Lower Grand River Watershed
Developing a Watershed Management Plan

Mid-Project Evaluation

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INTRODUCTION

Partners in the Lower Grand River Watershed are collaborating in the development of a watershed management plan using a Section 319 grant from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) Surface Water Quality Division. This is an ambitious undertaking due to the size of the Lower Grand River Watershed – an area approximately 3,020 square miles that encompasses ten counties in western Michigan. It is a unique project that will establish sustainable organizational and informational infrastructure to support comprehensive watershed management in the Lower Grand River Watershed and, in the future, the entire Grand River Watershed.

The Lower Grand River Watershed Management Planning Project (the Project) began in July 2002 and will end at the end of June 2004. During the first year of the Project, partners gained valuable experience in developing a watershed management plan using a subcommittee approach. The comprehensive project-level evaluation, a noteworthy component of the Project, is the vehicle for identifying, documenting, and distributing these beneficial lessons learned. This document contains the evaluation of the Project's first year, although the information obtained to conduct the evaluation also addresses the second year of the Project to a limited extent. The report is organized as follows:

- **Section 1: Project Background.** This section provides an overview of the Lower Grand River Watershed Management Planning Project, including partners, organization, goals, and tasks.

- **Section 2: Evaluation Approach.** This section describes the goals of the evaluation process and the activities conducted to obtain evaluation information. It also presents evaluation tools used to obtain feedback from the Project staff and partners.

- **Section 3: Evaluation Findings.** This section presents the information collected using the evaluation tools described in Section 1.

- **Section 4: Conclusions and Recommendations.** Based on the findings described in Section 3, this section presents conclusions on the success of the Project during the first year. In addition, this section provides recommendations for improving implementation of the Project during the second year.

- **Section 5: Future Evaluation Activities.** Additional evaluation activities are necessary to comprehensively examine the progress of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project as the grant cycle draws to an end. This section describes the remaining evaluation activities that will take place in Spring 2004.

Partners should be commended for their participation in the Lower Grand River Watershed Management Planning Project evaluation and openly sharing their thoughts about the experience. While beneficial, the evaluation process can be uncomfortable for participants and the outcomes may appear to accentuate the negative aspects of a project. The intent is not to expose limitations for the sake of assigning blame, but rather to collaboratively learn from past experiences and identify creative solutions. Not only does the evaluation process aid partners in identifying areas for improvement, but the evaluation also provided partners with the opportunity to collectively acknowledge and celebrate their successes.

SECTION 1: PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Lower Grand River Watershed Management Planning Project focuses on a portion of the larger Grand River Watershed in western Michigan. Draining approximately 3,020 square miles, the Lower Grand River Watershed encompasses ten counties and draws together a significant number of partners. The geographic scope of the Lower Grand River Watershed sets the stage for a complex watershed management planning process that requires the participation of numerous stakeholders representing multiple stakeholder interests. This section provides a contextual understanding of the Project by examining the factors that influence its structure and function – the partners, the goals, the work plan and schedule, and the organization.

Overview of Project Partners

Four organizations with a stake in the Lower Grand River Watershed play a lead role as partners in the Project. Descriptions of these organizations and their role in the Project are provided below:

Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ). As the agency responsible for protecting water quality in the State of Michigan, MDEQ administers the Nonpoint Source Program that offers Section 319 grants and technical assistance. A staff person from the Grand Rapids District Office of MDEQ serves as the Project Administrator for the Lower Grand River Watershed Management Planning Project. The Project Administrator ensures that the grantees fulfill the grant requirements and produce timely, high-quality products. In the context of the Project, the Project Administrator also participates on sub-committees as a partner.

Grand Valley Metro Council (GVMC). Focusing on the Grand Rapids metropolitan area, GVMC brings together many governmental units located within the Lower Grand River Watershed and provides expertise in the area of regional land use planning. GVMC is the primary grantee for the Lower Grand River Watershed Management Planning Project, responsible for inviting other partners (see descriptions below) to participate in the Project and submitting the original grant proposal. Although GVMC spearheaded the effort to secure a Section 319 grant for the Lower Grand River, it shares the responsibility of implementing the Project tasks with its partners.

Fishbeck, Thompson, Carr & Huber, Inc. (FTC&H). As a local consulting firm with expertise in watershed management planning, FTC&H works with numerous local stakeholders integral to the success of the Project. FTC&H leads many technical tasks under the Project, and plays a supporting role in all others. In addition, FTC&H serves as the point of contact for the Project, responsible for compiling information from all Project partners for purposes of reporting to MDEQ.

Annis Water Resources Institute (AWRI). Created by Grand Valley State University (GVSU) to conduct innovative research related to natural resources, AWRI is involved in several watershed management planning and implementation projects in western Michigan. Several tasks under the Project have AWRI in a lead role, particularly for the development of the information and education strategy and establishing the project evaluation process. AWRI also plays a role on many tasks as a supporting partner.

In addition to the four partners listed above, numerous municipalities, organizations, county and local agencies, and water resource groups participate on the Project as partners. Many of these additional partners committed to attending quarterly meetings and providing both financial and technical (e.g., data) resources. Several communities that committed to participating in the Project did so with the understanding that the process and the resulting watershed management

plan would assist in fulfilling new storm water permitting requirements under the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Phase II municipal separate storm sewer system (MS4) storm water program. **Appendix A** contains a list of additional partners participating in the Project.

Overview of Project Goals and Work Plan

According to the project description, the goal of the Lower Grand River Watershed Management Planning Project is "to develop a watershed management plan to outline strategies and recommendations to effectively reduce nonpoint source pollution." Therefore, the focus of the Project at this stage is creating a plan that will serve as a roadmap for future implementation. Further development and refinement of goals and objectives for the Project is occurring over the two-year project timeframe.

Beginning in July 2002, the Project set out to achieve this goal through ten tasks defined in the workplan. The tasks described in the work plan are as follows:

- Task 1: Identify Stakeholders, Form Committee and Facilitate Meetings
- Task 2: Identify Character of Watershed
- Task 3: Develop Information and Education Strategy
- Task 4: Set Watershed Project Goals and Objectives
- Task 5: Identify Systems of Best Management Practices (BMPs)
- Task 6: Integrate Existing Water Resource Programs and Organizations
- Task 7: Progress Reporting
- Task 8: Write and Assemble Watershed Management Plan
- Task 9: Develop Evaluation Process
- Task 10: Develop Sustainability for Watershed Management Plan.

Each task in the work plan contains a series of sub-tasks with a designated lead, supporting partners, and related products. **Appendix B** contains the complete work plan. **Table 1** provides a list of the roles and responsibilities of each partner. Each task of the workplan listed a variety of products and activities intended to achieve the overall goal of the Project. Many of the products and activities span both years of the Project. According to the work plan, partners are responsible for developing the following products:

Task 1
- Steering Committee mission statement, meetings and minutes

Task 2
- Spreadsheet comparing data from Lower Grand River Watershed studies
- Decision Support System
- Map of significant nonpoint source contributions, prioritized list of pollutants, sources, and causes
- Map of selected pilot project areas
- List of designated and desired uses, map of critical areas
- Initial water quality summary

Task 3
- Information and Education Strategy
- One brochure and four newspaper inserts

- Agendas and handouts for public meetings
- Interactive watershed management tool

Task 4
- List of watershed goals
- List of watershed objectives

Task 5
- Subwatershed classification of urban and rural areas
- Systems of urban BMPs
- Systems of rural BMPs
- Description of process to prioritize areas outside of the pilot project areas

Task 6
- Summary of existing water quality programs in the Lower Grand River Watershed
- Model programs and ordinances to protect water quality

Task 7
- Quarterly reports to MDEQ
- Project summary factsheet at the end of the Project
- Draft report, final report, Release of Claims Statement

Task 8
- Draft Lower Grand River Watershed Management Plan
- Final Lower Grand River Watershed Management Plan

Task 9
- List of members on Evaluation Team
- Description of evaluation tools
- Presentation of evaluation summary
- Evaluation summary report

Task 10
- Strategy for Reorganized Watershed Council
- Summary of recommendations for sustainability
- List of resource library materials.

