

PUBLIC KICKOFF MEETING REPORT

June 2023

The Upper Mississippi - Grand Rapids Watershed public kickoff meetings were held in June 2023. Two events were held, one in Tamarack and one in Grand Rapids to accommodate people in the southern and northern portions of the watershed. The goal of these meetings was to hear diverse viewpoints on watershed priorities and values. We also wanted to understand the issues, concerns and opportunities of watershed residents and stakeholders. This information was gathered by having participants complete two activities.

Seven topic areas were identified by the Steering Committee and Policy Committee. These included:

- ❖ Lakes
- ❖ Rivers / Streams
- ❖ Wetlands
- ❖ Forests
- ❖ Farms
- ❖ Groundwater / Drinking water
- ❖ Stormwater

Basic information on each topic was compiled into a poster for watershed stakeholders to view during the events. These posters were used to help residents have a shared understanding of the topics.

The events were advertised using print and social media ad campaigns. In addition, Steering Committee members advertised the events using their contact lists and connections. For those who could not attend the events in person, an online survey was made available. The survey ran for one month.

A total of 36 people participated in the events (22 in Tamarack and 14 in Grand Rapids). In addition, an online survey was available for those who could not attend in person. A total of 27 people submitted responses to the online survey.

Kickoff Meeting Activities

Identifying Issues, Concerns and Opportunities

A list of watershed issues, concerns and opportunities was compiled by the Steering Committee for each of the seven topics. The list was used to create a voting poster. Participants from each event used stickers to vote if they agreed on an issue. They were also provided with sticky notes to add new issues if they felt something was missing. A complete list of issues is listed at the end of this report.

Prioritizing Watershed Topics

Event participants were given four \$100,000 bills at the beginning of the event. They were asked to view each of the seven topics and think about how they would spend this money to protect and restore natural resources in the watershed in the next 10 years. Money could be spent all on one topic or spread over four.

Other Information

Using a paper survey, we asked participants to describe how they interact with the watershed, and a list of words that describe the watershed. This information was used to understand representation of the seven topic areas. We were also able to generate a word cloud which will be used later in the process to develop our vision statement for the plan.

Online Survey

The online survey mimicked the in-person event as much as possible. The same list of issue statements was listed for each topic, and participants were asked to rank the four highest priority topics.

Results

Where were participants from?

As expected, those who attended the Tamarack meeting were largely from the south while the Grand Rapids meeting participants were mostly from the north. Participants indicated they were from:

- ❖ Cromwell
- ❖ Tamarack
- ❖ Wright
- ❖ Hill City
- ❖ Grand Rapids
- ❖ Swan River
- ❖ Big Rice Lake

Participants indicated that they interacted with the watershed in the following ways:

- ❖ Residents
- ❖ Lakeshore owners
- ❖ Forest owners, loggers or people who work in the wood products industry
- ❖ Farmers
- ❖ City residents
- ❖ People who hunt, fish or recreate in the watershed
- ❖ People who work in the watershed
- ❖ People with cultural or family ties to the watershed

The top three ranked issue statements were collected for each topic:

Lakes

- ❖ Some septic systems are too old or not maintained, and they are affecting lake health. (30)
- ❖ Lakeshore owners are not aware of their role in protecting lake health (27)
- ❖ Aquatic invasive species are affecting lake health or make it difficult to enjoy recreating on our lakes (20)

Rivers / Streams

- ❖ Ditched or altered streams need to be restored to their natural state (21)
- ❖ Stream banks/shorelines are not well protected or have too much erosion (17)
- ❖ People do not know how to protect or restore streams (17)

Wetlands

- ❖ Wetlands are at risk of being lost due to development or land use change (27)
- ❖ People don't understand the importance/value of wetlands (24)
- ❖ Ditching is impacting downstream lakes and streams (22)

Forests

- ❖ Forests are at risk of being converted to development, farming or other land uses (26)
- ❖ Some tree species are at risk of diseases/pests that are affecting forest health (22)
- ❖ Changing weather or environmental patterns are affecting forest health (20)

Farms

- ❖ Soil health could be improved with more cover crops, less tillage or grazing management (25)
- ❖ Manure runoff or livestock accessing lakes, streams or wetlands are impacting the health of water resources (19)
- ❖ There are not enough rules/regulations to protect water resources (18)

Groundwater / Drinking Water

- ❖ More testing/monitoring is needed to track groundwater safety/quality (24)
- ❖ More information is needed to understand groundwater risks (18)
- ❖ People are unaware of risks or concerns impacting groundwater / drinking water (17)

