Stormwater & Drainage Topic Meeting Summary

Introduction

Located in remote northern Minnesota is the wild Little Fork River Watershed (LFRW). The LFRW is a large watershed covering 1,872 square miles. The confluence with the Rainy River is about 160 miles from the headwaters, 11 miles west of International Falls. The Little Fork River begins in the north-central portion of St. Louis County near the town of Cook (MPCA, 2017). The watershed consists of three counties: Koochiching County (39%), St. Louis County (48%), and Itasca County (12%). There are no large cities within LFRW: the largest towns are Littlefork (population of 674) and Cook (population of 667).

The LFRW One Watershed, One Plan (1W1P) is a planning partnership between Koochiching County, Koochiching County, Itasca County, Itasca SWCD, St. Louis County, North St. Louis SWCD, and the City of Littlefork. Over the next year, this planning partnership will create a plan that will help maintain the high quality of the natural resources in the LFRW as well as restore valuable resources. Through this process, the planning partners, with guidance from local experts and stakeholders, will develop a comprehensive watershed management plan that identifies key issues in the watershed, creates measurable goals to help address those issues, and develop targeted implementation actions that help work towards achieving those goals.

The 1W1P process is outlined in Figure 1 below. The first steps of the 1W1P process are a series of topic meetings that will be held to gather local input and kick-off the planning process by gathering issues, prioritizing issues, and targeting resources. These meetings will bring together the stakeholders and local experts to provide a strong background in each topic to ensure that the 1W1P adequately addresses the most important local concerns. The resources that will be covered in these meetings are Rivers & Lakes, Forests & Wetlands/Peatlands, Urban Stormwater & Drainage, and Farms & Groundwater. This is a summary of the Urban Stormwater & Drainage meeting.

Figure 1 Planning process for the LFRW 1W1P.

Little Fork River Urban Stormwater & Drainage Overview

Much of the LFRW is covered by forests and wetlands, therefore very little land in the watershed is developed (approximately 2% is developed; DNR, 2017; **Figure 6**). In addition, the developed areas of the watershed have low population density with no large cities within LFRW (**Figure 5; Figure 7**). The largest cities in the LFRW are Littlefork (population of 674) and Cook (population of 667; Koochiching County, 2018). There is little development adjacent to lakes compared to other northern Minnesota watersheds, although the most developed lake in this watershed is Sturgeon Lake. For drinking water, the largest withdrawals are at Littlefork and Cook, which have municipal water supplies (Helgesen, Lindholm, and Ericson, 1976).

Flooding along the Littlefork River has been a concern for residents and is a large economic concern. In 2024 there was a major flood in Cook (**Figure 2**). With changing weather patterns expected in the coming decades, flooding could potentially occur more commonly. Building resilient landscape that can reduce flooding risk will be important moving forward.

Figure 2. Flooding in Cook, MN on June 21, 2024.

Issues

The general process of planning and convening the topic meetings are shown in the graphic below. The process begins with gathering issues from existing studies and documents before the meeting. At the meeting, participants brainstorm issues, discuss these issues in greater depth, prioritize them, and brainstorm possible actions to address these issues (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3 Issue development for the BFRW 1W1P during topic meetings

The Stormwater & Drainage Topic meeting for the 1W1P planning effort was held on October 2, 2025 in the city of Cook. To gather the diverse viewpoints about water quality of stakeholders and experts in the watershed, we began the meeting by asking each member of the Advisory Committee to describe the forests and wetlands in the LFRW in a few words. Their responses are shown below in a word cloud (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Word cloud when participants were asked about stormwater and drainage in the LFRW.

Next, the meeting participants worked to gather more information about stormwater and flooding the watershed. Table 1 shows key notes about the cities of Littlefork and Cook, as well as Koochiching and St. Louis Counties, and the forest road networks of the LFRW.

