

Butternut Creek Watershed Engagement Plan

Plan Overview

In June 2019, the Otsego County Conservation Association (“OCCA”), in partnership with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (“DEC”), began the development of the Butternut Creek Watershed Management Plan (“BCWMP”). Located in western Otsego County, the Butternut Creek watershed spans approximately 130 square miles across 11 municipalities. The watershed is home to an estimated 4,500 people.¹ On August 23 2019, the DEC released its Final Phase III Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP). This document is intended to describe how New York State plans to meet its nutrient and sediment reduction targets established in the 2010 Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL). The purpose of the BCWMP is to develop a stakeholder-driven plan which effectively ties into the Phase III WIP while addressing matters related to water supply, flooding, recreation, and invasive species management.

In July 2019, OCCA formed the BCWMP Steering Committee (“Committee”). The Committee is comprised of the following organizations²:

- **Otsego County Conservation Association, Inc. (OCCA)-Lead Agency:** OCCA is a countywide environmental organization addressing a broad spectrum of basic environmental concerns. OCCA plays a key role in initiating and carrying out programs designed to improve or protect Otsego County’s air, land, and water. Wide support from county residents enhances our ability to accomplish our mission. More information about OCCA can be found at: <http://occainfo.org/>
- **Otsego County Planning Department (OCPD):** The department is responsible for a wide array of functions including administration of housing and transportation grants, managing solid waste and recycling, GIS services, and administering economic development initiatives. More information about OCPD can be found at: https://www.otsegocounty.com/departments/planning_department/index.php
- **Otsego County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD):** The staff at Otsego Soil and Water Conservation District works with landowners, land managers, local government agencies, and other local entities in addressing a broad spectrum of resource concerns: erosion control, flood prevention, water conservation and use, wetlands, ground water, water quality and quantity, non-point source pollution, forest land protection, wildlife, recreation, wastewater management and community development. More information about SWCD can be found at: <https://www.otsegosoilandwater.com/>.
- **New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC):** The DEC’s mission is to conserve, improve and protect New York’s natural resources and environment and to prevent, abate and control water, land and air pollution. In order to enhance the health, safety and welfare of the people of the state and their overall economic and social well-being. More information about

¹ This data were prepared using ArcGIS. Census data were gathered from the U.S. Census Bureau

² Additional organizations and/or agencies can be added to the Committee on an as-needed basis.

the DEC can be found at: <http://www.dec.ny.gov/>.

- **Otsego Land Trust (OLT):** Otsego Land Trust conserves our natural heritage of woodlands, farmlands, and waters that sustain rural communities, promote public health, support wildlife diversity, and inspire the human spirit. More information about OLT can be found at: <http://www.otsegoandtrust.org/>
- **Butternut Valley Alliance (BVA):** The Butternut Valley Alliance is a 501(c)(3) organization. Its mission is to protect and conserve the environmental qualities, farming, economic development and cultural heritage in the Butternut Creek watershed. More information about the BVA can be found at: https://butternutvalleyalliance.org/content.aspx?page_id=0&club_id=791986.

The Committee has elected to utilize a horizontal governance structure to ensure consensus-driven decision making during the planning process. A horizontal governance structure trades a traditional hierarchical management structure and replaces it with a flat management structure. Horizontal governance prioritizes collaboration, coordination, shared responsibility for decisions and outcomes, and a willingness to work through consensus. At this time, there has been discussion related to adding Otsego County Representatives serving the 11 municipalities within or adjacent to the Butternut Creek Watershed and members of the Otsego County Farm Bureau.

Moving forward, the planning process will involve five general steps: 1) Identifying stakeholders and engaging the public; 2) Gathering data and estimating pollution loads; 3) Assessing challenges within the Butternut Creek watershed and evaluating the capacity of local governments to address said challenges; 4) Identifying appropriate Best Management Practices (“BMPs”) and prioritizing key projects throughout the watershed; and 5) Implementing the plan.

Public Engagement Plan Overview

Considering the geographic scope and diverse array of stakeholders living in the Butternut Creek Watershed, it is critical to develop a coordinated, inclusive Engagement Plan. An effective Engagement Plan can ensure that an adequate cross section of the population in the watershed is engaged, and can allow for public feedback to be tracked, analyzed, and incorporated into future planning documents. At the same time, Engagement Plans can be utilized to empower local citizens to participate in decision-making efforts related to the management of the Butternut Creek Watershed. More specifically, the Engagement Plan utilizes three guiding principles which were derived from the City of Seattle’s Inclusive Outreach and Public Engagement Guide³:

1. **Enhance Relationships & Engagement** - This principle recognizes the importance of establishing trust with the populations that the Committee is trying to serve. Creating trusting relationships, increasing accessibility to information, and providing diverse opportunities to become involved in the planning process, are key actions that will help ensure a long-lasting public engagement effort.