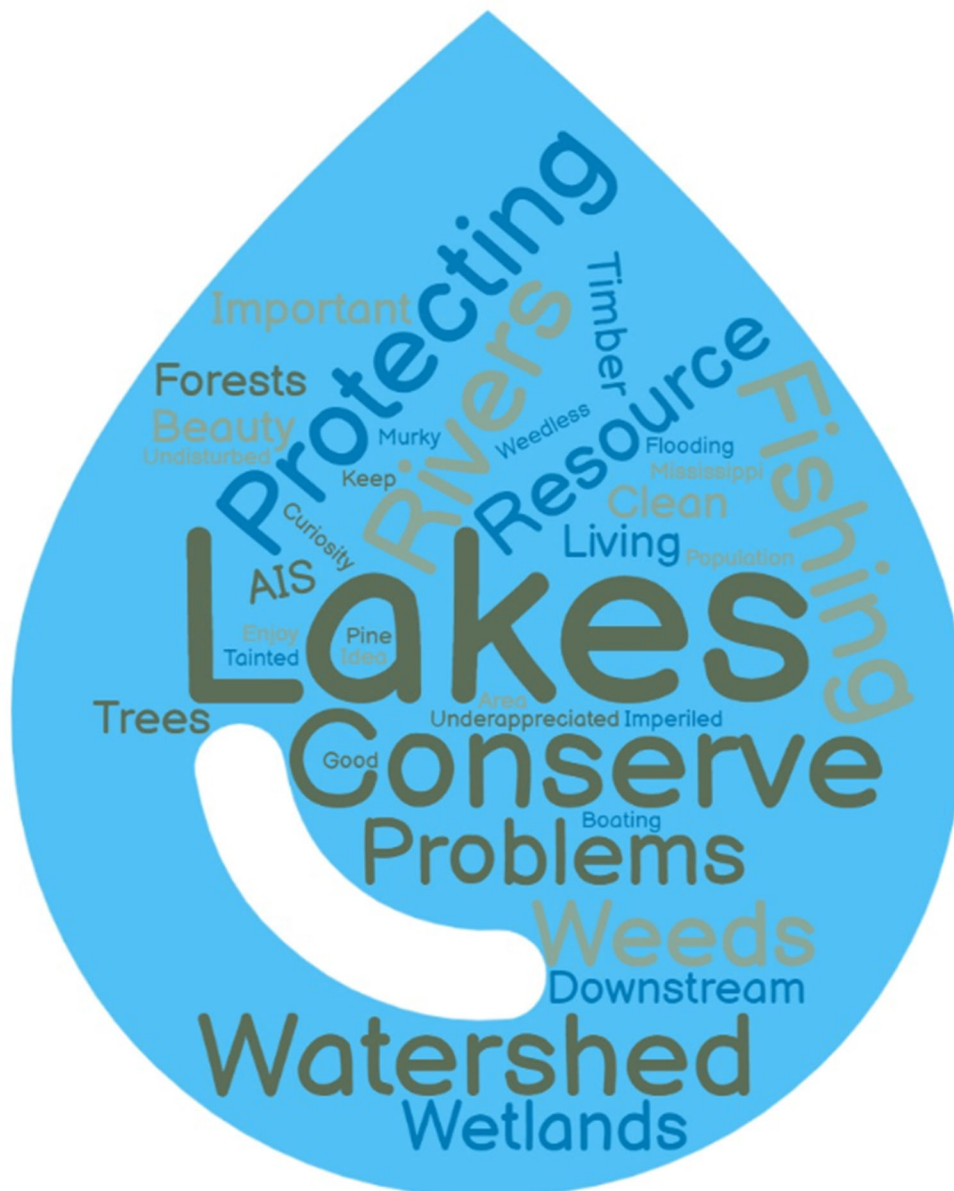
Stormwater

- ❖ Salt use from de-icing and dust control are impacting lakes, rivers and wetlands (25)
- ❖ Stormwater runoff is affecting lakes, streams and wetlands (19)
- ❖ Cities/Towns need professional help to manage stormwater (18)

The results of the prioritization activity showed lakes to be the highest ranked topic followed by wetlands. The lowest ranked topic was farms.