Table 1 Notes on Stormwater and Flooding in key communities

Community	Notes on Stormwater and Flooding
Littlefork	Have a couple areas of concern that would be interested in help with (area by Whitney's property), houses by city hall – road was not done correctly – now flooding at driveways – roads need to be redone. Stormwater washouts. By Lofgren Park – inlet to the river, Need management plan.
Cook	Flood Mitigation Plan? 3 box culvert where the river goes through town that can back up and cause issues (Vermilion Drive)?
St. Louis County	Can provide map of the 5 year county plan for road construction to line up opportunities for projects. Co Rd 74 slump/culvert blow out issue.
Koochiching County	Samuelson Park area
Rural Areas – Forest Road Network	Culvert resizing and fixes. Kooch Co Lands & Forests, DNR Forestry, Molpus (wood products industry)
French Township	Stormwater protection in Side Lake area (in WRAPS)
Bearville Township	Stormwater protection in Side Lake area (in WRAPS)

Draft issue statements were created based on discussion throughout the meeting. These can be found in Table 2, as well as the relevant documents which identify the issue.

Table 2 Draft issue statements for stormwater and drainage in the BFRW.

Draft Issue	Draft Issues Statement	Sources (see key below)
Flooding	**Flooding** along rivers can threaten economic and natural resources.	BWSR Letter, Itasca County, WRAPS, Logging
Stormwater Runoff	**Stormwater runoff** in developed areas increases peak flows and contributes pollutants to streams and lakes.	WRAPS, TMDL, EPA TMDL, Select Lakes, Trends, Koochiching County
Forest and Recreational Infrastructure	**Forest and Recreational** infrastructure affect hydrology, runoff, and erosion.	WRAPs, TMDL, Logging, Itasca County, Koochiching County, DNR Letter, BWSR Letter, MPCA Letter

BWSR Letter – BWSR 60 Day Letter | **DNR Letter –** DNR 60 Day Letter | **EPA TMDL –** EPA Total Maximum Daily Loads Support Letter | **Itasca County –** Itasca County Local Water Management Plan | **Koochicing County –** Koochiching County Comprehensive Local Water Management Plan | **Logging –** MPCA Effect of Historical Logging Report | **MDH Letter –** MPCA 60 Day Letter | **Monitoring –** MPCA Monitoring and Assessment Report | **MPCA Letter –** MPCA 60 Day Letter | **Select Lakes –** MPCA Water Quality Assessment of Select Lakes | **St. Louis County –** St. Louis County Comprehensive Water Management Plan | **TMDL –** MPCA Sediment Reduction Project Total (Total Maximum Daily Load) | **Trends –** MPCA Watershed Assessment and Trends Update| **WRAPS –** Little Fork River Watershed Restoration and Protection Strategy Report |

Discussion about outreach: Are all the different township boards aware of this planning process? Concern was that they don't meet very often. A suggestion was made that after the final Advisory Committee Meeting, we connect with them to let them know the general direction of the plan to get their input.

Stormwater & Drainage Actions

Actions were brainstormed to help address the issues that were prioritized during the meeting. These actions will be implemented into the plan, with more actions added during the planning process.

- Stormwater plan with retrofit analysis for Cook, Side Lake, and Littlefork
- Explore culvert inventories for possible replacements (State & County)
- Hazard/flooding mitigation plan for Cook
- Stormwater management on small parcels near lakes (i.e. rain gardens, shoreline restoration)
- Continue to update culvert inventories
- Sturgeon Lakes and Side Lake (and lakes North of Virginia) shoreline buffers and other stormwater projects such as rain-gardens, re-directing gutter downspouts, driveway water bars/open top box culverts, etc.
- Outreach to lakeshore owners about living lightly
- Outreach to ATV club about culverts
- Consolidating Highway department data
- ATV trail from Lake Superior to North Dakota (directed by the legislature). Crosses the Little Fork
- Outreach to township boards about partnership opportunities
- Nett Lake outreach
- Rerouting North Country trail issues
- Inventory of campsites and canoe accesses along the Little Fork River (County and State)