Table 1. Lower Grand River Watershed Management Planning Project Partner: Key Roles and Responsibilities

Partner	Role(s)	Responsibility
Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ)	Project Administrator	Ensure grantee spends grant funds according to workplan; Review products and quarterly reports; Participate on various subcommittees
Grand Valley Metro Council (GVMC)	Primary Grantee	Leading efforts of the Steering Committee and the Visioning Subcommittee (formerly the Sustainability Subcommittee)
Annis Water Resources Institute (AWRI)	Sub-grantee	Leading efforts of the Rural Subcommittee and the Information & Education Subcommittee
Fishbeck, Thompson, Carr & Huber, Inc. (FTC&H)	Sub-grantee	Leading efforts of the Urban Subcommittee and the Technical Subcommittee

Overview of Project Organization

The Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project uses a committee structure to implement tasks in the work plan. At the core of the structure is a Steering Committee, surrounded by a group of five subcommittees; the Steering Committee and subcommittees share the responsibility for implementing the Project. The Steering Committee is charged with reviewing and approving work of the subcommittees, as well as developing strategies for sustainable organizational structure and funding. Each subcommittee is charged with a specific goal (or goals) and associated objectives. The subcommittees established to implement the project include:

- A technical subcommittee that serves as an advisory group to other subcommittees;
- An urban subcommittee that serves as an advisory committee on urban, industrial, and commercial land uses and their relationship to water quality;
- A rural subcommittee that serves as an advisory committee on rural, residential, and agricultural land uses and their relationship to water quality;
- An information and education subcommittee that focuses on the development of information and educational tools and their dissemination throughout the watershed; and
- A sustainability subcommittee that will assist the project transition from planning to implementation, including developing strategies for sustainable organizational structure and funding.

In addition to the Steering Committee and the subcommittees, the Project also includes a stakeholder group that meets quarterly to discuss activities. This group is referred to as the Grand River Forum. Each partner is responsible for overseeing the activities of the various committees that comprise the Project. FTC&H leads the activities of the Urban and Technical Subcommittees. GVMC leads the efforts of the Steering Committee and the Sustainability Subcommittee. AWRI leads the Information & Education and the Rural Subcommittees. All partners work together to host meetings of the Grand River Forum.

In addition to the overall project goal, each partner developed goals and objectives for their respective subcommittee. Subcommittee goals are as follows:

<u>Technical Subcommittee Goals</u>

- To assist in the development and implementation of a watershed management plan.
- To prioritize the sources and causes of water use impairments and select appropriate Best Management Practices for use in both rural and urban subwatersheds.

<u>Urban Subcommittee Goals</u>

- To involve urban, industrial, and commercial communities and land users in the development and implementation of the watershed management plan.
- To select appropriate BMPs for urban subwatersheds
- To create and implement evaluation tools for measuring improvements in urban areas.

Rural Subcommittee Goals

- To involve rural, residential, and commercial communities and land users in the development and implementation of the watershed management plan.
- To select appropriate BMPs for rural subwatersheds.
- To create and implement evaluation tools for measuring improvements in rural areas.

Information and Education Subcommittee Goals

- To involve all users of the watershed to assist in the creation of a successful and innovative information and education strategy.
- To provide the Steering Committee with a Decision Support System to aid in the delineation of critical areas in the watershed.
- To create a method for the evaluation of the watershed management planning process.

Sustainability Subcommittee

- To maintain project momentum and develop strategies to accomplish the task of making the Lower Grand Watershed Management Plan an essential document for the protection and preservation of water resources in the watershed.
- To develop a collaborative framework of the necessary functions of the stakeholders to sustain the quality of the Grand River Watershed's resources. Actions that stakeholders use to institutionalize watershed management principles will be integrated into their standard operating procedures.
- To integrate watershed management goals into GVMC's programs for ongoing committee structure and long-term stability of watershed improvement efforts.

SECTION 2: EVALUATION APPROACH

As the lead partner for the evaluation task, AWRI hired Tetra Tech, Inc. (Tt) as the Project Evaluator to develop and implement the evaluation process. Using the *W.K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook* (January 1998), the Project Evaluator developed and implemented a process for conducting project-level evaluations that 1) uses stakeholder involvement to continually and consistently generate information about the project and 2) considers the context of the project, how it was implemented, and what outcomes resulted. The goals of the evaluation are to:

- Facilitate a process of holistic and continuous evaluation of the values, goals, objectives, organizational arrangements, processes, outputs and impacts of the project during and after implementation;
- Facilitate the identification of implementation problems as they occur and the resolution of those implementation problems in order to improve the potential for the attainment of project goals and objectives;

- Identify program design and management lessons learned in order to revise the current project and aid future project designs; and

- Assess and ensure the future sustainability of the program after the termination of the current funding stream.

The evaluation approach includes the following three primary components:

- **Contextual Evaluation.** This component focuses on how the project functions within the economic, social, and political environment of the community. This component also looks at the structure and function of the committees established to implement the project.

- **Implementation Evaluation.** Through this component, the evaluation identifies potential barriers to successful task implementation, monitors the experiences and performance of the project staff and partners, and documents evolution of the project over time. This component of the evaluation focuses on activities and participation, as well as products generated through the project.

- **Outcome Evaluation.** Assessing the short-, medium-, and long-term results of the project is the focus of this evaluation component. The term "outcome" generally refers to the impact a project has had, rather than the products it has created. In the short-term, outcomes may include an impact on awareness, knowledge, skills and motivations. In the medium-term, outcomes may include an impact on decision-making, policies, and personal behavior. Long-term outcomes are linked to the overarching goal of the project, generally a change in environmental or social conditions.

The evaluation approach will focus primarily on the project context and implementation, with a secondary focus on outcomes. This is due to the fact that MDEQ is providing funds to execute the designated tasks, which primarily focus on watershed management *planning* during the two-year project. The ultimate expectation is that project partners will generate an approvable watershed management plan for the Lower Grand River Watershed that will provide a roadmap for future implementation and lead to improvements in water quality conditions. At this time, implementation of the watershed management plan is outside the scope of the current Lower Grand River Watershed Management Planning Project; therefore, little information will exist on outcomes such as changes in water quality and stakeholder awareness as a result of the project. It is reasonable to assume that project partners will become fully engaged in the types of activities that will lead to implementation successes and positive outcomes.

Working with AWRI, the Project Evaluator assembled an evaluation team comprised of representatives from the Steering Committee and each of the five subcommittees and developed tasks for the evaluation process. The tasks of the evaluation process are as follows:

Task 1: Develop Evaluation Questions with the Evaluation Team

- Initial meeting between the Project Evaluator and the Evaluation Team assembled by AWRI during the beginning of the first project year.
- List of evaluation questions generated by the Evaluation Team for use by the Project Evaluator in selecting and developing evaluation tools.

Task 2: Develop the Evaluation Approach and Tools

- Description of potential evaluation tools, assessed according to resource availability, credibility, importance of information, and other considerations identified by the Evaluation Team.
- Project Evaluation Tool report that provides background on the evaluation, the evaluation approach, the evaluation tools, and the associated schedule for administering each evaluation tool.

Task 3: Collect and Analyze Data

- Conduct evaluation with Evaluation Team at the end of Project Years 1 and 2.
- Raw data collected using each evaluation tool (e.g., completed survey forms, focus group summaries, interview transcripts) to serve as documentation for future reference.
- Analysis and summary of the data collected through each evaluation tool used during each year of the Project.

Task 4: Prepare Draft and Final Evaluation Summary

- An evaluation summary report detailing the methodology and results used during Year 1 of the Project.
- An evaluation summary report detailing the methodology and results used during Year 2 of the Project, integrated with results from Year 1 of the Project.

The Project Evaluator and the Evaluation Team kicked-off the evaluation process on March 12, 2003. During this initial meeting, the Project Evaluator described the purpose of the project evaluation, provided an overview of the evaluation process, and facilitated a group brainstorming session to generate a list of project evaluation questions. The questions determined what type of information the Evaluation Team wants to collect and the most appropriate tool for collecting this information. To facilitate the brainstorming session, the Project Evaluator asked the Evaluation Team to think of evaluation questions that relate to the five focus areas listed in the project description. These focus areas are as follows:

- Assessment and Characterization of the Watershed's Natural Resources and Water Quality Conditions;
- Information and Education Strategy;
- Creating a System of Regional Governance for the Watershed;
- Reviewing and Recommending the Adoption of Best Management Practices; and
- Project Management.

The Evaluation Team generated an extensive list of evaluation questions. During the second project evaluation meeting on July 30, 2003, the Project Evaluator asked the Evaluation Team to prioritize questions and identify appropriate evaluation tools. Evaluation tools range in complexity and resource intensiveness. Provided below is a brief overview of evaluation tools commonly used in project evaluations[1].

- **Observation.** This tool involves watching the activities of project staff and participants, and is useful when conducting context and implementation evaluations. Through this tool, the evaluator may identify strengths and weaknesses in the operations of the project and offer suggestions for improvement.

[1] Adapted from the *W.K. Kellogg Foundation Evaluation Handbook*, January 1998.

- **Interview.** Through this tool, the evaluator can learn how project staff and participants view their experiences with the program and gain an in-depth understanding of hard-to-measure concepts, such as participation, empowerment, and cohesiveness. Interviews help the evaluator to understand how a project actually works and can produce useful information for individuals who wish to replicate the project. The evaluator may choose to give different types of interviews, such as informal conversational interviews where there are no predetermined questions to closed-field response interviews where the evaluator asks participants to choose from fixed responses.

- **Focus Group.** This tool is essentially a group interview. The evaluator can use this tool when confidentiality is not a concern and when obtaining a range of opinions on a topic is necessary. In this type of interview setting, a group of six to eight individuals meet for a few hours to respond to a series of predetermined questions. The goal is for participants to state what they think about these series of questions, and to serve as a catalyst for generating thoughts and observations that they might not have thought of individually.