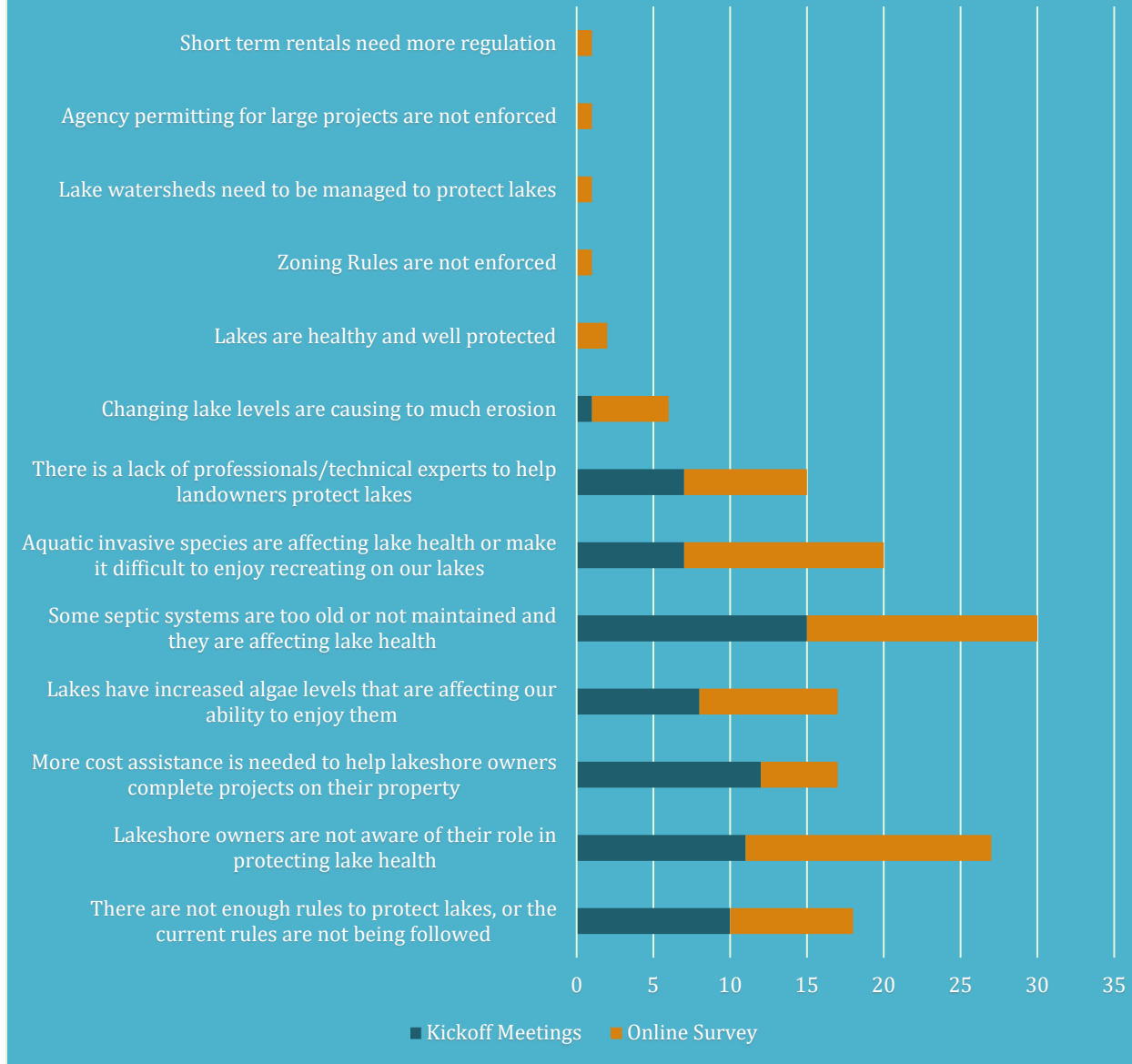


The words used to describe the watershed focused on protecting and conserving the resources of the watershed. A word cloud was created to show the responses to the question: In just 4 or 5 words, when you think of the Upper Mississippi - Grand Rapids watershed, what comes to mind?