Meeting Attendees

- Ada Tse – St. Louis County
- Andy Arens – Itasca SWCD
- Austin Steere – Itasca SWCD
- Cal Saari – Itasca SWCD Supervisor
- Carol Andrews – St. Louis County
- Chad Severts - BWSR
- Christine McCartthy – Lake County
- Corey Denning – North St. Louis SWCD
- Cory Williams – City of Littlefork
- Holly Hoy – City of Littlefork
- James Aasen, Koochiching SWCD
- Jolén Simon – Koochiching SWCD
- Matt Gutzmann - Itasca SWCD
- Mike Kennedy, MPCA
- Mitch Brinks, GIS Specialist TSA 8
- Phil Norvitch – North St. Louis SWCD
- Samuel Cook – St. Louis County
- Skyler Webb, St. Louis County
- Thomas Lee - MNDOT
- Moriya Rufer - Houston Engineering
- Aaron Frankl - Houston Engineering

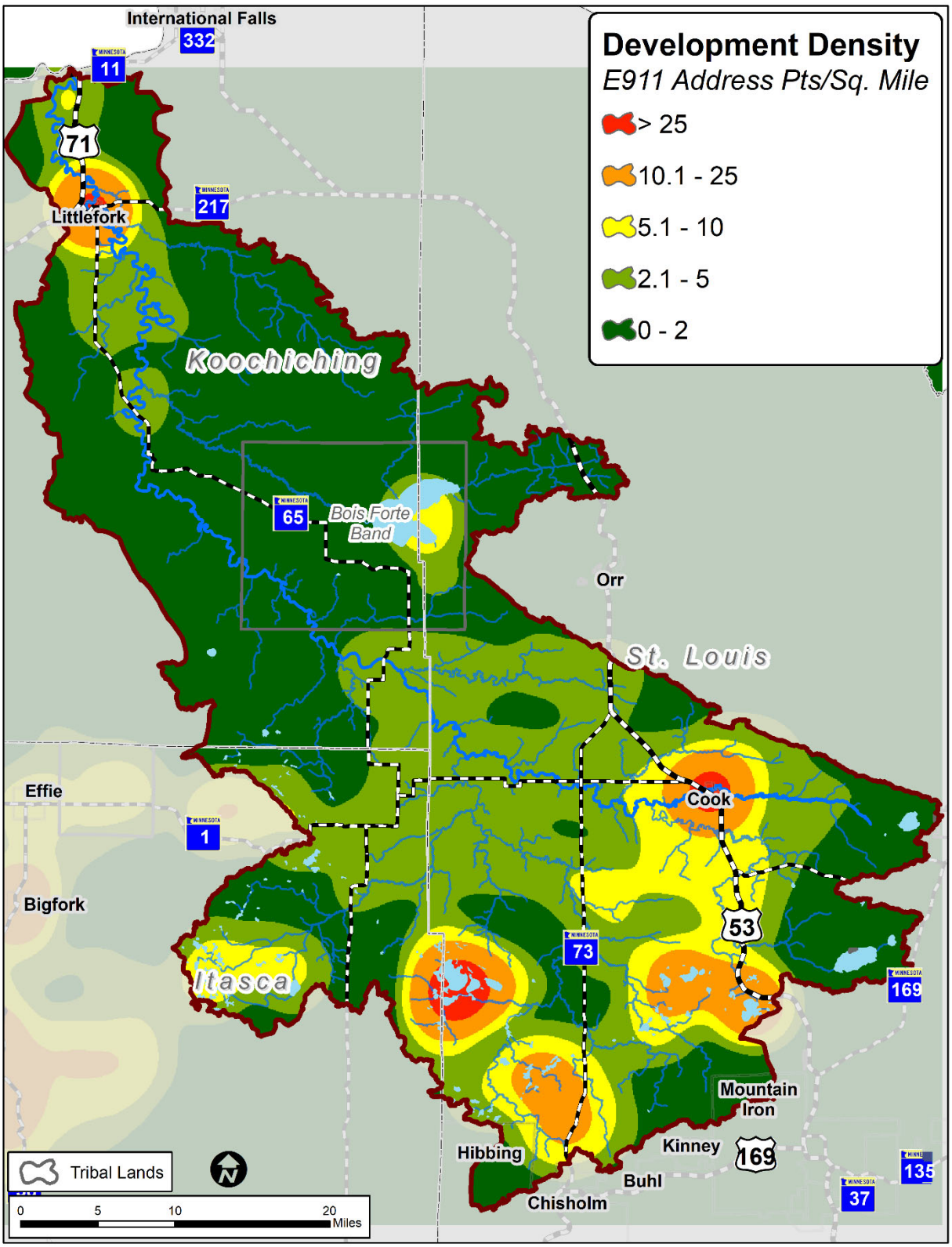

Figure 5 Development density in the LFRW as shown by the E911 address points per square mile.