- **Survey.** To obtain feedback from a broad audience, an evaluator may choose to develop and administer this type of evaluation tool. Surveys can vary in length and type of question, depending on where and how it is to be administered and the type of information the evaluator would like to obtain. Surveys can use a mix of open- and close-ended questions that will allow the evaluator to easily translate standard responses, but also obtain detailed information on perception and values.

- **Content Analysis**. Internal project documents are a valuable source of evaluation data. This tool focuses on conducting a detailed review and analysis of internal project documents, such as progress reports, strategies, outreach materials, summaries, meeting minutes, and project schedules. Coupled with other evaluation tools, content analysis of internal project documents can provide the evaluator with a mechanism for comparing the intent of the project with the reality of the project. Reviewing and analyzing these types of documents also serve as an efficient way for the evaluator to gain insights into project participation, decision-making processes, and changes in project development.

During the second project evaluation meeting, the Evaluation Team identified evaluation questions appropriate for Project Year 1 and for Project Year 2. **Appendix C** contains evaluation questions for Project Years 1 and 2 developed by the Evaluation Team. **Table 2** contains the Project Year 1 evaluation questions presented according to project and evaluation focus areas. In addition, the Evaluation Team identified appropriate tools to obtain information for answering each evaluation question. The Evaluation Team determined that content analysis, focus groups, surveys and personal interviews are the most appropriate tools for evaluating the Project, given available resources and schedule constraints. In most cases, the selected evaluation tools ask similar evaluation questions focusing on context, implementation and outcome. Depending on the type of evaluation tool, the questions gauge project success and challenges from the perspective of key project staff, the MDEQ Project Administrator, members of the subcommittees and Steering Committee, and the Evaluation Team. A description of each evaluation tool used to evaluate the Lower Grand River Watershed Management Planning Project is provided below.

Content Analysis

As stated above, review and analysis of project-related documentation allows for a comparison of the intent of the project with the reality of the project. Tt reviewed and analyzed the following project documents and products generated through the Rogue River Watershed I&E Program:

- Project workplan
- Project schedule
- Quarterly reports
- Subcommittee goals and objectives
- Grand River Forum evaluations
- Project brochure
- Watershed handout
- Grand River Beacon newsletter
- Project web site
- Online resource library
- Committee meeting minutes
- Proposed project area maps.

During the content analysis, the Project Evaluator reviewed and analyzed material to identify information regarding the context, implementation, and outcomes of the Project. In some cases, the Project Evaluator compared information contained in documents (e.g., project workplan to quarterly reports) to identify successes and challenges. In addition, the Project Evaluator compares information compiled through the content analysis to information collected using other evaluation tools such as focus group results and survey responses. When reviewed in concert, the information from the content analysis is given both depth and context.

Focus Group

Evaluation Team members met on July 30, 2003, to discuss the challenges and successes of the Lower Grand River Watershed Management Planning Project. The Project Evaluator served as the facilitator and asked participants to provide feedback on a series of questions derived from the potential evaluation questions developed during the March 12, 2003, Evaluation Team meeting. The questions addressed issues related to goals and objectives, organizational arrangements, processes, and outputs of the Project. Presented below are the questions that the Project Evaluator used to guide the focus group.

A. WATERSHED ASSESSMENT AND CHARACTERIZATION

1. How does the structure or the context of the project lead to better project outcomes (e.g., availability of resources, access to data, participation)?
2. Do the pilot projects accurately characterize the Lower Grand River watershed? Why or why not?
3. How does the schedule for year 1 tasks for this activity compare to the actual schedule?
    - Conduct inventory of existing and past studies to identify gaps in information
    - Create Decision Support System
    - Prioritize problem sites, sources and causes
    - Establish Pilot Project Areas
    - Determine Designated, Threatened and Desired Uses and Critical Areas of Watershed
4. How would you summarize the successes and challenges associated with this focus area of the project?

Table 2. Project Year 1 Evaluation Questions by Project and Evaluation Focus Areas

Project Focus Area	Evaluation Focus Areas			
	Goals and Objectives	**Organizational Arrangements**	**Processes**	**Outputs**
Watershed Assessment and Characterization (Workplan Tasks 2 and 8)	Does the management plan reflect stakeholders' concerns as well as priority areas identified through the watershed characterization? Are Phase II issues/concerns of watershed partners reflected in the watershed management plan?	Does the structure or the context of the project lead to better project outcomes (e.g., availability of resources, access to data, participation)?	Did the project have full participation?	Do the pilot projects accurately characterize the Lower Grand River watershed? Does the public agree? Do the data support the selection of the pilot projects?
Information and Education Strategy (Workplan Task 3)	Were the appropriate target audiences identified? For the project? For the watershed?	Were the appropriate stakeholders on the Information and Education Strategy team?	Was focusing on awareness now the right approach to take? Was developing the brochure and the news inserts by subcommittee an effective process?	Did people in the Grand Forum read and use the products developed through the I&E Strategy? Were the news inserts and brochures effective in raising awareness?
System of Regional Governance (Workplan Tasks 6 and 10)	**(No Year 1 questions)**			
BMP Review and Recommendations (Task 5)	Are the baseline conditions of each pilot area established?			
Project Management (Tasks 1, 4, and 7)	Have matching commitments from local governments been met for this project?	How much of the project success is based on actual individuals versus partner organizations?	Were on-going sub-watershed activities promoted and sustained while engaging in this larger basinwide project? Was the project funder given review time that the contract calls for? Were project budgets realistic?	What activities were accomplished that go beyond the requirements of the grant?

B. INFORMATION AND EDUCATION STRATEGY

1. Describe why developing the brochure and the news inserts by subcommittee was or was not an effective process.
2. Describe the composition of the Information and Education Strategy team. What were its strengths? Weaknesses?
3. How does the schedule for year 1 tasks for this activity compare to the actual schedule?
    - Determine goals and objectives
    - Create and distribute brochures and inserts
    - Conduct public meetings
4. How would describe the effectiveness of these educational materials?
5. How would you describe the successes and challenges associated with this focus area of the project?

C. BMP REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. What steps were taken to establish the baseline conditions of each pilot area?
2. What evaluation criteria were used to identify and select BMPs in urban and rural areas?
3. How does the strategy for evaluating BMPs leverage partner resources?
4. How does the schedule for year 1 tasks for this activity compare to the actual schedule?
    - Delineate urban and rural subwatersheds
    - Identify needed BMPs in urban subwatersheds
    - Identify needed BMPs in rural subwatersheds
    - Set up prioritization process for areas outside of pilot project areas

D. SUSTAINABILITY

1. How does the strategic plan for the new watershed organization define how it will be sustained over time?
2. What is the process for establishing the new watershed organization?
    - Does the process involve all stakeholders?
    - Are there effective mechanisms in place for obtaining partner and public input?
3. How does the schedule for year 1 tasks for this activity compare to the actual schedule?
    - Define steering committee members' roles and responsibilities
    - Create resource library

E. PROJECT MANAGEMENT

1. What is the status of matching commitments from local governments for year 1 of this project?
2. Describe your perceptions as to how much of the project success is based on actual individuals versus partner organizations?
3. Does the project funder feel that he/she had adequate review time, as required under the contract?
4. How do project budgets compare to actual expenditures?
5. What activities that go beyond the requirements of the grant were accomplished during year 1 of the project?
6. How does the schedule for year 1 tasks for this activity compare to the actual schedule?
    - Submit quarterly reports

Interview

Phone interviews took place between the Project Evaluator and several key project partners. The phone interview with the MDEQ Project Administrator took place on January 21, 2004. Phone interviews with the project grantees took place on January 22, 2004 (AWRI), February 20, 2004

(FTC&H) and on March 3, 2004 (GVMC). Each phone interview covered the same range of issues as discussed in the Evaluation Team focus group meeting. The Project Evaluator used interviews as an evaluation tool to obtain in-depth details on the workings of the project and the four primary partners on the project.

As necessary, the Project Evaluator contacted additional project staff and partners throughout the evaluation process to obtain additional information and clarify information collected through the content analysis, focus group, and interviews.

Survey

To ensure that the evaluation captures the broader perspective of subcommittee participants, the Evaluation Team members facilitated evaluation activities within their respective subcommittees. Although initially intended to function as a focus group, subcommittee members requested additional time to consider the evaluation questions and prepare their responses. As a result, many subcommittee members answered the evaluation questions in a survey format by taking home the evaluation questions and submitting their answers to the Project Evaluator individually. The Project Evaluator developed focus group questions for the subcommittee members based on the July 30, 2003 Evaluation Team meeting. Evaluation questions provided to subcommittee members are as follows:

1) What are the goals and objectives of this sub-committee?

2) What are the goals and objectives of the overall Lower Grand River Watershed 319 Project?

3) What is the function of the sub-committee within the overall project structure?