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https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/ParksAndRecreation/Business/RFPs/Attachment5%20_InclusiveOutreachandPublicEngagement.pdf

2. Enrich Knowledge Gathering - Establishing a strong connection with communities with respect to data gathering allows constituents to play a key role in determining relevance and appropriateness of organizational programming. Public engagement efforts should focus on a two-way delivery of information whereby the Committee shares vital information about the plan to the public, while receiving watershed-specific information from members of the public.
3. Embrace Organizational Change - For community engagement to be successful, organizations (and individuals who represent those organizations) must be open to organizational changes that are responsive to community insight and allow for shared power between communities and the organizations that serve them.

The goal of the Engagement Plan is to empower communities to make decisions for themselves, increase the capacity and potential of communities in the Butternut Creek valley to manage their watershed, and to improve the relationships between local and state agencies, community organizations, municipalities and the public while advancing regional, state and national goals for public good.

The public engagement strategies enumerated below are subject to change based on input from members of the Committee, the public, and other interested parties in the planning process. The Committee reserves the right to improve upon, add, or remove public engagement strategies to ensure the feasibility of the overall plan.

Publication of Materials

For the purposes of this project, plan-related documents (papers, reports, maps, etc.) will be located on a shared Google Drive folder until the Committee approves the distribution of said documents to the public. All partners and members of the Committee will have access to the Google Drive folder. Copies of plan documents can be provided via Compact Disc (CD) to individuals who lack high-speed internet. Final copies of plan documents are intended to be publicly distributed and posted by any interested party. OCCA and BVA will maintain pages on their respective websites dedicated to the Butternut Creek Watershed Management Plan.

When planning documents are released for public comment, the public shall be afforded 60-days to provide written comments to the Committee. The Committee shall provide hard-copy or CD-based versions of planning documents upon request. Publication of planning documents shall be listed on all partners' social media accounts. OCCA shall distribute notices of the release of planning documents in the official newspaper of record in the Butternut Creek Watershed.

Interested Groups/Plan Partners

The Committee is actively seeking organizations and/or individuals interested in participating the planning process. Currently, the Committee has identified several interested organizations who could provide valuable expertise throughout the planning process. These include:

- The Otsego County Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan Implementation Committee
- The Otsego County Planning Department
- The Susquehanna River Basin Commission
- The New York Chapter of the Choose Clean Water Coalition

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Services Agency
- The Otsego County Farm Bureau
- The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

The Committee will work with the BVA to identify and recruit interested parties. It is important to note that watershed planning expertise is not required to join the group.

Messaging

The Committee will endeavor to communicate matters related to the Butternut Creek Watershed Management Plan in a way that is: considerate of the audience being engaged by the Committee; inclusive of differing viewpoints and value systems; and is accessible by individuals with varying levels of education or familiarity with watershed management techniques.

The Committee recognizes that watershed management strategies require input from people of all walks of life. The Committee will focus on describing how the plan will benefit municipalities, businessowners, and residents of the watershed. When controversial matters are discussed such as land-use regulations, the Chesapeake Bay Total Maximum Daily Load, and the role of government in watershed management, the Committee will provide clear information geared toward achieving consensus whenever possible.

The Committee shall take a unified position when communicating about matters related to the plan. Information regarding outreach materials, public presentations, and plan-related feedback shall be circulated amongst the Committee whenever possible.

Public Engagement Tracking

OCCA and the Committee shall utilize sign-in sheets, Google and social media analytics, log all comments received on the plan to gather public engagement data. All data shall be stored on the Committee's shared Google Drive folder, with a collated version being included in the Plan itself. Tracking both numerical and spatial data related to the Committee's public engagement efforts will allow for the Committee to continuously evaluate the efficacy of the Engagement Plan. This data can also inform changes to the Committee's Engagement Plan should adjustments be deemed necessary and feasible.

Event-Based Outreach

Event-based outreach represents a key public engagement tool for the Butternut Creek Watershed Management Plan. OCCA plans on working with Committee members to establish a presence at events throughout the watershed. OCCA will rely on the BVA to identify community group leaders, social media outlets, and newspapers where community events are advertised. Through outreach conducted during the July 17 and August 14 Stakeholder meetings, the Committee became aware of several events including but not limited to:

- The Otsego County Fair
- Family Farm Day
- New Lisbon Fireman's Barbecue
- Town Lawn Sale Days

- Copes Corners Spring Fest
- OCCA Earth Festival
- BVA Harvest Festival

OCCA will work with the Committee to create outreach materials including but not limited to pamphlets, flyers, posters, maps, and infographics. These materials will be handed out to interested parties during community events.

OCCA will establish an event calendar which is intended to provide notice to the public when the Committee plans on attending community events. The calendar shall be located on the OCCA project-specific website. Community members are free to contact Committee members with information regarding events in the watershed at any time during the planning process.

