

# West Michigan Conservation Network (WMCN) Executive Minutes

**Date:** June 8, 2026

**Facilitator:** Jessie Schulte

**Meeting Type:** All-Partner Structure & Function Meeting

**Attendees:** Ari Henson (Allegan Conservation District), Della Fetzer (Rebel Cultures), Emma Waatti (Oceana Conservation District and WMCN Board), Eric Piehl (Volunteer), Ginny Wanty (WMCN Board, Website Coordinator, and Committee Leader), Heather Moody (Grand Valley State University), James (Parshall Companies), Jeff Westendorp (Keep Growing), Jessie Schulte (Kent County Parks and WMCN), Jim Beke (City of Kentwood), Katie McLaren (Muskegon County Parks), Kenneth McMahon (Fishbeck), Lea Sevigny (Joyful Wildcrafting and WMCN Learning & Engagement Lead), Megan Kamper (Land Conservancy of West Michigan), Sue Aagaard (WMCN Board, Montcalm Liaison, Montcalm Area Master Gardener Association, and Flat River Watershed Council), along with additional conservation partners and guests from across the West Michigan region.

---

## Executive Summary

The West Michigan Conservation Network (WMCN) convened partners from across the region to share organizational updates, conservation accomplishments, emerging challenges, and opportunities for collaboration. The meeting also reviewed the updated WMCN organizational structure and strategic direction following the separation of the CISMA Steering Committee into its own governance structure. Partners highlighted significant work in invasive species management, habitat restoration, urban forestry, watershed protection, conservation education, volunteer engagement, and native plant propagation.