4) How does the project's sub-committee structure – several sub-committees each with a focus on a particular topic – affect the outcomes of the overall project?

5) How effectively does your sub-committee exchange information on progress with the other sub-committees?

6) What stakeholders are missing from this sub-committee and why?

7) What skills or areas of expertise would have benefited the efforts of this subcommittee during the first year?

8) How would you describe the level of participation by sub-committee members?

9) What stakeholders are missing from the overall project and why?

10) Describe why the processes used by this subcommittee to develop work products were effective and/or challenging.

11) How realistic were project schedules and budgets?

12) How much of the sub-committee's success is based on the participation and commitment of actual individuals versus the organization represented by each individual?

13) How much of the overall project's success is based on the participation and commitment of actual individuals versus the organization represented by each individual?

14) What were the most significant lessons learned by this sub-committee during the first year of the project?

Feedback on the subcommittee focus group questions helped to formulate focus group questions for the Steering Committee. Evaluation questions provided to members of the Steering Committee are as follows:

1) What are the goals and objectives of the Steering Committee?

2) From the perspective of the Steering Committee members, what are the goals and objectives of the overall Lower Grand River Watershed 319 Project?

3) Describe how the Steering Committee functions within the overall project structure. Does the Steering Committee function effectively? Please describe why or why not. What changes could be made to improve how the Steering Committee functions?

4) How do members of the Steering Committee feel that the project's structure – several sub-committees each with a focus on a particular topic and a Steering Committee – affect the outcomes of the overall project?

5) What are the challenges associated with information exchange between the Steering Committee and each sub-committee? If information exchange is effective, what factors contribute to its effectiveness? If information exchange is not effective, what factors serve as barriers to effective communication?

6) What challenges has the Steering Committee faced over the course of the project? (It is acceptable to discuss recent issues, although the current focus of the evaluation is the first project year.)

7) What skills or areas of expertise are missing from the Steering Committee? What efforts are being made to address these needs for the remainder of the project?

8) Describe the level of participation by Steering Committee members. What has led to, or prevented, a high level of participation? Provide recommendations to overcome barriers, if any, to participation.

9) What were the most significant lessons learned by the Steering Committee during the first year of the project?

10) Were the goals and objectives of the Steering Committee achieved during the first year of the project? If yes, please describe the factors that led the Steering Committee to successfully achieving its goals. If no, please describe the factors that prevented the Steering Committee from successfully achieving its goals.

11) With approximately six months remaining in the project, what would the Steering Committee like to achieve before the project ends (i.e., what are the Steering Committee's updated or revised goals for the near-term)?

The evaluation tools selected by the Evaluation Team resulted in primarily qualitative information. Given the focus of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project, qualitative information is necessary to identify successes and challenges related to project context and implementation. Future phases of watershed management in the Lower Grand River watershed, such as implementation of the watershed management plan, can be evaluated using quantitative information. Section Three presents the information collected using evaluation tools described above.

SECTION THREE: EVALUATION FINDINGS

This section presents the information obtained through the evaluation tools described in the previous section. Evaluation findings fall into the following categories: 1) project context; 2) project implementation; and 3) project outcomes. As discussed in Section Two, each evaluation tool sought to collect information that would answer the questions posed by the Evaluation Team (see Table 2). Many of the evaluation tools generated additional information that provided insights beyond answers to the Project Year 1 evaluation questions. Each section provides an in-depth discussion of the evaluation findings that includes answers to the Project Year 1 evaluation questions, as well as other successes and challenges identified through the evaluation process.

Project Context

Findings in this category address the structure and function of the project partners, as well as how the project functions within the community. In a project such as the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project, the effectiveness of the project structure and the ability for project staff and participants (i.e., subcommittee members) to work together as a team will affect progress toward project goals. Therefore, it is important to examine project management arrangements and the use of committees and subcommittees to conduct project activities. As part of the project context, the evaluation also examines how the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project affects, and is effected by, the community. Community, for the purposes of this evaluation, is defined through the Grand River Forum, the Phase II communities participating in the project, and existing sub-watershed groups in the Lower Grand River Watershed.

Function of the Project Partners: Project Grantees and the Project Funder

As discussed in Section One, the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project is a cooperative effort among three entities: 1) GVMC; 2) AWRI; and 3) FTC&H. MDEQ is also considered a partner as the primary funding agency. Results of the phone interviews, focus groups, and surveys have revealed that all three grantees, as well as other project participants, feel this cooperative approach works well, despite some logistical challenges.

According to the interview with GVMC, the differing missions and approaches of each project partner (i.e., academia, regional municipal coordinating agency, private sector and state agency) may contribute to the logistical challenges experienced in managing the project. The interview with FTC&H indicated that partners maintained good communication by participating in planning meetings held on an as-needed basis. Interviews revealed that all project partners share responsibilities according to areas of expertise, allowing each partner to take a leadership role on different project subcommittees.

GVMC is the primary grantee for the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project with support from AWRI and FTC&H as sub-grantees. Although the partners have clearly delineated leadership roles within the overall project structure (i.e., subcommittees and the Steering Committee), interviews revealed that at times the Project has not had a defined leader among the grantees. Gerald Felix, the Executive Director of GVMC, led development of the grant proposal

and initial work plan for the Project. He served as GVMC's representative on the project until the fourth quarter of Project Year 1, when he resigned from GVMC. The interim Executive Director of GVMC served as GVMC's representative on the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project. Since that time, GVMC has hired a new Executive Director, but has asked the interim Executive Director to continue representing GVMC on the project. According to the interview with GVMC's current representative, some historical knowledge of the project left with Gerald Felix. The current representative from GVMC stated that he was unaware GVMC was the lead grantee on the project until recently, and that he felt the sub-grantees probably wanted GVMC to take more of a leadership role than it had in the past. FTC&H verified this assumption by stating that both sub-grantees look to GVMC to make final decisions, and that GVMC is fulfilling this role more now than it had during Project Year 1. By taking a more active leadership role, GVMC has helped to reshape the project's overall structure and provided conflict resolution when necessary.

Structure and Function of the Project

As discussed in Section One, the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project consists of a Steering Committee, five sub-committees, and the stakeholder-based Grand River Forum. The evaluation process revealed successes and challenges related to the overall project structure and each component of the project structure (i.e., Steering committee, sub-committees and the Grand River Forum). A review of the work plan indicates that the overall structure of the project was conceptualized early in the process, possibly at the time the three grantees developed the grant proposal. Based on a review of the quarterly reports, it appears as if the project partners formulated the goals and objectives for each of the subcommittees to use in recruiting subcommittee members during the initial Grand River Forum meeting. As a result, partners serving on the various subcommittees did not have an active role in defining the structure or function of the project. The evaluation process revealed that some subcommittee members felt that the roles, purposes, and functions of the subcommittees were unclear at the beginning of the project and that they did not have an opportunity to shape their respective subcommittee goals and objectives. Lack of involvement early in the Project, particularly during subcommittee goal setting, may be a factor in subcommittee members' perspectives.

Subcommittee members feel that delegating roles and responsibilities to particular sub-committees works well because it allows specialized individuals in small working groups to address detailed issues while maintaining focus and generating progress. The number of groups comprising the project's structure and the use of the word "committee" to define these groups gives the appearance that it is an established organization, according to the interviews with GVMC and AWRI. Given that it is not an established organization, and that the committees do not have clear leadership or rules for functioning like a true committee, GVMC stated that it might have been more appropriate to refer to each group as a "task force" rather than a "committee" or "subcommittee."

Although subcommittee members stated that the project structure allowed groups to focus on a particular issue, the evaluation process highlighted that the subcommittee members felt the structure did not promote inter-subcommittee communication. One member of the Steering Committee stated that the overall project structure slows progress, making it difficult to sustain participation and generating the need for project partners (e.g., FTC&H, AWRI, GVMC) to conduct more of the work. Several members did acknowledge that the web site and the Grand River Forum were useful in keeping up-to-date on other subcommittees' activities. In addition, subcommittee members highlighted overlap in subcommittee membership as a useful means of information exchange among subcommittees.

Other important factors influencing the project context of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project is the function of the project within the community. Stakeholders from communities within the watershed participate in the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project through the Grand River Forum; therefore, the evaluation will take into account the success the Grand River Forum has had in engaging stakeholder involvement. In addition, the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project has reached out to the community by providing an incentive for municipalities subject to Phase II NPDES MS4 permitting requirements. Several subwatershed groups are active within the Lower Grand River Watershed, an important component of the community affected by the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project. The final evaluation will assess how the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project affected, and is affected by, the Grand River Forum, Phase II municipalities, and sub-watershed groups.

Project Implementation

This category focuses on task implementation, the performance of project staff and partners, and the evolution of the project over time. Project implementation also takes into account project outputs (i.e., project deliverables required under the work plan) and deadlines. The Project Evaluator used several evaluation tools to evaluate project implementation, including focus groups, surveys, phone interviews with key project staff, and the content analysis. The evaluation of project implementation provides an analysis at the subcommittee and committee level, as well as the overall project-level.

