

OTTAWA COUNTY GROUNDWATER BOARD

- DATE: June 20, 2024
- PLACE: Ottawa County Fillmore Complex, Conference Room E
- PRESENT: Roger Belknap, Joe Bush, Adam Elenbaas, Jerry Geertman, Frank Johnson, David Kraker, Carrie Rivette, Sylvia Rhodea, Patrick Staskiewicz, Alex Svoboda (Sarah Bowman), John Yellich (Remote), Dale Zahn, Henry Werksma
- ABSENT: Mark Baker, Dale Buist, Lee Machiela, John Truscott
- STAFF: Matthew Chappuies, Andrew Roszkowski, Paul Sachs, Drew Shaw, Kylie Vosburg
- PUBLIC: Nathan Adamczyk, David Barnosky, Steve Hecksel, Joe Wallace

CALL TO ORDER

Chair Belknap, called the meeting to order at 9:02 a.m.
Introductions of those in attendance followed opening statements.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

GWB 24 - 07 Elenbaas moved to approve the June 20, 2024 Agenda. The motion passed. UNANIMOUS

OLD BUSINESS

GWB 24 - 08 Yellich moved to approve the February 15, 2024 Minutes. The motion passed. UNANIMOUS

GWB 24 - 09 Hank Werksma moved, and Sylvia Rhodea seconded to ratify the creation of the Shallow Wells Work Group, and the appointment of the following members of the Groundwater Board: Belknap, Bush, Johnson, Kraker, Machiela, Rivette, Staskiewicz, Svoboda, Yellich. The motion passed. UNANIMOUS

PERTINENT PROJECT UPDATES

A. Legislative Advocacy

- i. Shallow Wells Work Group

Paul Sachs, Director of Strategic Impact, appreciates the group's dedication and recaps the discussions from the two previous meetings. The focus is on exploring alternative water sources, especially due to a house bill for non-potable shallow wells that raised contamination concerns and did not progress. The local geology necessitates more geologic mapping to determine alternative water needs, particularly for those relying on the Marshall Sandstone aquifer.

Discussions included municipal water rates and balancing turf grass water needs with protecting potable water quality and quantity. Alternative water sources for landscaping, such as shallow wells, rainwater capture, and stormwater capture, were considered, with cost being a significant factor.

Challenges for agricultural producers, especially those not using the Marshall aquifer but the Glacial aquifer, were highlighted, focusing on permitting and water availability issues through EGLE and the water withdrawal assessment tools. The group aims to advocate for better water access for producers.

Legislative advocacy is a key theme, aiming to push for better solutions for residents and agricultural producers. This includes exploring shallow well opportunities and broader water reuse strategies.

Paul Sachs discussed the Environmental Health Department's shallow wells guidelines, acknowledging the uncertainty about the number of existing shallow wells and their potential impact. Rainwater capture was considered a clean alternative due to fewer regulations. The group discussed zoning laws to require new developments to use alternative water sources for irrigation.

Robinson Township was highlighted as a model for local regulatory approaches, emphasizing public education and moving away from household wells for irrigation. Developers in Robinson Township must ensure access to public water for new planned unit developments, impacting development feasibility based on proximity and cost.

The group noted a significant drop in the Marshall aquifer's water levels and quality over the past 20 years. More state involvement and updated regulations are needed to address water quantity issues. Ottawa County's unique geology poses distinct challenges despite statewide reports and collaborations with other counties.

Efforts are ongoing to collect more accurate data for policy and decision-making. Current tools have discrepancies, and the county is working on better data collection through well sampling and monitoring to improve groundwater management.

Matt Chappuies, Land Use Coordinator, discussed the development and implementation of a groundwater model for Ottawa County. The process involves outlining the model and consulting with firms to understand the latest techniques. An RFP (Request for Proposal) will be initiated in the coming months. The model will be a significant investment, requiring ongoing maintenance.

The model aims to consolidate geologic data, improving over time as more information is input. It's intended to be a dynamic tool, updated in real time, accessible via an online dashboard for the board and potentially the public, including researchers and universities.

Members of the board highlighted the model's importance for local planning and zoning. The model will help inform local officials to support effective planning using available statutory authority. Challenges of accessing specific groundwater data, such as site-specific reviews and water use data, were discussed.