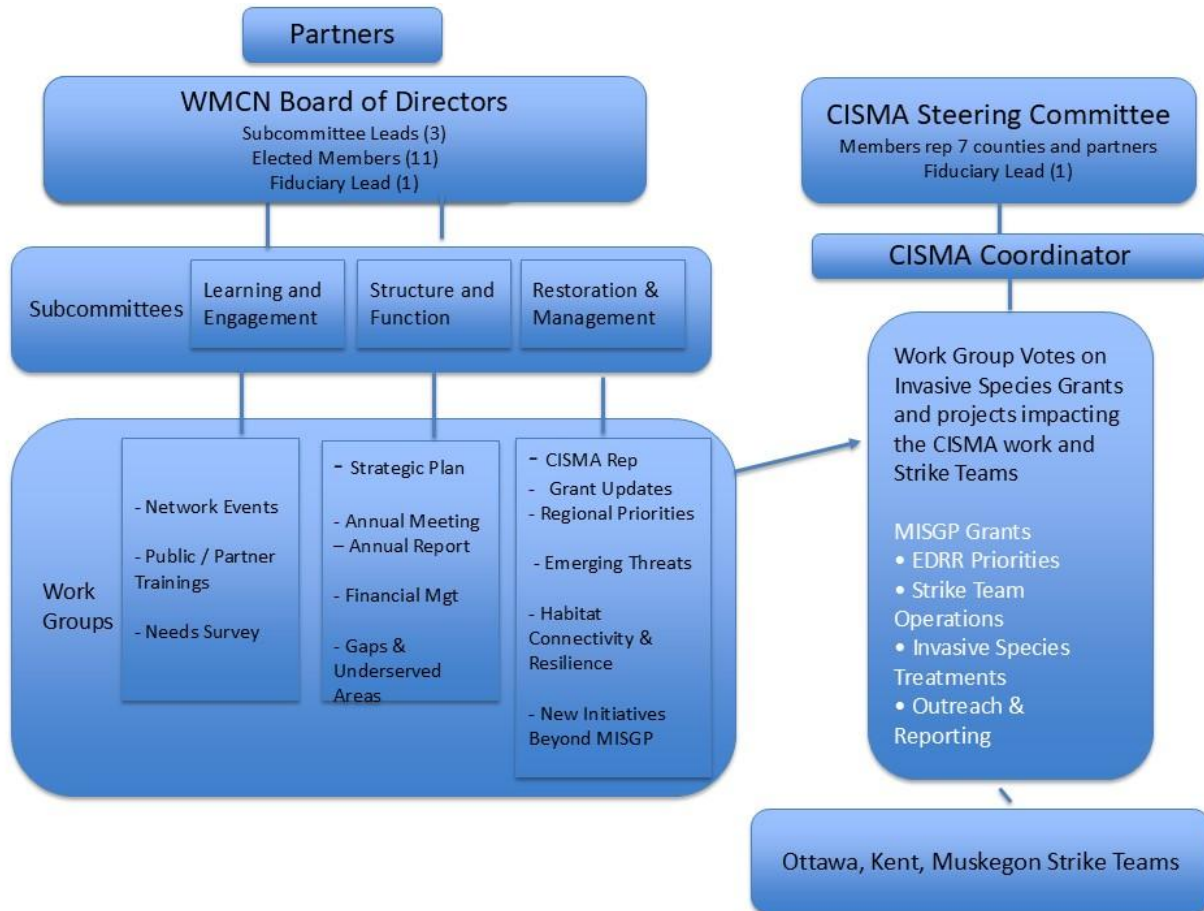
---

## Organizational Update

### WMCN Structure Revision

- Reviewed the updated WMCN organizational structure and strategic plan.
- The CISMA now operates through its own Steering Committee while maintaining strong collaboration with WMCN partners.
- WMCN continues to focus on:
  - Learning & Engagement
  - Restoration & Management

- Structure & Function
- Leadership emphasized that the network has evolved beyond invasive species grant administration into a broader regional conservation collaboration platform.



## Partner Updates

### Joyful Wildcrafting – Lea Sevigny

- Congratulated partners on recent invasive species regulatory successes.
- Offered volunteer support for barberry removal projects.
- Shared upcoming educational programming:
  - Watershed field event.
  - Deer management and disease workshop.
  - Native bee conservation program.

- Encouraged partners to propose future training topics and educational opportunities.

#### **Grand Valley State University – Heather Moody**

- Continues urban environmental monitoring research in Grand Rapids.
- Students are conducting air-quality monitoring near Roosevelt Park schools to evaluate impacts from truck traffic.
- Offered applied student projects including:
  - Tree inventories
  - Ecological design
  - Community garden planning
  - Rain garden assistance
- Invited organizations to propose future student-led conservation projects.

#### **Parshall Companies – James**

- Continues oak wilt consultation and diagnostics throughout West Michigan.
- Refers native planting, pollinator habitat, and rain garden projects to local conservation districts.
- Reported increased observations of Japanese knotweed and continued support of invasive species reporting efforts.
- Confirmed ongoing support of WMCN through scholarship sponsorships for the Annual Meeting.

#### **Land Conservancy of West Michigan – Megan Kamper**

- Reported continued stewardship efforts focused on garlic mustard removal.
- Celebrated the organization's 50th anniversary.
- Highlighted public engagement events including hikes, bike rides, and paddling programs throughout the summer.

#### **Allegan Conservation District – Ari Henson**

- Announced launch of Allegan County's new Invasive Species Strike Team.
- Conducting invasive species assessments and management planning.
- Received a donated property formerly used as a Girl Scout camp.

- Beginning ecological inventories and trail planning to make the site publicly accessible.

### **Rebel Cultures – Della Fetzer**

- Introduced Rebel Cultures, a native plant propagation laboratory in West Olive.
- Specializes in propagating species with limited seed availability.
- Currently supporting:
  - Karner Blue Butterfly habitat restoration.
  - Rare and imperiled native plant production.
  - Disease-resistant American beech tree propagation.
- Expressed interest in future grant partnerships and collaborative conservation projects.

