support public, nonprofit and philanthropic clients in the areas of Strategy and research, Training and capacity building, and Project management – always with a focus on driving the people side of change. Topical area of experience include protecting voting rights in Indian Country and engaging the public in redistricting; integrating public health and healthcare for better outcomes; engaging new voices in natural resource management and protection; building diversified coalitions and engagement capacity in policy networks; and aligning corporate social responsibility aims with business objectives.

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