Efforts are being made to foster collaboration with local producers to share valuable data, emphasizing trust and mutual benefits. The goal is to establish local influence and demonstrate effective groundwater management, potentially serving as a model for other counties. The discussion also touched on the need for more data and a different mindset, similar to water budgeting practices in the western U.S.

The discussion concluded with considerations on using gathered data for educational purposes and the importance of an effective communication strategy to inform and engage the public.

ii. Water Reuse

Joe Bush, Water Resources Commissioner, provided an update on a project involving Fairlife, which currently has a discharge permit from EGLE to release clean “cow” water into a county drain. Fairlife has invested \$50,000 into a study with an engineering firm to explore water reuse options. The study aims to ensure compliance with EGLE’s requirements while considering the potential for using the water for irrigation. Although the water is not yet at the necessary levels for irrigation, Fairlife is committed to making progress in this area. Despite past complaints, Fairlife is seen as a positive partner in this effort.

The broader context involves addressing the overloaded Coopersville wastewater treatment plant and questioning why water meeting regulatory standards for discharge cannot be repurposed for irrigation. Discussions with EGLE revealed that while they control the water quality going into the drain, additional permits might be needed for irrigation use. The project will include installing monitoring gauges to assess the impact of discharging up to 385,000 gallons per day into the drain. The water will be monitored as it flows into the Deer Creek watershed area, where it may potentially be used for irrigation.

Fairlife is committed to being a partner in this process, aiming to prove to EGLE that this approach is effective in Ottawa County. The goal is to establish a successful model for water reuse in the county, despite potential differences in other regions. Engagement with EGLE and an invitation to their director to Ottawa County are part of these efforts.

Challenges in managing corporate partnerships and the costs associated with trucking water away from the plant—amounting to \$25,000 to \$30,000 per day—highlight the importance of finding a sustainable solution. Ongoing efforts and discussions with Fairlife underscore the company’s commitment to addressing water management issues and its role in the local dairy industry.

Joe goes on to provide an update on recent discussions with EGLE regarding dam regulations and surface water monitoring. EGLE oversees eight dams within the county that require regular permits and inspections every three years. He highlighted the ongoing collaborative efforts between the Conservation District and the Department of Strategic Impact, who are installing additional gauges to enhance surface water monitoring. This initiative aims to better understand water flow and identify potential sites for new dam systems.

One significant regulatory challenge discussed was EGLE's prohibition on inline detention systems, despite some being installed without proper authorization. This issue is particularly relevant as some drains are currently dry, prompting public requests for structures to capture rainwater for future use.

He and Paul emphasized the importance of thorough mapping and monitoring, utilizing topographical data to pinpoint optimal locations for potential dam projects. These efforts are part of a broader strategy to pilot dam systems for irrigation purposes. Allendale was identified as a promising site for these pilot projects due to its perennial creeks that maintain water flow year-round. Joe mentioned that historical dam structures from the 1960s and 1970s are still operational today, though newer regulations have complicated the approval process for similar projects.

Securing landowner agreements remains a critical step in moving forward with these projects. The historical context of previously allowed structures under different regulations raises questions about the current regulatory framework's flexibility.

An example was shared about a blueberry farmer who faced challenges in obtaining a deep well for irrigation, highlighting the ongoing difficulties and costs farmers encounter in securing water resources. Joe emphasized the need for continued discussions with EGLE to explore regulatory flexibility and potential solutions for water management.

B. Fillmore Landscape Updates

Kylie Vosburg, Land Use Planning Specialist, provided updates on the Fillmore landscape project. Initially, the plan was to plant seeds in the fall or spring; however, the schedule shifted, leading to a focus on other aspects of the project. Prairie grass was planted along the road, and improvements were made to the dune grass islands with mulch to address weed issues. The flower gardens are thriving and have attracted significant positive attention. There has also been a noticeable increase in butterflies and wildlife in the area. Overall, the project is progressing well, with many areas showing vibrant growth and improvement.

Future plans include installing permanent educational signage. This will consist of a main overview sign near the front entrance, featuring a wayfinding map and information on the project's purpose and groundwater issues. Additionally, ten smaller garden signs will be placed in various zones to educate the public about plant requirements and garden differences. Designs for these signs are in progress, aiming for a modern yet timeless look that blends with the natural landscape and building design.