Opportunities for Ongoing Research

OCCA will work with the Committee to establish regular lines of communication with higher education institutions like Hartwick College and the State College of New York (SUNY) at Oneonta. Numerous organizations in the Committee have internship opportunities that could be conducive to participation in the BCWMP. Given the nature of the semester system, work performed by interns related to the BCWMP will be stored on a shared Google Drive folder. Work performed by interns could include but are not limited to: Geospatial Information Systems (GIS) analysis, plan development, primary research, secondary research (lit reviews), data analysis, and public outreach.

Social Media

Committee members can publish posts related to the BCWMP on their respective organizational website at their discretion. Any feedback received by a Committee member via social media channels shall be shared amongst the Committee to ensure that it is recorded. The Committee should decide whether to use hashtags or other grouping mechanism to help interested parties access plan-related social media posts. Periodically, the Committee shall post the link to the plan-specific website on relevant social media channels (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) to assist newcomers to the planning process. Special attention must be paid not to share confidential information or draft documents that have not been approved for release.

Advisory Committee

The Committee will actively seek and collaborate with individuals and/or professionals who possess specific areas of locational expertise that could aid with the planning process (GIS analysis, stream ecology, agricultural environmental management, etc.). During the data gathering and plan development phases of the BCWMP, the Committee will determine the need to create *ad hoc* advisory committees comprised of individuals/professionals in specific disciplines. The Advisory Committee shall provide input on specific plan-related items like the New York State Agricultural Environmental Management, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Services Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and stream ecology.

Trusted Advisors

OCCA will work with members of the BVA and the Committee to establish a relationship of trust within the Butternut Creek Valley Watershed. OCCA recognizes that land-use management can be contentious topics to discuss with landowners, especially with “outsiders”. Therefore, OCCA will rely on “trusted advisors”—individuals who have established relationships with key stakeholders to broker connections necessary for plan development/completion. These connections can be utilized to arrange public presentations, gather data, conduct stakeholder interviews, discuss issues and opportunities facing the Butternut Creek Watershed, and to resolve potential disagreements/conflicts related to the Plan itself.

Media Releases

OCCA will work with the Committee to prepare, vet, and coordinate media releases related to the BCWMP. Media releases will be distributed to OCCA’s media listserv no more than 10 business days prior to a stakeholder meeting. OCCA will store all media coverage related to the Butternut Creek Watershed Management Plan in a shared Google Drive folder. Media releases shall be sent to the newspaper of record in each watershed municipality.

Decision-Making

The Committee shall make every effort to utilize a consensus-driven approach during each phase of the planning process. Decision making shall be informed by continuous public engagement and input. The public will have the opportunity to provide comments on the plan at set stages during the planning process. Decisions made by municipal entities such as adoption by the Otsego County Board of Representatives, for example, shall be posted on the project-specific website.

Website/FAQ and Comment Box

During the August 14 stakeholder meeting, it was recommended that OCCA post Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on the project-specific website. It was also suggested that OCCA create a comment box on the project website for interested parties to provide input on the plan. In response, OCCA’s web content manager created a comment box for the BCWMP on September 13.

Surveys

Surveys represent a critical part of the planning process. If utilized correctly, surveys can gather a wide range of useful data ranging from demographic data to public perceptions of various best management practices commonly used in watershed management. For the purposes of the BCWMP, the Committee must evaluate several factors related to the feasibility of conducting a survey:

- Cost related to the preparation and distribution of the survey;
- Determining the adequate medium for delivering the survey (mail, phone, online, etc.);
- Obtaining an adequate sample size; and
- Reducing the presence of bias should surveys be utilized in the planning process.

Once the above-listed factors are evaluated, the Committee will decide whether to utilize a stakeholder survey during the data gathering phase of the plan.

Stakeholder Interviews

The Committee anticipates that stakeholder interviews will play a critical role in the data gathering and plan development phases of the BCWMP. OCCA will work with the Committee to identify, recruit, and interview interested parties during the data gathering phase of the planning process. The Committee will use trusted sources to establish connections with potential interviewees. For the purposes of the Plan, a trusted source refers to an individual who has a positive relationship with a target stakeholder. The Committee is conscious of the possibility that stakeholder interviews may be biased if there is a perception of mistrust between interviewers and interviewees. The Committee will work together to develop a list of interviewees. The rationale for selecting interviewees and the list shall be included in the BCWMP.

Targeted Landowner Outreach

During the August 14 Stakeholder Meeting, it was recommended that the Committee conduct targeted outreach to landowners with large acreages adjacent to the Butternut Creek. The Committee will evaluate the feasibility of sending postcards, mailers, or CD copies of plan documents to affected landowners. The Committee the number of landowners who live along the Butternut Creek and the associated cost of direct outreach strategies. The Committee will engage affected landowners via phone, letter, and, in some cases, one-on-one meetings. Landowners will be provided with flyers, contact information for Committee members, and plan documents as they become available.