Project Implementation at the Subcommittee and Committee Level

An important aspect of project implementation is how well the various committees and subcommittees work together to accomplish their respective goals and the requirements of the grant. Factors influencing committee and subcommittee functions include facilitation, participation, and processes used to complete tasks. An analysis of the factors influencing project implementation is provided below for each committee and subcommittee comprising the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project.

Technical Subcommittee

FTC&H facilitates the efforts of the Technical Subcommittee and, according to subcommittee members, conducts most of the activities and processes necessary to develop the work products. Members of the Technical Subcommittee are able to articulate the goals of their subcommittee and of the overall project, demonstrating an understanding of their role within larger project. FTC&H feels that the involvement of decision-makers from major cities on the Technical Subcommittee is impressive. The involvement of major decision-makers from major cities may be due to the NPDES Phase II MS4 storm water permitting requirements; subcommittee members feel these requirements are the catalyst for their organization's support of the project, which drives their individual participation. Members of the Technical Subcommittee feel that federal agencies and Phase I MS4 communities are noticeably absent. Although a few private and non-profit groups participate, the Technical Subcommittee members feel increased participation from these types of organizations would prove beneficial. According to Technical Subcommittee members, the initial year of the project revealed the lack of technical requirements early on in the process.

FTC&H and subcommittee members noted that participation on the Technical Subcommittee was sporadic, contributing to a lack of continuity that impeded the group's effectiveness. During the first year, subcommittee members learned that continuity among the group is important, even when there is not much to do. As the second year of the project is underway, members state that the Technical Subcommittee has more to do and is taking a more active role – resulting in better participation.

The evaluation process revealed that continuity of the Technical Subcommittee is largely dependent on members perceiving they have a purpose and an immediate role to play. When the group didn't have much to review, participation was very sporadic. Now that the group has more to review, participation on the Technical Subcommittee is improving, according to members.

Rural Subcommittee
AWRI facilitates the Rural Subcommittee with support from FTC&H. When asked to articulate the Rural Subcommittee's goals and objectives, members referred to the one-page description developed by AWRI, indicating that the group is aware of this formal list and may use it as a point of reference. In addition to the one-page overview, members stated that the Rural Subcommittee is also intended to: develop pilot projects, provide direction to rural watersheds, and set the standard. According to members, functions of the Rural Subcommittee include selecting pilot areas, providing guidance to local partners, addressing the rural aspect of the 319 plan, developing BMPs for rural areas, and promoting the rural opinion within the project.

Attendance in the Rural Subcommittee was high in the beginning of the project, but members noticed a drop off when the Sand Creek watershed was selected as the Rural Pilot Project Area. A core of approximately eight members provided continuous participation. Although lack of participation slows the process, subcommittee members felt that the process for conducting the subcommittee's activities was effective due to the expertise and efforts of AWRI and FTC&H. Members feel that more involvement in the Rural Subcommittee is necessary from the following stakeholders: conservation districts, the Timberland Resource Conservation & Development Council, Western Michigan Environmental Action Council, Michigan State University extension, U.S. Department of Agriculture-Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Involvement from more local officials, Kent and Ottawa Counties parks, and Timberland Resource Conservation & Development Council would benefit the overall project according to Rural Subcommittee members.

Through the evaluation process, members of the Rural Subcommittee identified a possible link between the selection of the Sand Creek watershed as the Rural Pilot Project Area and participation trends in the Rural Subcommittee. Once the Rural Pilot Project Area was selected, members of the Rural Subcommittee who didn't have a vested interest in the Sand Creek watershed, or couldn't see how the pilot project area related to their particular subwatershed, stepped away from the project. Initially in the project, members of the Rural Subcommittee emphasized the amount of enthusiasm that existed among participants. When the early members of the group no longer felt their interests or needs were reflected in the function of the Rural Subcommittee, participation dwindled. It is possible that diminishing participation in the Rural Subcommittee might affect support for the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project from rural stakeholders over the long-term.

Urban Subcommittee
FTC&H facilitates the work of the Urban Subcommittee, a group that identifies their goals as follows: to identify pollutants and sources in watersheds and to identify acceptable BMPs. According to project partners, many of the Urban Subcommittee's members represent municipalities that are subject to the NPDES Phase II MS4 permitting requirements and were told that participation in the Lower Grand Watershed Planning Project would benefit their efforts to meet their permitting requirements. Participation on the Urban Subcommittee was sporadic, according to members, but that FTC&H held the group together. Members state that sporadic attendance is possibly due to long meetings held back to back. Members feel that success of the Urban Subcommittee is dependent on participation and support from municipalities that each

member represents. Members feel that the activities of the Urban Subcommittee would have benefited from the expertise of communities subject to Phase I MS4 permitting requirements. From the perspective of the Urban Subcommittee, the overall project lacks representation from schools, universities and other nested MS4s; these entities are also subject to the Phase II MS4 permitting requirements.

According to FTC&H, Urban Subcommittee members obtained a better understanding of the project organization by developing the watershed management plan for Buck Creek Watershed, the Urban Pilot Project Area. Through the first year of the project, the members of the Urban Subcommittee learned that committees and communities can work together.

The evaluation process revealed that members of the Urban Subcommittee view the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project as an opportunity to more effectively and efficiently meet their Phase II MS4 permitting requirements. Statements about the desire to see more involvement from Phase I MS4 communities, schools, universities, and other nested MS4s is a clear indication that members of the Urban Subcommittee would like to network with other entities subject to NPDES MS4 permitting requirements. It is unclear, however, if members of the Urban Subcommittee are aware of, and committed to, the goals of the overall Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project and if their participation in the project is sustainable (i.e., once their Phase II MS4 permitting requirements are fulfilled, how involved will they remain in the Lower Grand River Watershed project? If involvement in this project is not meeting their expectation in helping them to comply with Phase II MS4 permitting requirements, will they remain committed to the Lower Grand River Watershed efforts and participate in future activities that have no relationship to their permit requirements?).

Information &Education Subcommittee

AWRI serves as the facilitator of the Information and Education (I&E) Subcommittee. Members of the I&E Subcommittee feel that expectations for the subcommittee were not clear at the outset of the project and expressed a desire for the opportunity to review the goals and objectives developed by AWRI for the subcommittee. Although members of this group have expertise in conducting stakeholder outreach for the organizations that they represent, they expressed a concern that the facilitator did not fully tap their expertise during Project Year 1. Based on input from I&E Subcommittee members and AWRI, it is clear that the facilitator and some members of the I&E Subcommittee differ in approach and style, causing some frustration and a perceived lack of progress. Like many of the other subcommittees, the I&E Subcommittee experienced a decline in participation over time, maintaining a core group of approximately five members. Some members suggest that the group's atrophy may have been linked to the perception that the facilitator does not value members' input; some members expressed a concern about offering their input because they felt the facilitator viewed comments on I&E products as contentious. According to members, the I&E Subcommittee appeared to thrive under a temporary facilitator because they felt that the facilitator valued their input and was willing to learn from their expertise.

Members stated that the I&E Subcommittee did not initially operate using a formal process; most members felt as if the facilitator took the lead on developing the I&E products tasked to the group and asked members for approval once the product was finished. According to members, workplan deadlines were the driving force of the I&E Subcommittee rather than evaluation results from each I&E product. Members stated that they tried to address the issue of structure and evaluation by creating a development and evaluation process. The process appears to have mixed success in the minds of I&E Subcommittee members; some members stated that the development and evaluation process is useful and valuable, others commented that it does not

work. Some members expressed concern that the I&E Subcommittee activities, such as development of the I&E Strategy, are taking place before the newly formed Visioning Committee has had a chance to develop the vision for the watershed (see Sustainability Subcommittee discussion below). Members of the I&E Subcommittee feel that the work of this subcommittee should integrate with the activities conducted by the other project subcommittees. However, the I&E Subcommittee members stated that they have had little to no interaction with the rest of the subcommittees in the project, a sentiment shared by other subcommittee members, and have not received feedback on any I&E products from other subcommittees.

Members feel that the I&E Subcommittee lacked representation from the agriculture community, homebuilders, and local business. Although members stated that they vocalized this, they feel no effort was made to recruit these types of stakeholders. According to members, the I&E Subcommittee would have benefited from leadership better suited to the style of the group, effective communication, a structure and process that had group consensus, and evaluation. Some members felt that the I&E Subcommittee made some accomplishments while others thought that, if given free reign, they could have accomplished a great deal more.

Many members of the I&E Subcommittee stated that they were not pleased with the products developed through the project; in particular, they felt that the logo and the colors selected for project communications on the web site and printed materials were not appropriate for the project. In addition, some members of the I&E Subcommittee felt that the products did not reflect the interests of the target audiences.