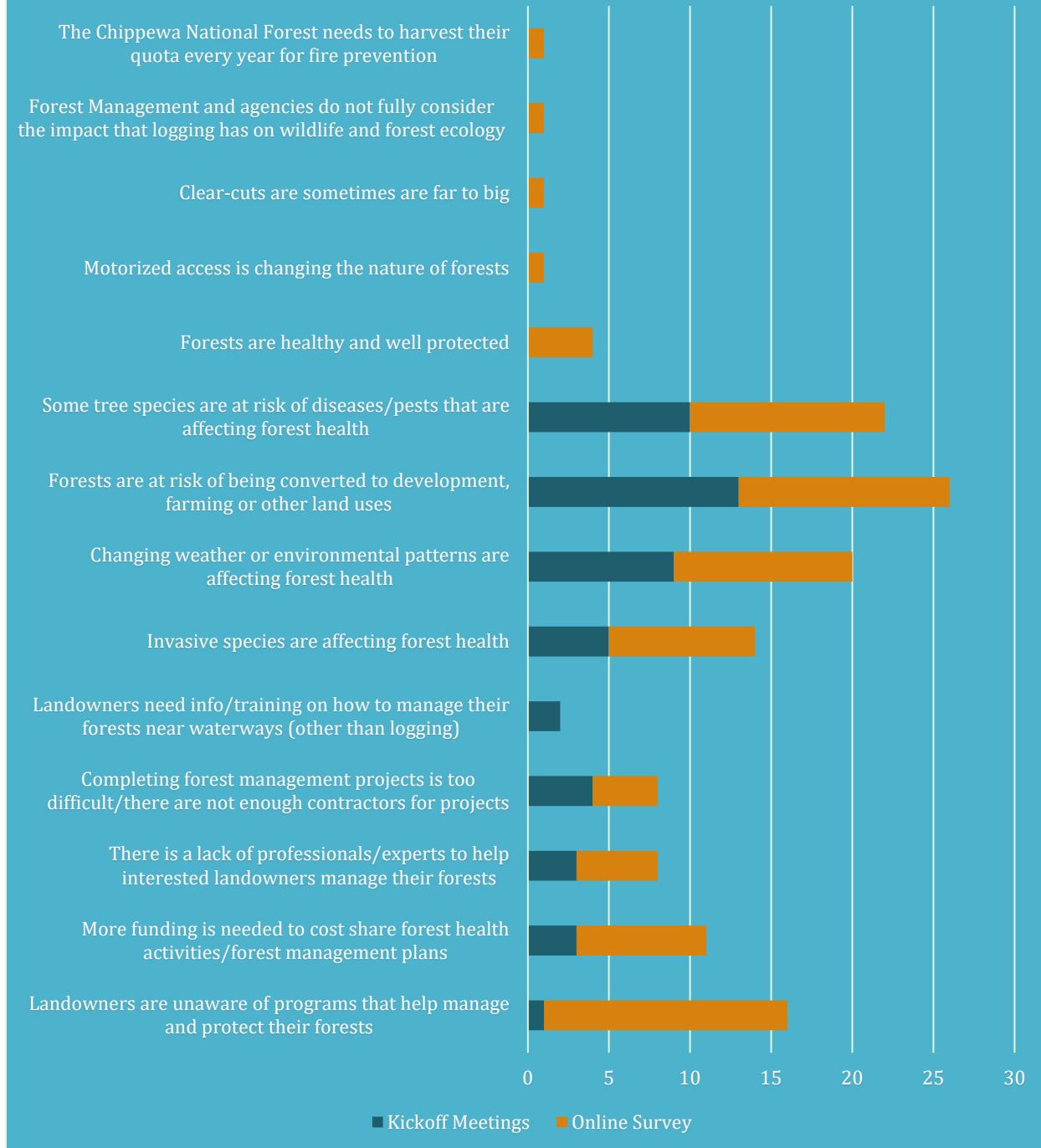


A complete list of the issue statement voting questions and the cumulative score are shown in the figures below.