At the Water Quality Forum, the project received positive feedback, generating interest in native landscaping. Inquiries have been made about implementing eco-friendly turf and expanding the project. A CIP (Capital Improvement Project) has been submitted to extend the project to the James St. Complex and the Hudsonville courthouse, targeting approximately eight to twelve acres of turf for transformation.

Paul Sachs commented on the importance of leading by example, expressing frustration with recent projects that do not incorporate native landscaping. Despite efforts to promote such practices, new facilities continue to use traditional landscaping approaches, resulting in missed opportunities for sustainability. Discussions included potential cost savings and water savings from the project, along with questions about the accuracy of these calculations.

Other participants acknowledged the challenges of incorporating native landscaping into existing projects and expressed hope for future opportunities to integrate these practices more effectively.

C. Well Drilling

The department is currently engaged with Lakeshore Environmental to resume drilling operations. A revised contract and pricing schedule, which includes additional details requested by the fiscal department, are pending board approval.

Once approved, drilling will commence at two designated sites in Allendale Township, with plans to install approximately a dozen additional wells throughout the year. The drilling operations will include pumping tests at several locations, which are expected to provide valuable geological data for future modeling.

D. Surface Water Monitoring

In addition to drilling, surface water monitoring is being addressed in collaboration with Joe Bush's office and the Conservation District. Potential monitoring sites are being identified, and the logistics for setting up the necessary equipment are being evaluated.

The aim is to co-locate surface water monitoring equipment with existing groundwater monitoring stations wherever possible. Some sites will also include weather monitoring stations to track rainfall and other conditions affecting the hydrogeologic cycle.

E. Outreach

An event called *Conservation on Tap* event will take place in the near future, and all are encouraged to attend or share the information. Additionally, the Macatawa Water Festival is scheduled for next month. The team is looking forward to participating again, building on last year's success with an engaging booth setup that attracted significant interest and facilitated valuable networking.

Preparations are underway for a new display to enhance our outreach efforts at the festival. Staff is working with John Yellich and his team a display that can effectively communicate our message using geologic samples.

The recent advertising campaigns, including gas station tv ads, billboards, and social media ads, have concluded. Early feedback indicates that these ads have successfully raised awareness and generated interest, although metrics are still pending.

Website updates continue, with the new format proving to be more user-friendly and engaging. The web development team is actively refining the site to improve navigation and enhance the overall user experience. The updated website features excellent videos and resources that are positively received.

Sarah Bowman from the Ottawa Conservation District explains that additional outreach initiatives include the introduction of rain barrel workshops and the promotion of native seed mixes through Pheasants Forever. The workshops, which began in May, have seen positive community engagement. The sale of native seed mixes is also gaining traction, with residents increasingly choosing to replace traditional turf with native plantings.

Efforts to enhance irrigation efficiency among local farmers are ongoing, with outreach focused on providing free uniformity testing for center pivots and solid set systems. Farmers interested in this service are encouraged to reach out.

Overall, these outreach activities and updates are contributing to increased public awareness and engagement with our conservation efforts.

F. Landscape Rebate Pilot Program

Matt Chappuies provided an update on the landscape rebate pilot program, designed to support homeowners in converting their landscaping to native plants. This initiative aligns with the strategies index developed a couple of years ago, with the timing now considered optimal for moving forward.

One key aspect of the program is to offset the significant costs associated with converting to native plants, which can range from \$10,000 to \$30,000. This financial burden can be daunting for homeowners looking to replace their current landscaping with native wildflowers or more eco-friendly turf options. Successful programs in other communities across the country, particularly in Minnesota, have been studied to gather insights and best practices. The team is currently evaluating the logistical aspects of implementing this program, including identifying specific needs and potential gaps it could fill.

The initial plan is to launch a small-scale pilot program next spring, followed by a larger rollout in subsequent seasons. An important target for this program will be homeowner's associations (HOAs), many of which currently have bylaws that prohibit the use of native plants. Engaging with HOAs and providing incentives to modify these bylaws will be crucial for the program's success.

Community feedback, gathered from a survey on the Allendale Informed Facebook page, indicated that financial constraints and HOA restrictions are major barriers to adopting native plants. Collaborating with the Ottawa Conservation District to provide garden kits and potentially offering rebates for these kits is being considered.

Funding for the program is anticipated to come from private corporate sponsorships and federal or state grants. One stipulation for the pilot program is that participants must already be on a well system and not have access to municipal water. This condition aims to ensure the program targets those most in need of assistance.