The evaluation process highlighted difficulties experienced by the I&E Subcommittee due to a difference in the approach taken by the facilitator and the approach desired by the I&E Subcommittee members. While many of the other subcommittees had positive responses about the facilitator conducting most of the work for the group, the evaluation process revealed that members of the I&E Subcommittee found this approach unsatisfactory. The individuals that comprise the I&E Subcommittee expressed a desire to have input in all aspects of the subcommittee's activities (e.g., goal setting, I&E product development) rather than have these activities done for them. More importantly, members want to see their input directly reflected in the process and work products of the subcommittee – a tangible measure that the facilitator is listening to their input and acting on it.

Sustainability Subcommittee

The Sustainability Subcommittee, facilitated by GVMC and MDEQ, was initially formed to develop a strategy for moving the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project into the implementation phase. In addition, the facilitators proposed that the Sustainability Subcommittee prepare future grant packages and identify existing programs to incorporate into the project. Details provided in the quarterly reports indicate that members of the Sustainability Subcommittee also wished to include the development of a vision for the watershed as part of their role. Meeting minutes from the Sustainability Subcommittee and the Steering Committee indicate that discussion on the purpose and goals of the Sustainability Subcommittee hindered actual progress toward creating a strategy for sustainability.

During the third quarter of Project Year 1, project partners discussed the goals and tasks of the Sustainability Subcommittee and determined that a minor adjustment to the project structure was necessary. Partners recommended splitting the tasks and roles identified for the Sustainability Subcommittee and assigning them to separate subcommittees. The existing Steering Committee would address issues related to project sustainability, including the development of a sustainable watershed organization. Development of a vision for the Lower Grand River watershed and the

project became the responsibility of a new subcommittee, referred to as the Visioning Subcommittee.

As a result of the restructuring, the Sustainability Subcommittee is no longer a standing committee of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project. The efforts of the Visioning Subcommittee will be incorporated into the final project evaluation report.

Steering Committee

GVMC and FTC&H share facilitation of the Steering Committee, comprised of stakeholders representing local government and non-profit organizations within the watershed as well as project partners. Project partners recruited Steering Committee members by extending formal invitations to participate. Steering Committee members that provided responses to the evaluation survey commented on the level of participation. One member stated that the Steering Committee seemed to include people with influence in the area, but that MDEQ seemed to steer the group. In addition, this member felt that the Steering Committee would benefit from a broader base of knowledge, specifically from private partners including developers, non-profits, and wildlife or environmental experts. One member stated that the Steering Committee could benefit from the involvement of someone with skills in sales and public relations to assist in selling the project to residents within the watershed.

Several members stated that attendance at Steering Committee meetings appears to drop as the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project continues and that a core group regularly attends and carries out the work. Steering Committee members offer little explanation as to the drop in attendance, except to say that the topics are staying a bit dry and members may be losing interest. One member stated that finding time to attend the meetings regularly is a challenge. Most of the Steering Committee's work is directed by the project partners, according to another Steering Committee member, due to a lack of member involvement. To initiate more involvement from meeting participants, a member suggested using a "roundabout" session at each meeting to provide Steering Committee members with the opportunity to give comments on a particular issue and provide feedback on lessons learned at the meeting.

The initial meeting of the Steering Committee, as reported in the meeting minutes, reviewed the function of the Steering Committee in relation to the other subcommittees comprising the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project. According to these minutes, project partners explained that the Steering Committee would serve as the core of the project's organizational structure, reviewing data and information provided by the Urban, Rural, Technical, I&E, and Sustainability Subcommittees. The Steering Committee would also assist in implementing numerous project tasks, including developing overall watershed goals and objectives, reviewing and approving criteria for selection of Pilot Project Areas. Meetings of the Steering Committee involved subcommittee updates made by each project partner responsible for facilitating their respective subcommittee. A Steering Committee member commented that while it is effective to have one spokesperson from each subcommittee present information, the limited time for reporting during each Steering Committee meeting does not allow these spokespersons to accurately convey the magnitude of each subcommittee's activities.

Although the Steering Committee reviewed and commented on products generated by the subcommittees, the meeting minutes indicate that Steering Committee's activities appeared to largely focus on defining and refining the project's organizational structure. For example, the Steering Committee's discussions on the vision for the watershed precipitated the evolution of the Sustainability Subcommittee into a more focused and well-defined Visioning Subcommittee. In addition, the Steering Committee participated in researching and brainstorming the potential

functions and structure of a future watershed organization in the Lower Grand River Watershed. Steering Committee members that responded to the evaluation survey viewed the amount of time spent discussing vision and long-term goals as a challenge faced by the Steering Committee. One Steering Committee member referred to this as "starting from scratch" and "choosing a direction with no direction in sight." This member also stated that the Steering Committee was successful thus far in selecting good goals for the watershed.

Grand River Forum
According to FTC&H, the Grand River Forum is equally comprised of subcommittee members and stakeholders. Many subcommittee members listed the Grand River Forum as an important communication channel for learning about the activities of other subcommittees. A formal evaluation of Grand River Forum participants will be conducted and incorporated into the final project evaluation report.

Project Implementation at the Overall Project-Level
Based on the information collected through the evaluation, issues related to overall project implementation fall into three categories: 1) defining the vision and setting goals; 2) sustaining participation; and 3) fulfilling work plan requirements. A description of the successes and challenges related to project implementation at the project-level is provided below.

Defining the Vision and Setting Goals
The first step in most iterative watershed management processes is identifying goals and objectives. The evaluation process reveals that while goals and objectives existed for each of the committees comprising the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project, goals and a vision for the Lower Grand River Watershed did not exist at the outset of the project. Project partners and participants on the Steering Committee and subcommittees repeatedly raised the issue of creating a vision and setting goals for the watershed as a project challenge, stating that visioning should have taken place before attempting to undertake this project given its scope.

The lack of clear vision or goals for the watershed impeded implementation of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project. During Project Year 1, a great deal of discussion during Steering Committee meetings focused on establishing a vision for the watershed and setting goals, per the comments of Steering Committee members and an analysis of Steering Committee meeting minutes. Discussions of vision affected the role and function of the Sustainability Committee and led to the creation of the Visioning Subcommittee. While the project partners were successful at identifying a need and adapting the project structure to meet that need, the reorganization has had a slight ripple effect on the ability of other subcommittees to conduct their activities. Ideally, the vision and goals created through the Visioning Subcommittee will influence the direction of the Urban, Rural, Technical and I&E Subcommittees; however, the Urban, Rural, Technical and I&E Subcommittees have had to continue making progress toward their respective tasks without the benefit of a watershed vision or goals. This has created a dilemma specifically for the I&E Subcommittee. The I&E Subcommittee is in the process of developing an I&E Strategy for the Lower Grand River Watershed Management Plan, while the Visioning Subcommittee is developing the goals for the plan. Given the two Subcommittees are simultaneously conducting these activities, the timing of the project is such that the I&E Strategy is not likely to reflect the vision and goals developed by the Visioning Subcommittee. The final evaluation will examine how the timing of the visioning activities affected project implementation for the I&E Subcommittee, as well as the other subcommittees.

Sustaining Participation

Participation is a critical factor in successfully implementing the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project. Not only is participation an important factor for this particular project, but also for future projects that will focus on implementing watershed management plans. Project implementation occurs through the efforts of the project partners that facilitate each subcommittee and the Steering Committee. The project partners (e.g., GVMC, AWRI, and FTC&H) are compensated for a significant portion of the time spent working on the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project, although project staff do volunteer their time on occasion. Members of the Steering Committee and the subcommittees, however, participate solely as volunteers with the support of their municipality, agency, or organization.

The evaluation process highlighted participation trends that characterized the Steering Committee and subcommittees – broad participation at the outset that became sporadic over time, sustained by a core group of members. Project partners and subcommittee members stated that a lack of consistent participation affected the ability of Subcommittees to make progress towards goals and tasks. Reasons for the decline in participation are unclear, although project partners and subcommittee members offered several possible explanations.

- **Steering Committee.** The Steering Committee focus group revealed that some members feel that this is going to be a "long and tedious project" and that topics are becoming dry, causing members to lose interest.

- **I&E Subcommittee.** Members of the I&E Subcommittee also stated that participation declined over time, suggesting the trend may be linked to the perception that members' input was not heard or valued.

- **Rural Subcommittee**. The Rural Subcommittee experienced a decrease in participation after the Sand Creek watershed was selected as a Pilot Project Area, suggesting that members were willing to participate when activities had a broad watershed focus and lost interest when the subcommittee took on a subwatershed focus.

- **Technical Subcommittee.** Participation trends also declined in the Technical Subcommittee, according to members, possibly due to a perceived lack of need early in the project; members cited an increase in participation as the Urban and Rural Subcommittees produce information for Technical Subcommittee review.

- **Urban Subcommittee.** Urban Subcommittee members stated that long back-to-back meetings could be a reason for sporadic participation.

- **Grand River Forum.** Through the initial focus group with the Evaluation Team, project partners cited a noticeable fluctuation in Grand River Forum participation and stated that better participation tracking is necessary to determine the potential causes.