Lake Issue Statements



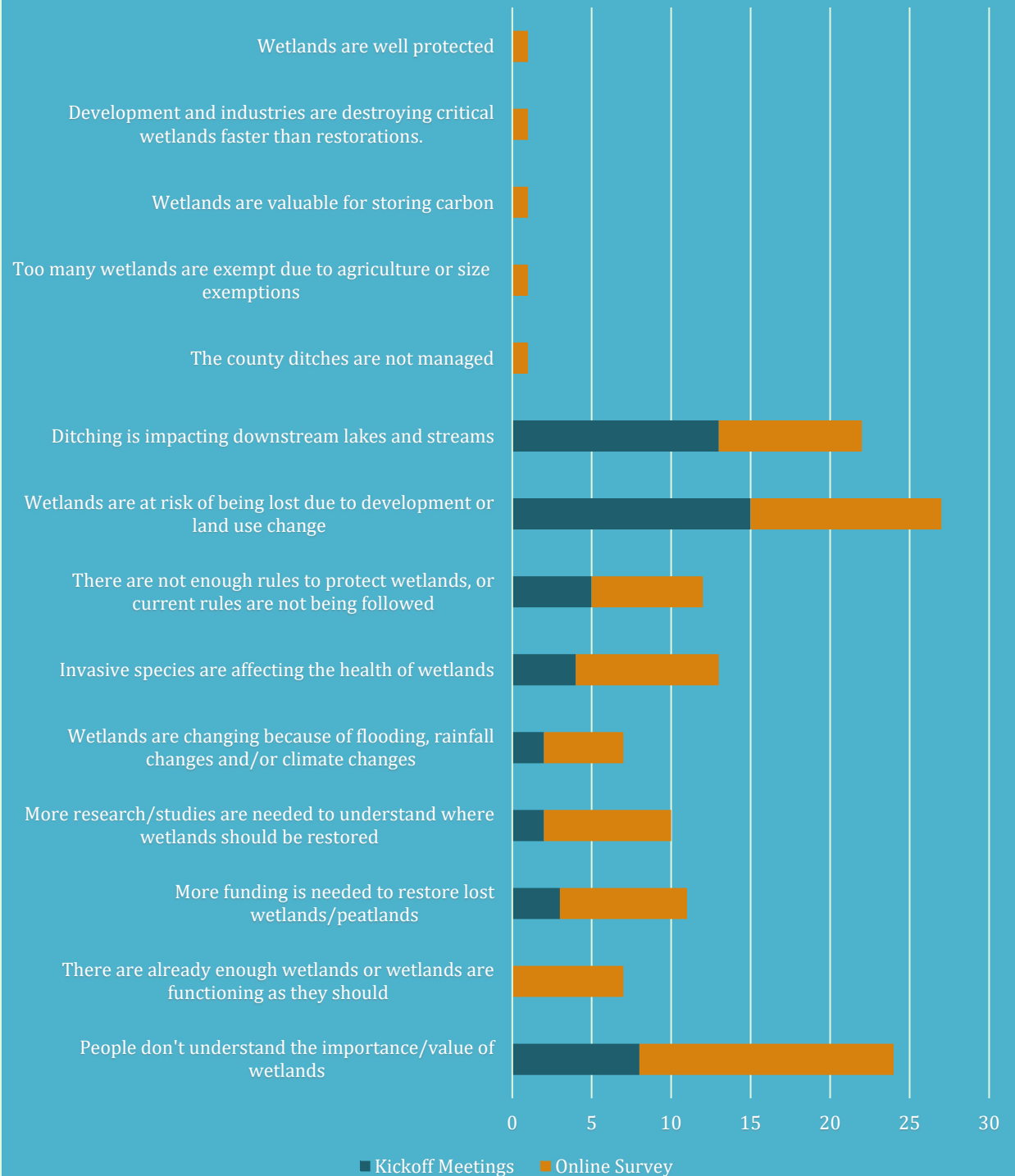
Forest Issue Statements



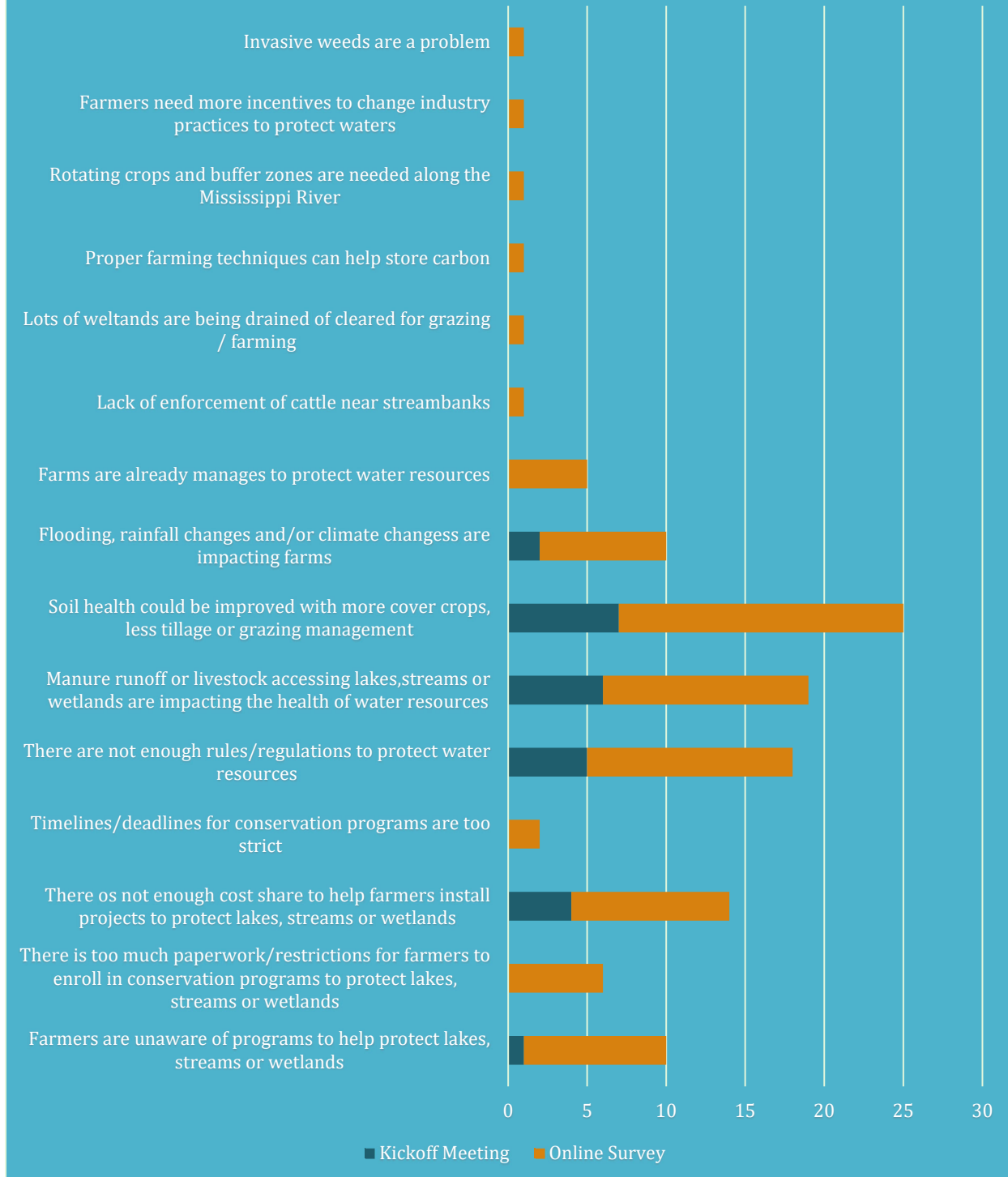
River & Stream Issue Statements



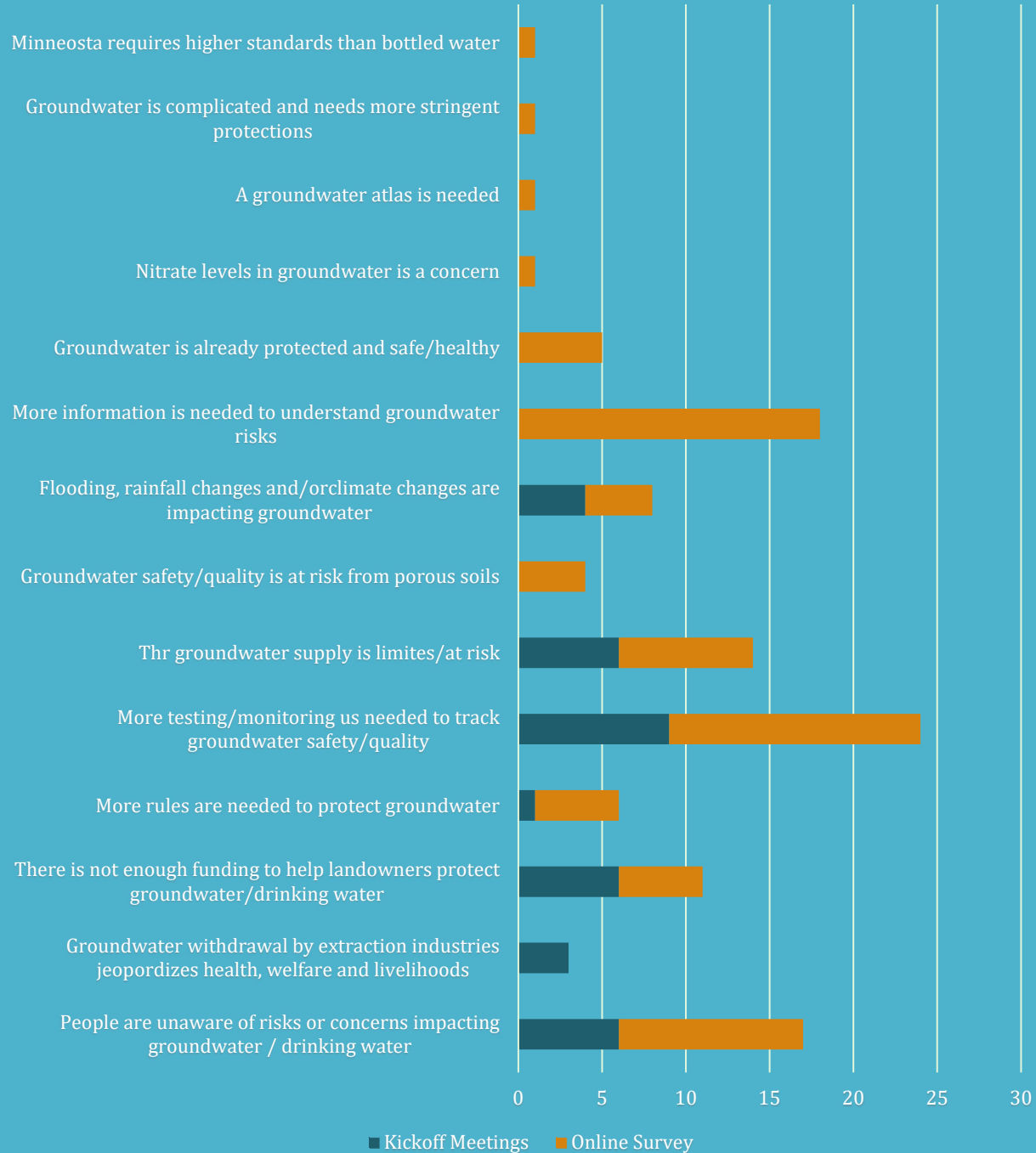
Wetland Issue Statements

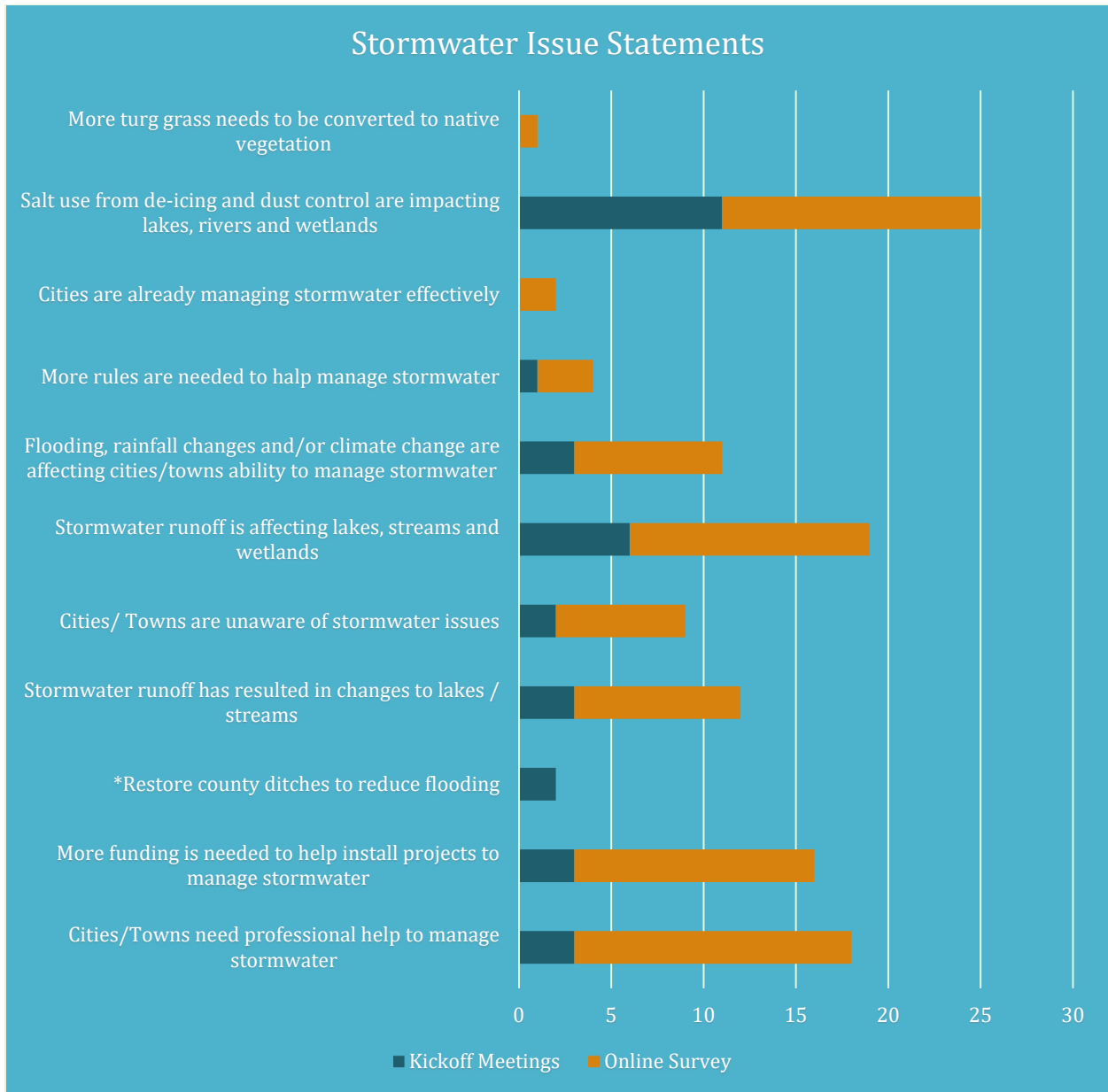


Farm Issue Statements

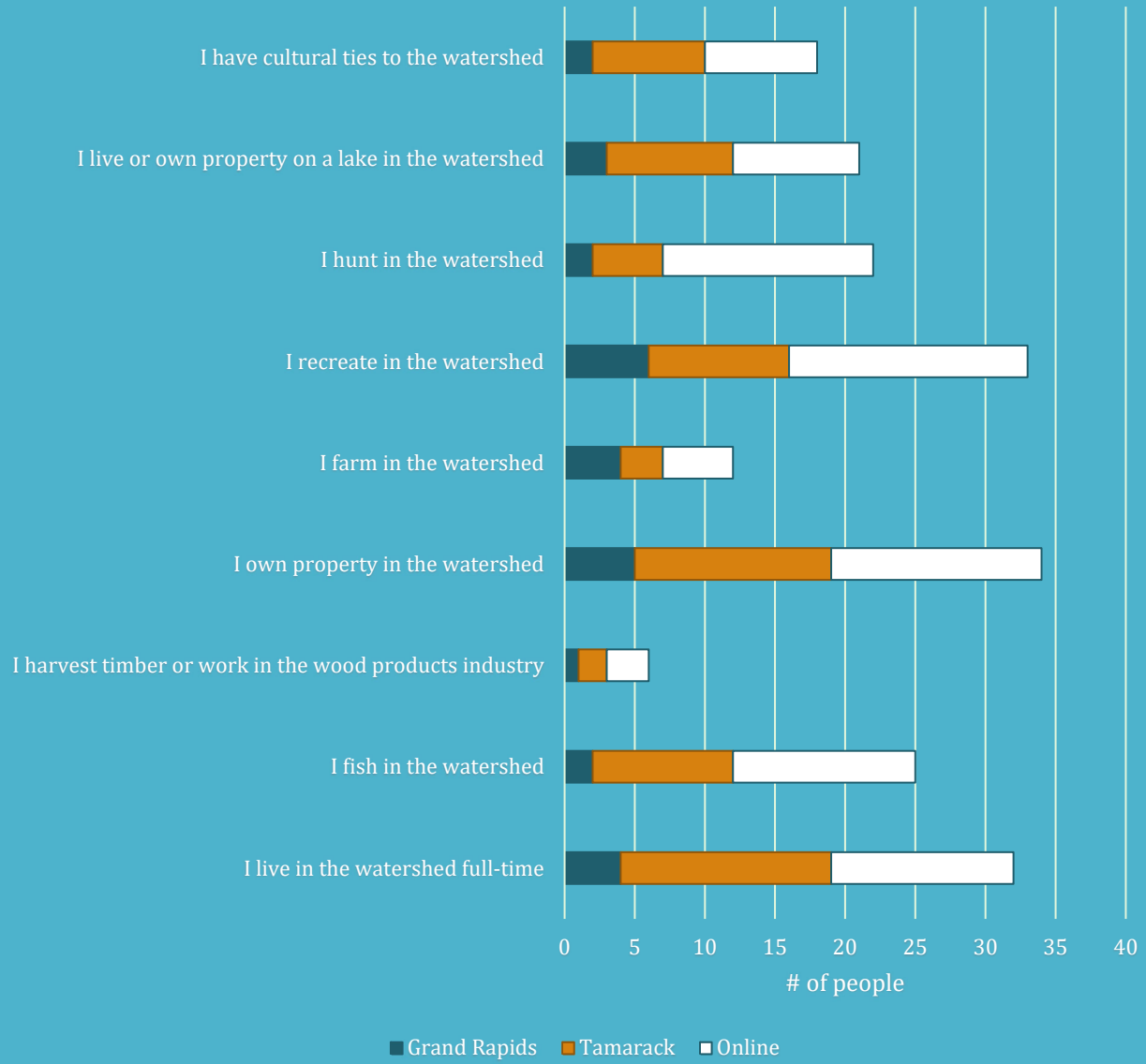


Groundwater Issue Statements





Watershed Association



With the current rate of land use change in the watershed, what do you think the UM-GR watershed will look like in 50 years?

Tamarack:

- ❖ I can't imagine what changes will look like in 50 years
- ❖ Hard to predict. Hopefully replanting of forests.
- ❖ From the indicators on the wall if interest are followed=clean lakes and recreation. No ability for self-preservation=consumable resources will be gone.
- ❖ If talon/riotinto proceeds, in 50 years the watershed will be poisoned by acid mine drainage. RioTinto will be gone, leaving taxpayers on the hook. The water, fish, birds and people will be poisoned. Tamarack will be a superfund site.
- ❖ A lot more weeds to come
- ❖ Improved lakes.
- ❖ A lot more people; change in demographics.
- ❖ I expect more emigration to the area because of it's clean air, water and soil. The forests of the watershed will be increasingly valued for mitigation of climate change.
- ❖ Overdevelopment along lakes and rivers as more people head north.
- ❖ Overdeveloped.
- ❖ Probably remain much the same.
- ❖ More population.
- ❖ Pay attention now or it will be in a sorry state in 50 years.

