

# Communication Subgroup

## Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, September 27, 2023

10:00 – 11:00 am

Via Zoom



## Meeting Summary

### **Welcome and Introductions**

*Joan Cox, University of Illinois Extension*

Joan welcomed the group and noted that Layne Knoche and Amanda Christenson are helping with technology and meeting minutes.

### **NARPS and Communication Lessons Learned**

*Mila Marshall, Sierra Club*

Mila discussed lessons learned during a project aiming to reach NARP holders with outreach information. The takeaway lessons included: a mix of education and entertainment in virtual programs; making outreach materials adaptable for use by wastewater treatment plant operators; fostering responsiveness to operator questions and concerns; and building trust. The project revealed operator interest in nutrient trading and NLRS-related funding opportunities, emphasizing the value of collaborating with wastewater industry consultants to broaden reach. Mila stressed the need for clear, decision-maker-friendly resources and successful engagement with local media. She concluded by sharing the [NARP Stakeholder Engagement Best Practices](#) document and by prompting a group discussion about consultant interactions.

### **Communications Plan and 2023 Biennial Report Key Points**

*Emily Steele, Illinois Extension*

Emily shared Biennial Report production timeline, noting a shift in report launch to December 1. Extension's NLRS team plans to provide a comprehensive promotional package, including the full report, executive summary, press release, common message presentation, legislator letter, promotional graphics, and sample social media posts for partners to use. An interactive session allowed participants to vote and discuss key points for the media release and legislator letter. The meeting concluded with an announcement about the new [NLRS@illinois.edu](mailto:NLRS@illinois.edu) email address and a reminder of the next meeting on December 12 at 2 pm, focusing on the promotional toolkit.

## Meeting Minutes

*In attendance: Megan Baskerville, The Nature Conservancy; Amanda Christenson, Illinois Extension; Joan Cox, Illinois Extension; Albert Cox, MWRDGC; Rachel Curry, Illinois Extension; Chris Davis, IEPA; Robert Hirschfeld, Prairie Rivers Network; Layne Knoche, Illinois Extension; Mila Marshall, Sierra Club; Trevor Sample, IEPA; Emily Steele, Illinois Extension; Michael Woods, IDOA*

### **Welcome and Introductions**

*Joan Cox, University of Illinois Extension*

Joan welcomed the group and noted that Layne Knoche and Amanda Christenson are helping with technology and meeting minutes.

***NARPS and Communication Lessons Learned******Mila Marshall, Sierra Club***

Mila, who has been with the Sierra Club for three years, discussed her role in communicating about Nutrient Assessment and Reduction Plans, or NARPs. Sierra Club has received funding from the Lumpkin Foundation to do this work, which focuses on building relationships with non-traditional stakeholders and supporting existing NARP participants in East Central Illinois. In a region with fewer than 5 NARPs and limited volunteer engagement, they are creating informative resources and promoting public awareness about NARPs. While Sierra Club has 14 groups in the state, including two in East Central Illinois, they aim to harness the energy of Sierra Club volunteers to improve communication with the local community and elected officials in a way that resonates with them.

Wastewater treatment facilities typically lack the capacity to engage the public on nutrient-related issues. The Sierra Club's Clean Water Team recognizes the need to provide the public with fundamental water knowledge and a better grasp of state water governance. Mila acknowledged the need for active training sessions to equip the public with the skills required to advocate for water issues effectively. This includes teaching them how to write letters to the editor, engage with elected officials regarding NARPs, broaden the network, and build alliances for addressing nutrient pollution.

Mila also discussed communication channels among Illinois EPA, NARP holders, Sierra Club, and the public. She mentioned that reaching out to NARP holders can be challenging as they may be hesitant to engage with Sierra Club. However, establishing a relationship is crucial for sharing recommendations for public involvement. Sierra Club has successfully empowered the public to develop their skills, ask questions, and access information independently. They are utilizing the Illinois EPA's NARP Web Application Map to connect stakeholders with relevant information.