In addition to participation on a subcommittee basis, FTC&H made the observation that more stakeholders from Kent and Ottawa Counties participated in the Grand River Forum than from Barry and Ionia Counties. FTC&H attributed the lack of participation from Barry and Ionia Counties to the fact that the Grand River Forum was consistently held at the GVSU Eberhard Center in Grand Rapids (Kent County).

No specific information on participation trends of the Sustainability Subcommittee was revealed through the evaluation process to date, likely due to the creation of the Visioning Subcommittee. The final evaluation will provide an analysis of participation trends of all subcommittees, the Steering Committee and the Grand River Forum during the final months of the project to determine how and why these trends may have changed over time.

Fulfilling Workplan Requirements

Project implementation is largely about developing the products required in the workplan and the processes used to generate those products. This section will provide specific insights and perceptions related to fulfilling the requirements of the work plan, including both the processes used and products developed through the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project.

Processes

A general description of the processes used to develop work products in each of the subcommittees and the Steering Committee was described in the previous section. At a project-level, the process for the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project focused on how to develop a watershed management plan for a watershed that drains approximately 3,020 square miles and covers ten counties. During the Evaluation Team focus group, participants stated that although the size of the watershed presents an issue, project partners are doing well in conducting the watershed assessment and characterization due to the amount of expertise brought into the process. The overarching process used to implement the project consists of a series of regular subcommittee meetings where members receive updates on current activities, review draft products, and provide input. This process relies heavily on the project partners. AWRI commented that this process may require streamlining because it seems as if staff are always preparing for meetings and have little time to do much of the required work. Through the evaluation process, the Project Evaluator observed that this process also gave subcommittee members limited responsibilities and may have led to the perception that their consistent participation is not necessary because the project partners ensure progress is made.

The evaluation process also revealed concerns about the selection of Pilot Project Areas as part of the watershed management planning process. During the Evaluation Team focus group, some participants stated that the Pilot Project Areas do not accurately characterize the watershed, but that good rationale was used in the selection process. Others on the Evaluation Team felt that because the pilot projects represent both urban and rural land uses, they do accurately characterize the general nature of the watershed. The recent phone interview with GVMC raised concerns about the level of detail that the Pilot Project Areas attempt to achieve within the larger watershed project. GVMC felt uncertain at this point in the Project if the Pilot Project Areas will produce watershed-wide lessons that apply throughout the watershed. If everyone is trying to make sure that their specific issues and interests are reflected in the results of the pilot projects, GVMC expressed the concern that both projects (e.g., the Pilot Project Areas and the overall Lower Grand River Watershed Management Plan) may suffer in the end. The evaluation process revealed that selection of the Sand Creek watershed as a Pilot Project Area possibly affected Rural Subcommittee participation; this may be tangible evidence that concerns expressed by GVMC over the use of Pilot Project Areas are valid and coming to fruition.

Products

The Evaluation Team focus group provided information on the status of work plan tasks compared to the work plan schedule. A comparison of each task to the work plan schedule showed that most tasks were implemented on time during Project Year 1, with the exception of one news insert under the I&E Subcommittee. The products assigned to the Sustainability Subcommittee were not completed due to the creation of the Visioning Subcommittee. A more

recent view of project implementation also shows that project partners and subcommittee members have developed products required under the work plan according to schedule. Minutes from the January 29, 2004, Steering Committee meeting state that project partners and subcommittee members have completed many of the tasks identified in the work plan.

In addition to the tasks listed in the work plan, project partners and subcommittee members implemented several activities not originally described in the work plan. During the evaluation process, AWRI provided a list of additional activities to illustrate that additional needs or priorities were identified through the Project, leading to implementation of activities outside of the original scope of work. The list of additional activities performed by AWRI is as follows:

- Development of the Sand Creek Watershed Management Plan and associated I&E strategy.

- Development of a 319 Grant Proposal for the Sand Creek Watershed to obtain funding for implementation activities.

- Preparation and facilitation of a tour of the Sand Creek Watershed on June 13, 2003. Tours were intended to highlight BMPs and severe NPS pollution areas for the Sand Creek Watershed Partners and Rural Subcommittee.

- Development, printing, and dissemination of supplemental handout used frequently in the third quarter, explaining general watershed concept, did you know facts, and definitions of land use.

- Development and monthly updating of project website, www.gvsu.edu/wri/isc/lowgrand. This website has a home page with general description of project, maps of the study area, a listing of involved partners, a information library page that includes an excel macro containing the resource library being used in the matrix and development of final Lower Grand plan, a listing of all meeting specifics and past minutes, a page of related projects, another of events, a page with downloadable versions of all outreach products, and a page with project contact information.

- Development, printing and dissemination of business card like web-cards to promote website.

- Assistance in crafting a product development plan with the I&E Subcommittee and have since implemented plan in the development of remainder I/E products, summer of 2003.

- Evaluation of the Fall 2003 News Insert with assistance from target audience participants.

FTC&H also identified additional activities conducted under the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project. According to FTC&H, additional activities are a result of project successes, the desire to create products useful at a subwatershed-level, and ensure sustainability. Additional activities have included the following:

- Planning and conducting quarterly Grand River Forum meetings (i.e., eight meetings during the 2-year project) rather than the four meetings required under the work plan, a decision driven by the success of the initial Grand River Forum meeting.

- Developing the watershed information matrix to better categorize and organize the inventory of past and existing studies on a subwatershed basis.

- Participating in a watershed organization panel discussion, in conjunction with the Rogue River Watershed Council, to discuss options for watershed organizations in the State of Michigan.

The evaluation process revealed that project partners are willing to take on additional activities without expecting additional resources, but that it raises concerns about having enough time and resources to fulfill grant requirements. According to FTC&H, it is important to also stick to the scope of work to ensure that project partners can fulfill grant requirements.

The final evaluation report will examine the status of project implementation during the final year of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project.

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes focus on the impact that the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project has had in the short-, medium-, and long-term. The goal of the overall Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project is to develop approvable watershed management plans for the Pilot Project Areas and the overall Lower Grand River Watershed. Part of this goal is to define goals and a vision for the watershed and to create a strategy for sustainability to ensure transition from watershed management planning to implementation.

Given the goals of the Lower Grand Watershed Planning Project, the short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes can be measured in a variety of ways. Project partners and the subcommittee members should provide additional input on the short-, medium-, and long-term project outcomes. Based on the evaluation of Project Year 1, the Project Evaluator views the project outcomes as follows:

Short-Term Project Outcomes

- Approved watershed management plans, including I&E strategies
  - Lower Grand River Watershed Management Plan
  - Urban and Rural Pilot Project Area Watershed Management Plans
- Accepted watershed goals and vision
- Increased awareness of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project

Medium-Term Project Outcomes

- Implemented approved watershed management plans
- Implemented Lower Grand River Watershed I&E Strategy
- Implemented Lower Grand River Watershed Sustainability Strategy

Long-Term Project Outcomes

- Established sustainable Lower Grand River Watershed organization
- Achieved Lower Grand River Watershed goals and vision
- Changed behavior of stakeholders in the Lower Grand River Watershed

At this point in the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project, it is too soon to evaluate the project outcomes. It is likely that short-, medium-, and long-terms project outcomes will require evaluation beyond the current grant funding of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project. The final evaluation report will explore the issue of project outcomes in-depth, including

suggested indicators and evaluation tools for measuring the impact of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project beyond the current grant cycle.

SECTION 4: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents conclusions and recommendations based on the findings of the mid-project evaluation.

Mid-Project Conclusions

Within each of the three project evaluation areas, the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project has demonstrated successes and challenges to date. Conclusions of the mid-project evaluation focus on each of the three project evaluation areas: project context, project implementation, and project outcomes.

Project Context

From a project context perspective, the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project has demonstrated a successful working relationship among project partners responsible for day-to-day administration and implementation of project tasks. Several partners expressed concern that Gerald Felix leaving GVMC during the first year of the project may affect the success of the project. However, the evaluation process has revealed that the function of the project partners did not suffer through this transition and that the new representative from GVMC has stepped up to take on a more defined leadership role in the project.

The evaluation identified some challenges related to the overall project structure and function that has influenced the success of both project context and project implementation. Based on evaluation findings, it appears that the subcommittee structure may have been prematurely developed for use in the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project and that a seemingly less mature structure, such as task forces, may have promoted activities such as watershed visioning and goal setting to occur at the project's outset. A subcommittee structure indicates that each subcommittee has clearly-defined goals and functions, as well as a formal process for conducting its business. In the case of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project, the evaluation process revealed that subcommittee members did not feel their group's goals and objectives were clearly defined at the outset of the project, or that the goals and objectives defined by project partners for the subcommittee were appropriate. Many subcommittees did not have formal processes in place for conducting their meetings or accomplishing their assigned tasks.