There was a focused discussion on the importance of continued collaboration and innovative funding solutions to support the landscape rebate pilot program and encourage the adoption of native plants across the county.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Nathan Adamczyk from Robinson Township raised concerns regarding statements made in Ottawa County's visual ads and other materials, specifically the claim that "Ottawa County is running out of water." He emphasized the importance of backing such statements with publicly available, data-driven information to avoid misleading or fear-driven messaging.

He suggested that the statement be revised to better educate the public on water quality, water readings, and water conservation. He stressed the need for transparency and accuracy in public communications to ensure the community understands the context and basis of the statements being made. Staff ensured that this data is available to the public on the groundwater website.

Drawing a parallel, Nathan referenced the movie "The Biggest Little Farm," which showcases a farm in California that successfully managed its water resources through natural means and landscape modifications. He highlighted this as an example of innovative water management practices that could inspire local efforts.

He concluded by expressing his skepticism about the claim that Ottawa County is running out of water, urging for clear, factual data to support such assertions and for public messaging to reflect accurate and constructive information on water resources and conservation.

Dave Barnoski from Port Sheldon Township advised John Yellich about the location of Fairlife. The specified location is in Polton Township, T8N R14W Section 23.

Steve Hecksel addressed concerns regarding water availability, particularly in light of recent dry spells. Last year, during an especially dry period, he made public pleas on social media for residents to reduce lawn watering, especially in certain areas like Blendon Township.

Steve highlighted that there are locations where the depth of wells cannot be increased without significant modifications. He provided an example of wells installed in new homes just eight years ago, which now require deeper pumps due to declining water levels.

Steve confirmed that water shortages are indeed occurring in specific areas, challenging the notion that it might be solely a seasonal issue. He emphasized that studies have already documented a decline in the water table, and this information is publicly accessible on relevant websites.

Reflecting on his past skepticism as a well driller, Steve acknowledged that the significant drop in the water table over the last decade is undeniable.

OTHER BUSINESS

A. Retirement News

Dale Zahn, a long-serving board member, announced his retirement. Dale has been an integral part of the board since its inception and has been a strong advocate for the board's work, deeply understanding the challenges and complexities involved.

Despite his retirement, Dale has graciously agreed to serve out the remainder of his term, which extends through the end of the year. His continued presence is appreciated, given his extensive experience and leadership within the real estate sector.

The board expressed their excitement for Dale's retirement and acknowledged his significant contributions and leadership throughout his tenure.

John Yellich, the retiring Director of the Michigan Geological Survey, discussed his tenure and the future direction of the Survey. He noted his retirement but assured that he would continue to support the new director and Ottawa County. John has been with the Survey since 2013 and working closely with Ottawa County since 2016.

John introduced Sara Pearson, the incoming Director of the Michigan Geological Survey, who previously worked in the drinking water division at EGLE, focusing on safe drinking water initiatives. Sara will start her new role on July 1, and John expressed his intent to assist her during the transition.

John emphasized the critical progress made during his tenure, particularly in securing funding for the Survey, which had not been funded for 30 years. He acknowledged the support from Ottawa County in obtaining legislative funding, which allowed the Survey to expand from one person to 13 employees.

One of the significant projects initiated under John's leadership involves mapping near-surface recharge areas related to aggregates. This project, funded with \$5 million over five years, aims to inform infrastructure development and ensure strategic use of aggregate resources.

Additionally, John highlighted the development of a core storage facility in Kalamazoo, which stores samples collected over the past 15-18 years, including those from Ottawa County. This facility supports both energy and groundwater research. Due to the facility's capacity limitations, the Survey secured approximately \$6 million from the legislature to purchase and expand the facility, ensuring continued sample collection and research capabilities.

John expressed gratitude to Ottawa County for their support in securing these funds, which total around \$14 million. This funding has been instrumental in advancing the Survey's work and supporting its research and resource management initiatives.

The meeting concluded with appreciation for John's contributions and acknowledgment of the positive impact of his efforts on the Michigan Geological Survey and Ottawa County.

B. Next Meeting

Chair Belknap reminded the Board that the next meeting is scheduled to take place on **Thursday, August 15, 2024, at 9:00 AM.**

ADJOURNMENT

GW 24 – 10

Chair Belknap adjourned the meeting at 11:09am.

UNANIMOUS