Mila spoke about Sierra Club's approach to stakeholder engagement, emphasizing the use of storytelling for stakeholder engagement and the need for a balanced mix of entertainment and education in virtual public programs. She highlighted the success of *the River with the Blues* program, which focused on nutrient pollution in the Mississippi River and featured Mississippi Delta Blues music alongside informative, five-minute talks about nutrients and the river. This unique approach attracted a new audience. Sierra Club has developed some educational resources covering topics like water basics, nutrients, and water policy literacy for wastewater treatment plant operators and consultants to enhance stakeholder outreach. They emphasize the importance of relationship building and communication skills in stakeholder engagement, with a commitment to connecting this work to broader clean water initiatives. They track a variety of permits including the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System, 404 permits regulating discharge of dredged material in US waters, and 401 permits required any time there is activity which results in a discharge into US waters. Sierra Club recognized the challenge of reaching NARP holders, and started engaging with consultants instead, to gain insights into their engagement strategies. Mila ended by recapping lessons learned, highlighting Sierra Club's approach of blending education and entertainment, especially in virtual programs. She stressed the importance of adaptable outreach materials for wastewater treatment plant operators and the need for responsiveness to operator inquiries to build trust.

Sierra Club's experience revealed wastewater treatment plant operators' interest in nutrient trading and NLRS related funding opportunities. They found that collaboration with wastewater industry consultants expanded their reach. She emphasized the importance of clear and easily understandable resources for decision makers and shared their successful engagement with local media through commentary on environmental priorities.

Mila concluded by sharing the [NARP Stakeholder Engagement Best Practices](#) document and posed questions to the members, including: “Do you find that it is valuable to have a one-to-one relationship with consultants? Do you seem to only have those conversations project by project? What do those connections look like? Are there conflicts of interest?”

Discussion:

Albert Cox: I believe it's crucial for consultants involved in public projects to communicate with the public. It's important to know if these consultants are educating the public.

Mila: Consultants play a vital role in decision-making. It's essential they're aware of available resources. The decline in environmental journalism post-COVID has impacted public discourse. Both consultants and journalists can enhance public education if they're aware of available resources.

Megan Baskerville: We've adjusted our training schedules to better suit contractors and tile designers. Feedback suggests they're hesitant to promote conservation benefits to clients. We're considering integrating sales training on conservation benefits.

Mila: It's important to train businesses in selling conservation practices. The benefits of conservation might not always be the selling point. Service providers often feel excluded from conservation discussions due to cost implications.

Albert: Can you share how you've utilized the common message presentation?

Mila: Using consistent language from the documents saves time in content creation. It's efficient to forward resources that are clear and easy to understand. Being aligned with the NLRS coalition's message feels collaborative.

Albert: That is good to know.

Joan: It is beneficial to understand how the common message presentation is being used.

Mila added the following to the chat:

- [NARP Stakeholder Engagement Best Practices](#)
- Mila's Email Address: [Mila.marshall@sierraclub.org](mailto:Mila.marshall@sierraclub.org)

### ***Communications Plan and 2023 Biennial Report Key Points***

*Emily Steele, Illinois Extension*

Emily shared her role as an Illinois Extension Marketing and Communication team member working on Biennial Report production and promotion. She began with an update on the 2023 Biennial Report timeline, stating that we are in the final design and review stages. Around the last week of October, the report draft will be reviewed by the Illinois EPA and IDOA directors. It will launch December 1, with a backup date of December 8 to avoid conflicting with the Thanksgiving holiday news cycle. The next big touch point with all partners is the NLRS Conference on January 25, and printed copies will be available.

Illinois Extension met with Illinois EPA and IDOA staff to discuss report promotion, revisiting its historical promotion and brainstorming a plan for this time. Extension is creating a promotional toolkit that will be distributed to partners at the same time as the report launches. It will include the media release, legislator letter, common message presentation, digital graphics, talking points, suggested text for social media posts, a

user guide, and a few other elements. The full report, executive summary, appendices, and media release will be posted to the Illinois EPA website. The legislator packet, including the legislator letter, the report, and executive summary will be digitally sent to Illinois legislators by the Illinois EPA.

Extension will draft the legislator letter and media release, then Illinois EPA and IDOA will for review. Members of the communication subgroup will have a chance to review the promotional toolkit materials. At report launch time, NLRs partners will receive an email containing links to the executive summary, full report, the media release, and the promotional toolkit. All members will also receive instructions for receiving print copies. Emily invited feedback and questions.