Since the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project represented the first comprehensive effort for conducting watershed management planning in the Lower Grand River, a project structure that reflected this organic, grassroots effort may have proven more effective. In addition, a project structure that reflected the ideas and input of watershed stakeholders may have empowered participants and provided them with a sense of ownership. For example, project partners could have used the Grand River Forum to generate initial ideas and input on an appropriate structure and processes for the group to conduct the same project tasks. Project partners demonstrated the ability to adapt the project structure to better suit the needs of participants by dividing the function of the Sustainability Subcommittee between a newly formed Visioning Subcommittee and the Steering Committee. This change in the project structure indicates that the project partners participate in informal evaluation of the project and take steps towards improvements when challenges become apparent.

Challenges related to the overall project structure and function also exist in the area of group communication. Many subcommittee members perceive that limited information exchange takes place among subcommittees. Several members referenced opportunities to exchange information through subcommittee members that participate on other subcommittees, the project web site, or attend the Grand River Forum meetings. As the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project moves toward the implementation phase, other communication channels tailored to the needs of project participants may prove more effective and may strengthen the overall structure and function of the project.

In conclusion, project partners are taking proactive steps to improving the project context of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project. The effects of improvements to the project structure and function will be a focus of the final evaluation report.

Project Implementation

From a project implementation perspective, the first year of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project has experienced a mixture of successes and challenges. Successes are a direct result of the work conducted by the project partners. Focus group results indicate that by sharing leadership roles based on areas of expertise, project partners have contributed different skills to the project while maintaining their respective subcommittee's focus on a specific topic (e.g., urban areas, rural areas, watershed vision). Subcommittee members acknowledge that the project partners are the glue of the project and are the reason for continual progress. Project tasks are being developed according to schedule and within the project budget. Project partners also state that they have implemented additional activities, including conducting additional Grand River Forum meetings and developing tools (e.g., watershed information matrix, project website) to enhance communication and decision-making activities.

The evaluation process has identified project implementation challenges that exist at both the project- and subcommittee-level. The most significant challenge affecting project implementation, as well as project context, appears to be the lack of a vision and goals for the watershed. Although the project appears to be on track for defining a vision and goals for the watershed with the creation of the Visioning Subcommittee, the ability of the I&E Subcommittee to create an I&E Strategy during this grant cycle that reflects the watershed vision and goals may be impeded. Participation from stakeholders that represent the geographic scope of the Lower Grand River Watershed is another project-level challenge. Although only one project partner raised this issue through the evaluation process, it is an issue that may grow in importance as the project moves into the implementation phase and participation by stakeholders from Barry and Ionia becomes necessary to achieve watershed goals.

Challenges related to project implementation exist to varying degrees at the subcommittee-level. The most pronounced implementation issues exist within the I&E Subcommittee, related to friction between the group facilitator and subcommittee members on issues of facilitation style, product development processes, and the need for evaluation of I&E products. Project partners have taken steps to resolve project implementation issues that exist within the I&E Subcommittee, such as use of a formal product development and evaluation process as well as a change of the group's facilitator. Other project implementation challenges at the subcommittee-level is sustaining participation. Participation rates vary in each subcommittee for reasons that are unclear, but likely due to subcommittee-specific factors. Frequent evaluation activities within each subcommittee may help to reveal factors influencing participation rates and aid project partners in identifying possible solutions. The final evaluation will address whether or not the Pilot Project Area approach affected project implementation.

In conclusion, project partners are again demonstrating a proactive approach to improving issues that may negatively impact project implementation of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project by focusing on the development of a watershed vision and goals through the Visioning Subcommittee as well as addressing issues raised by the I&E Subcommittee members. The final evaluation report will examine the effects of these improvements, as well as other actions taken by the project partners to ensure successful project implementation.

Project Outcomes

From a project outcomes perspective, the success of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project is unknown. To determine the impact of the project, it is necessary to identify and measure short-, medium-, and long-term project outcomes. Through the evaluation process, the Evaluation Team must work with the Project Evaluator to identify appropriate project outcomes, translate the outcomes into measurable indicators, and develop evaluation mechanisms. This portion of the evaluation process will extend outside the scope of the current grant funding cycle for the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project. However, planning the evaluation process to measure project outcomes should occur at this time. The final evaluation report will identify the process developed by the Evaluation Team to identify project outcomes.

Recommendations and Lessons Learned

The following recommendations focus on activities to improve the workings of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project as it wraps up under this grant cycle and moves into the implementation phase. Lessons learned provide insight for future watershed projects on how to improve organizational, process, and participation issues.

Recommendations

- Ensure that the Visioning Subcommittee finalizes the watershed vision and goals with approval from all subcommittee participants and the Grand River Forum participants.

- Continue to identify opportunities for more frequent internal evaluation at the committee level (i.e., each subcommittee, the Steering Committee and the Grand River Forum). Internal evaluations should address participation, decisionmaking, and products. It is evident that the project partners are taking steps to conduct internal evaluation and make changes based on evaluation findings, such as creation of a Visioning Subcommittee and modifications to the I&E Subcommittee. If possible, make internal evaluation a part of every meeting and possibly have a standing feedback mechanism in place (e.g., an electronic suggestion box) that provides project participants with a long-term anonymous way to submit thoughts and opinions.

- Determine why subcommittee members feel that existing communication channels (e.g., meeting minutes posted on project web site, Grand River Forum meetings) are inadequate for inter-subcommittee information exchange. Obtain feedback on more effective, alternative communication mechanisms that would promote information exchange. Make findings and actions available to all project participants using an effective communication channel.

- Verify factors influencing participation within each subcommittee and brainstorm possible solutions within each subcommittee.

- Establish a mechanism for subcommittees to provide review and comment on other subcommittees' work products. This is especially important for products developed by

the I&E Subcommittee, past and future, since these products will communicate the work conducted by the other subcommittees and create a brand identity for the overall project.

- Develop external evaluation activities, beyond the Grand River Forum, that will reach watershed stakeholders and obtain their input on products developed under the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project that will affect the implementation phase (e.g., the watershed information matrix, the decision support system, the project web site, the project logo).

Lessons Learned

- Allow project participants to be involved in the goal setting process, or at the very least, provide input on draft goals and objectives.

- Create the watershed vision and goals before creating a watershed project and work plan. Vision and goals should influence all aspects of the watershed management process and help shape watershed projects. Without a vision and goals, no sense of direction for the project participants and difficult to measure long-term success.

- Select a facilitation style that reflects the needs and dynamic of the subcommittee. Some groups work well with a facilitator that also conducts most of the work for the group. Other groups prefer to play a more hands-on role, rather than just reviewing and approving draft products.

- Identify a lead organization to assume a leadership role and have final decision-making authority, even if project implementation responsibilities are shared equally among many partners.

- Ensure the project reflects the needs and interests of subcommittee members; they must be able to "see themselves" in the goals, activities, and accomplishments. If a subwatershed specific activity is necessary, do not forgo the watershed-wide activities of the subcommittee to focus on a specific geographic area. Create a subwatershed-specific group that will focus on that area and allow the overall subcommittee to continue focusing on activities and issues that have broad watershed applicability.

- Ensure that the project's organizational structure reflects input from project participants and reflects the project's maturity level.

- Convene a subcommittee only when members have work to accomplish in the short-term or an active role to play. Members may lose interest or their sense of purpose if meetings do not serve an immediate need, resulting in declining participation.

- Identify ways to effectively delegate subcommittee activities to subcommittee members as "homework" to provide members with an increased sense of ownership. If members feel as if their presence won't be missed at subcommittee meetings because they are not responsible or accountable for anything, it is likely that participation will be sporadic. Asking members to conduct research, write a white paper, or make a presentation may increase the sense of urgency that they attend meetings and facilitators and

- Understand the types of communication channels that project participants prefer to facilitate internal information exchange.

SECTION 5: FUTURE EVALUATION ACTIVITIES

The Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project is quickly drawing to a close, but the evaluation process continues. To ensure that the evaluation has captured a comprehensive and accurate characterization of the project's successes and challenges, final evaluation activities will solicit input from a subset of stakeholders affected by the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project, specifically subwatershed groups located in the Lower Grand River Watershed and Phase II communities that provided financial resources to the project. In addition, final evaluation activities will solicit input from Grand River Forum participants and Visioning Subcommittee participants, important pieces of the overall project that did not have the opportunity to provide input to the mid-project evaluation. Final evaluation activities will also include follow-up with the Evaluation Team, project partners, subcommittee members, and the Steering Committee to revisit issues raised through the mid-project evaluation and to address the evaluation questions reserved for the second year of the project.

As previously discussed, project outcomes will require evaluation activities that likely go beyond the end date of the Lower Grand River Watershed Planning Project. Final evaluation activities will include the development of a plan for assessing short-, medium-, and long-term project outcomes. The Project Evaluator envisions that these evaluation activities may take place during the project implementation phase for the Lower Grand River Watershed and will provide a foundation for evaluating an implementation-focused project given successful implementation of the Lower Grand River Watershed Management Plan is one of many medium-term project outcomes.