Grand Rapids:

- ❖ Unfamiliar- needs to be preserved though.
- ❖ Nonexistent.
- ❖ I am concerned that lots of floodplain and wetland will be filled for development.
- ❖ Nothing good. Too much development, too many homes and their mown lawns too close to lakes. Not enough undisturbed forestland.

What would you like the watershed to look like in 50 years?

Tamarack:

- ❖ Clean and as close to untouched as possible.
- ❖ Stay the same.
- ❖ Wilderness.
- ❖ Clean and healthy.
- ❖ Wisely planned development- younger demographic.
- ❖ Clean water for our grandchildren.
- ❖ Improved water.
- ❖ Good stewardship of all resources.
- ❖ Safe place to do recreational things, fish and swim.
- ❖ Cleaner.

- ❖ I would like the peatlands restored, the marshes, wild rice lakes and rivers flourishing. The water will be clean. People will be able to eat more than 1 fish a week. The birds, especially our eagles and raptors will flourish rather than die of mercury poisoning.
- ❖ Try not to change things. Stop altering, and maybe the place will look as it does today.
- ❖ Close to what it is now.
- ❖ Continuation of clean rivers and lakes.
- ❖ Forested.

Grand Rapids:

- ❖ Undisturbed, clean, respected. Better lakeshore protections/plantings. No more “daylight” septic systems flowing into the rivers. More recreation that doesn’t result in damage. More wildlife species and more resilient rivers/streams during flooding and drought.
- ❖ I would like the watershed to look much less “managed” with wild areas along wetlands and floodplains.
- ❖ Lush, abundant, and tended by Original Free Nations (Dakota & Anishinaabe).
- ❖ Heavily forested; diverse and healthy tree population. Lakes protected from AIS (surveillance at landings) and septic/sewer system rehaul. No farming or industry that impacts water negatively.
- ❖ Clean, clear and full of fish
- ❖ Accessible for the elderly ready available and handicapped programs
- ❖ Clean and healthy! We owe that to the next generations.
- ❖ Healthy and thriving
- ❖ Natural looking waterways with access for homes and cabins which are mainly hidden from view from the water; clean waters; planned response from climate change to keep vegetation including forests healthy; a place for humans and the natural environment to coexist
- ❖ Same or better than now
- ❖ natural and healthy
- ❖ Healthy lakes, streams, forests and wetlands the provide abundant recreational opportunities.
- ❖ I’d like it to be as good or better than it is now.
- ❖ Lakes without algae
- ❖ Less conversion to ag and more wetlands protected.
- ❖ Healthy and safe & fair for all
- ❖ Show modest improvement in quality and knowledge.
- ❖ Healthy in all areas.
- ❖ I want the watershed to be pristine, unencumbered by industry, and healthy for future generations to enjoy. I want strong processes and assurances that the ecology in the region will not be heavily and permanently impacted and altered by development, industrial projects, human recreation, or pollution. I want dams to be reviewed and removed, if their impact is no longer effective. I want mercury to be seriously addressed and stopped before all of the food webs including us are consuming it to

our detriment. I want run-off like pesticides, chloride, and sewage to no longer be a substantial risk to waterways. I want wetlands to be preserved as the life blood of the natural ecology of our region. I want the deep and rich heritage of our river and its many inhabitants to be protected, defended, and preserved so that future generations can understand and thrive in our beautiful region.

- ❖ More fish less people
- ❖ Much as it is now, with a fairly high percentage of public, undeveloped land helping to protect our lakes and rivers. A continual engagement and participation of privately owned shoreland owners to protect water quality through incentives and education will help as well.
- ❖ I would like to see the army corps stop flooding in Pokegama lake. I would like to see a new Hydro power idea to help our power needs in the future in Itasca County.

Are there any topics or resources we didn't cover at the kickoff meeting?

Tamarack:

- ❖ I don't know yet.
- ❖ No.
- ❖ None.
- ❖ Problems with gold mining.
- ❖ It looks like you have this covered.
- ❖ No.
- ❖ I always enjoy learning at the meetings.
- ❖ Not a single poster addressed the threat that hard rock mining will bring to this very area. This is a real threat- no nickel sulfide mine has ever polluted the watershed. Doesn't matter what the skills for riotinto say. These are the facts.
- ❖ Wild rice, food resources that the watershed provides.

Grand Rapids:

- ❖ Providing a list of current resources to people attending this meeting would be helpful. Are there resources for lake (property) owners? River (property) owners? Professionals interested in helping with watershed restoration or management projects?
- ❖ Please avoid framing this project as a search for studying problems, but rather prioritizing problems. We know we're negatively impacting wetlands in our pursuit of personal benefit.
- ❖ Traditional Native multigenerational or millennial care for WATER, treaty rights of the nation-to-nation status with the U.S. government through congress (Constitutional instituted rights).