#### Discussion:

- Robert Hirschfeld: It sounds like we won't see the graphics and talking points until after the date of release, is that correct?
- Emily Steele: Joan, do you think that it is possible to have working group members look through that promotional toolkit?
- Joan Cox: We have some Steering Committee members here today, so I would open this question up to them. Are you suggesting we send out the whole toolkit for members to review prior to launch? Are there other thoughts members have thoughts about this?
- Trevor Sample: In the past, we have run the common message draft by the communications subgroup to get some feedback. Sometimes we would get some comments on it. Some points stay the same as mainly just taking the updates from the Biennial Report and putting in the new text. The social media text, general talking points, and user guide are all new this year, so we can talk about how we can get it done in time to have a review period for working group members. If we do, it will probably be a short turnaround. For the common message we can probably try to make that happen, but we'll have to circle back around with the steering committee and see what is possible based on the timeline that we have set out for the release of everything.
- Emily: I want to clarify something. We share the figures and graphics from the report for people to use in the common message presentation, but the digital graphics as part of the promotional toolkit are generic graphics for posting on social media or in an email. It's not something we're pulling from the report. It's something we're creating specifically for people to promote the Biennial Report.
- Megan Baskerville: I really like the idea of the toolkit. That's helpful, but I was thinking along the lines of the graphs and things like that. Sometimes we grab screenshots of the report and it's hard to then share, so if there was a raw file that we could grab some main graphics from the report, that would be great too. Are we going to discuss what we think the key points should be?
- Emily: Yes, we will do that next.
- Robert: Yeah, I'm glad we're going to talk about that. My other question is will there be any background prep for media in advance of the release? Or is it a press release just going out on Dec 1 and that will be the first-time media has been alerted?
- Emily: That is a very good question. What do you usually do as far as background prep? What did you have in mind for that?
- Robert: It totally depends. Is there going to be outreach to journalists and an embargoed press release that they have a week in advance? In some ways I'm thinking about how Prairie Rivers Network is going to respond. For example, there was the event that DNR did last year where they renamed invasive carp as Copi. I think they had an embargoed press release out a week in advance. They had done work with

journalists. The story goes out on the release day and the hits the Washington Post and the New York Times that day, but it becomes very difficult for other stakeholders to have input if they haven't done the work in advance. So, there it was very difficult for us to get a message out because all these things are pre-written. I don't necessarily have a suggestion on what should be done, but I did want to understand the plan.

- Emily: Thank you for bringing that up. This is my first time with this report. I like the idea of doing an embargoed release, especially since the NLRS can be a dense topic. Having that lead time for media to process can be helpful. I'm not opposed to it, but I think we need to discuss it a little bit more. Trevor, I don't know if you have thoughts on this.
- Trevor: Yeah, we haven't done that before and that would have to go through both the IEPA and IDOA directors because it's a joint news release. That would be something that they would have to decide because this is a government news release.
- Mila: I love the idea of a media day. I know it's used in different ways, but it's an opportunity for journalists to ask all the different types of questions. It's an opportunity to pitch angles for stories. I like the idea of an embargoed release if I'm correct that it means that the publication is delayed from the press release.
- Emily: It means sending a release out in advance and it's embargoed, so they can't use it or publish it until the date that we set. That way they have the release and any other information in advance so they can start preparing their coverage.
- Mila: Got it, I have not done this with Sierra Club. Media Day allows the journalists to reflect on their angle and end up with a powerful piece for their community. I like the idea.
- Emily: I'll ask one follow-up question and then I think we need to move on to the key points. For your media days, were you doing those in person or were those done as an online call where media were invited to connect with experts?
- Mila: One of each. In person was fun. The virtual one had breakout sessions where you put different speakers or organizations into different breakout rooms and people can spend time speaking to each other. The whole goal was to have as many people as possible for the media to engage with at one time, so they have a diversity of stories.

Interactive activity:

We then transitioned to discussion around the 2023 Biennial Report key points. The Illinois Extension team used a Miro Board to enable members to read and vote on their top key points. The team explained how the technology worked, then let participants read each key point by chapter, then started voting. We offered alternative voting methods if participants could not access the Miro Board for any reason.

Voting results:

#### Water Quality Key Points

1. 5 votes for Quotation: "Greater runoff and drainage associated with climate change tend to increase river loads and, therefore increase the difficulty of meeting the strategy's water quality goals."
2. 4 votes for "Statewide nutrient levels remained elevated above interim target levels, especially for phosphorus."
3. 4 votes for "Both nitrate-nitrogen and total phosphorus five-year average statewide loads increased 4.8% and 35% compared to the baseline. Streamflow was 23% higher than baseline. However, the 2017-21 averages showed a decline from the 2016-20 period."

