



Testimony
SF1608
April 13, 2023

Madam Chair and members of the committee, my name is Jan Voit. I am the Executive Director of Minnesota Watersheds. I want to thank Senators Weber and Kupec for authoring this bill and you and the committee for this hearing. Please allow me to begin by providing some brief background information about watershed districts.

Watershed districts were established by the Minnesota Legislature in 1955. These special purpose local units of government are organized to protect and manage water resources based on a hydrologic boundary rather than a political boundary. Because they are based on a hydrologic boundary, the watershed district could include all or a portion of cities, counties, or townships. By statute, watershed districts have the responsibility “to conserve the natural resources of the state by land use planning, flood control, and other conservation practices using sound scientific principles for the protection of the public health and welfare and provident use of the natural resource.” Watershed districts are formed by citizen petition to the Board of Water and Soil Resources to address water resources issues such as water quality protection, erosion and sediment reduction, and flood control. There are 45 watershed districts in Minnesota and 30 of them are affected by this legislation which would allow local citizens to make grassroots decisions about where and how to invest funds for managing water resources.

The watershed law provides for board members that are appointed by county commissioners. Watershed district boards consist entirely of citizens who live within the district and represent the interests of the diverse communities within the watershed. This keeps the watershed district board focused on the protection and preservation of water resources issues at the local level. The appointed board has taxing authority and is accountable not only to the county commissioners, but to the communities in which they live and work. Watershed districts publish their budgets and hold an annual public hearing for their general operating levy. This is a transparent process that is required by Minnesota statutes and has worked well for 68 years.

Greater Minnesota watershed districts face the same demands for new programs like One Watershed, One Plan, increased water quality and water quantity project activity, increasing costs of wages and expenses, and increased state and federal water quality regulations as those in the metro. Yet, watershed districts in Greater Minnesota have had their general operating levy capped at \$250,000 for 22 years. The present value of the \$250,000 cap is \$420,000 today.

As a former watershed district administrator, I know the difficulties this levy cap causes. Greater Minnesota watershed districts are restricted in their ability to apply and compete for Clean Water Fund grants because they are limited in their ability to generate the local match. However, this is not an issue for metro watersheds because their general operating levy is tied to the projects and programs identified in their watershed management plans that are approved by the state.

Increasing the general operating levy has been Minnesota Watersheds top legislative priority for the past five years. We need your help and your support of Senate File 1608 to increase the general operating levy for Greater Minnesota watersheds so they can continue to meet local needs and state water quality goals. Thank you.