### **Oceana Conservation District – Emma Waatti**

- Completed a major Great Lakes Restoration Initiative project involving the planting of approximately 20,000 trees within critical dune systems.
- Continuing grant development and soil health initiatives.
- Launched the "Barberry Be Gone" replacement program encouraging residents to remove invasive barberry.

### **Community Volunteer Perspective – Eric Piehl**

- Shared appreciation for the work of partner organizations.
- Although currently focused on family responsibilities, expressed hope to return to active volunteer service in the future.

### **Keep Growing – Jeff Westendorp**

- Continues invasive species management advocacy throughout Ottawa County.
- Uses professional agricultural consulting work to support broader conservation goals and collaboration among partners.

### **City of Kentwood – Jim Beke**

- Reported progress on a NOAA-funded Plaster Creek Floodplain Restoration Initiative.

- Advancing restoration design with Plaster Creek Stewards.
- Completed additional tree plantings and native habitat projects.
- Continuing partnership with Friends of Buck Creek and regional municipalities.

### **Muskegon County Parks – Katie McLaren**

- Successfully completed aquatic habitat restoration plantings and native landscaping projects at Dune Harbor Park.
- Hosted volunteer events and educational programming.
- Shared updates regarding exploration of a countywide parks millage initiative to support long-term park funding and infrastructure improvements.

### **Fishbeck – Kenneth McMahon**

- Continues wetland delineation work statewide.
- Highlighted the North Fork Black Creek restoration project in Allegan County.
- Project will restore natural stream meanders and reconnect approximately 40 acres of wetlands.
- Discussed concerns regarding proposed legislative changes that would weaken wetland protections and EGLE regulatory authority.

### **WMCN Leadership Update - Ginny Wanty**

- She highlighted the continued growth and evolution of the West Michigan Conservation Network, supporting the updated organizational structure and ongoing efforts to strengthen collaboration across the region. She promoted upcoming WMCN training opportunities focused on watershed stewardship, deer management, and native pollinator conservation, encouraging partner participation and idea-sharing. Ginny also provided updates on planning for the Network's 20th Anniversary Annual Meeting, including scholarship support, sponsorship development, and efforts to ensure broad partner engagement. Throughout the discussion, she reinforced the value of conservation education, partner networking, and science-based stewardship as key elements of WMCN's long-term success.

### **Montcalm County & Watershed Update - Sue Aagaard**

- Sue Aagaard serves with several organizations she supports, including the Flat River Watershed Council, Montcalm Area Master Gardener Association, and Montcalm Conservation District. She announced the upcoming Flat River Watershed Council kayak fundraiser, stewardship efforts targeting spotted knapweed and hoary alysium, growth within the Master Gardener program, and ongoing work to secure

continued conservation funding through a county millage initiative. Sue also emphasized the importance of partnerships between nonprofit, governmental, and private-sector conservation organizations to strengthen stewardship efforts throughout the region.

---

### **Key Themes Identified**

1. Continued expansion of regional invasive species management capacity.
  2. Increased investment in habitat restoration and watershed protection.
  3. Growing emphasis on urban forestry, climate resilience, and environmental justice.
  4. Strong volunteer and educational engagement across partner organizations.
  5. Need for continued advocacy supporting wetlands, forests, and biodiversity conservation.
  6. Opportunities for collaborative grants, restoration projects, and public outreach.
- 

### **Upcoming Opportunities**

- Deer, Disease, and Damage Training – June 18, 2026, hosted by Oceana Conservation District.
  - Additional WMCN learning events on watershed health and native pollinator conservation.
  - WMCN Annual Meeting and 20th Anniversary Celebration scheduled for November 5, 2026.
- 

### **Adjournment**

Partners expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share accomplishments, discuss emerging conservation issues, and strengthen collaboration across West Michigan. The meeting reinforced WMCN's role as a regional network connecting conservation districts, local governments, nonprofits, educational institutions, volunteers, and private-sector partners to advance conservation outcomes across the region.