### Agriculture Key Points

1. 4 votes for “73,000 pounds of nitrogen and 30,000 pounds of phosphorus were kept out of waterways through agricultural conservation projects cost shared by IDOA and IEPA.”
2. 2 voted for “52.7% of rivers near Illinois cropland have grass buffers which were identified using satellite imagery.”
3. 2 voted for “55% of farmers, a 28% increase from 2020, are somewhat to very knowledgeable about the NLRs - National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2022 Illinois NLRs survey.”
4. 2 voted for “Nitrogen fertilizer methods on corn acres: 76% of 2021 corn acres used the Maximum Return to Nitrogen rate. Corn fertilization timing: 25% fall/winter, 35% fall-spring split, 40% in spring. 85% used nitrogen inhibitors for fall/winter-applied anhydrous ammonia, 83% for spring-applied. - National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2022 Illinois NLRs survey”

### Point Source Key Points

1. 5 votes for “34% reduction in total phosphorus discharges, surpassing strategy interim goals.”
2. 2 voted for “48% more major municipal facilities, a total of 46, achieved an average total phosphorus concentration of 0.5 mg/L or less from 2020 to 2022.”
3. 2 voted for “38% of major municipal wastewater facilities have phosphorus limits.”
4. 2 voted for “\$237.7 million invested by the point source sector in 2021–22, including \$191.8 through the State Revolving Funds.”

### Urban Stormwater Key Points

1. 4 votes for “1.2 million gallons of stormwater were kept out of waterways through 11 Illinois EPA Green Infrastructure Grant program funded projects.”
2. 3 votes for “70% of communities with Municipal Separate Storm Sewer Systems sweep streets and collect leaves annually.”
3. 2 votes for “174 acres were protected by 14 new stormwater practice projects funded by the Illinois EPA Section 319.”

### Adaptive Management Key Points

1. 5 votes for “Continued support is crucial for research, conservation practices, and education. Incorporating climate impact research into nutrient loss plans is vital.”
2. 2 votes for “143 watershed-based plans were developed since 2011 with Illinois EPA cost-share funding.”
3. 2 votes for “Subwatershed nutrient loads vary across Illinois, with multiple factors influencing these differences. More research is needed to understand the roles of streamflow, nutrient management, changes in population, hydrology, and legacy nutrients.”

### Discussion during and after voting:

- Megan Baskerville: Can we suggest 'other' key points, too?
- Robert Hirschfeld: I find it difficult to vote for any of these, honestly. To me these are problematically decontextualized.
- Joan Cox: If you have other key points that you would like included, please put those in the chat. They will also be considered for promotional content.

- Megan: Great! Key point for Ag: Now largest contributor for both N/P (showing that point sources are on-target).
- Robert Hirschfeld: Also, a suggestion for the water quality key point addressing climate change. I would prefer a framing of “more will be needed to achieve goals” rather than “increasing difficulty of achieving goals.”
- Megan: Note on “38% of major municipal wastewater facilities have phosphorus limits”, instead of % of majors, would it be easier to contextualize if it was "% of output." I just think those few majors are a majority of 'point source' flow. Does that make sense?
- Joan: thanks for these suggestions
- Robert: There should be a key point that, with the strong reduction from the point source sector, the increased loading is attributable to agriculture. I see Megan suggested that too. Seconded!
- Megan: Thanks so much for this open process! I must jump off the call but would vote for none of the Adaptive Management key points. Will try to email some thoughts!
- Mila Marshall: I must jump off the call too. I liked this method of voting. I learned something new.
- Robert: I agree that I appreciate the open process. I have a quick comment when we're done. I may not put too much stock into ranking these like this. This is just kind of a snapshot. For example, back at the water quality I think the climate change one got the most and two others each got four votes. I wanted to point out that I thought those two who ranked second were very similar, so that might have created a split. Again, I don't know that you are necessarily ranking them in order, but I wanted to point out that they were very similar key points, with just one vote ahead.

Once discussion concluded, Amanda mentioned that there is a new email account, [NLRS@illinois.edu](mailto:NLRS@illinois.edu) which will roll out the first week of October. The meeting concluded with a reminder that our next meeting is December 12<sup>th</sup> at 2 pm and we will showcase the promotional toolkit. Joan thanked everyone for their input and the meeting was adjourned at 11:11 am.