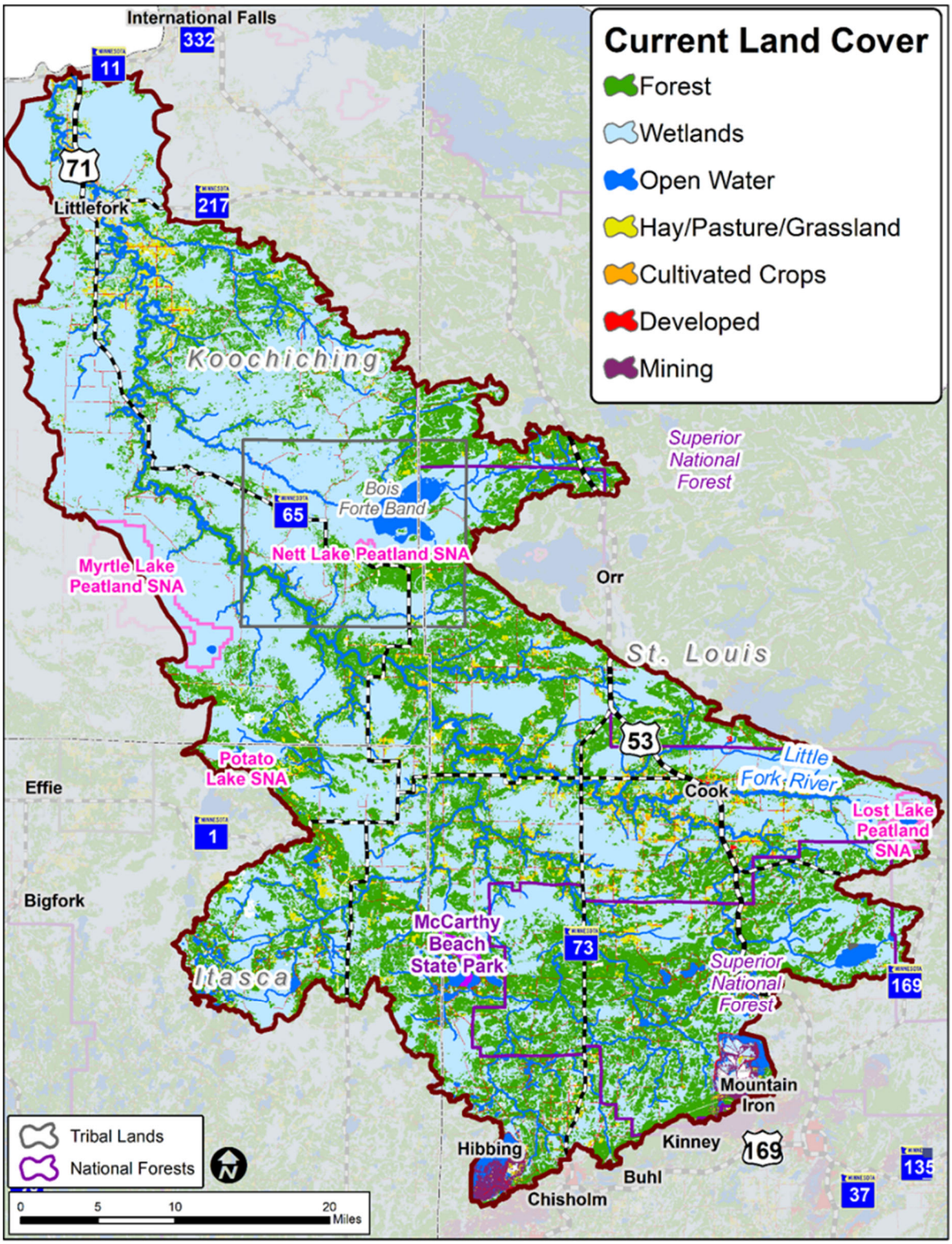

Figure 6 Current land cover in the LFRW.

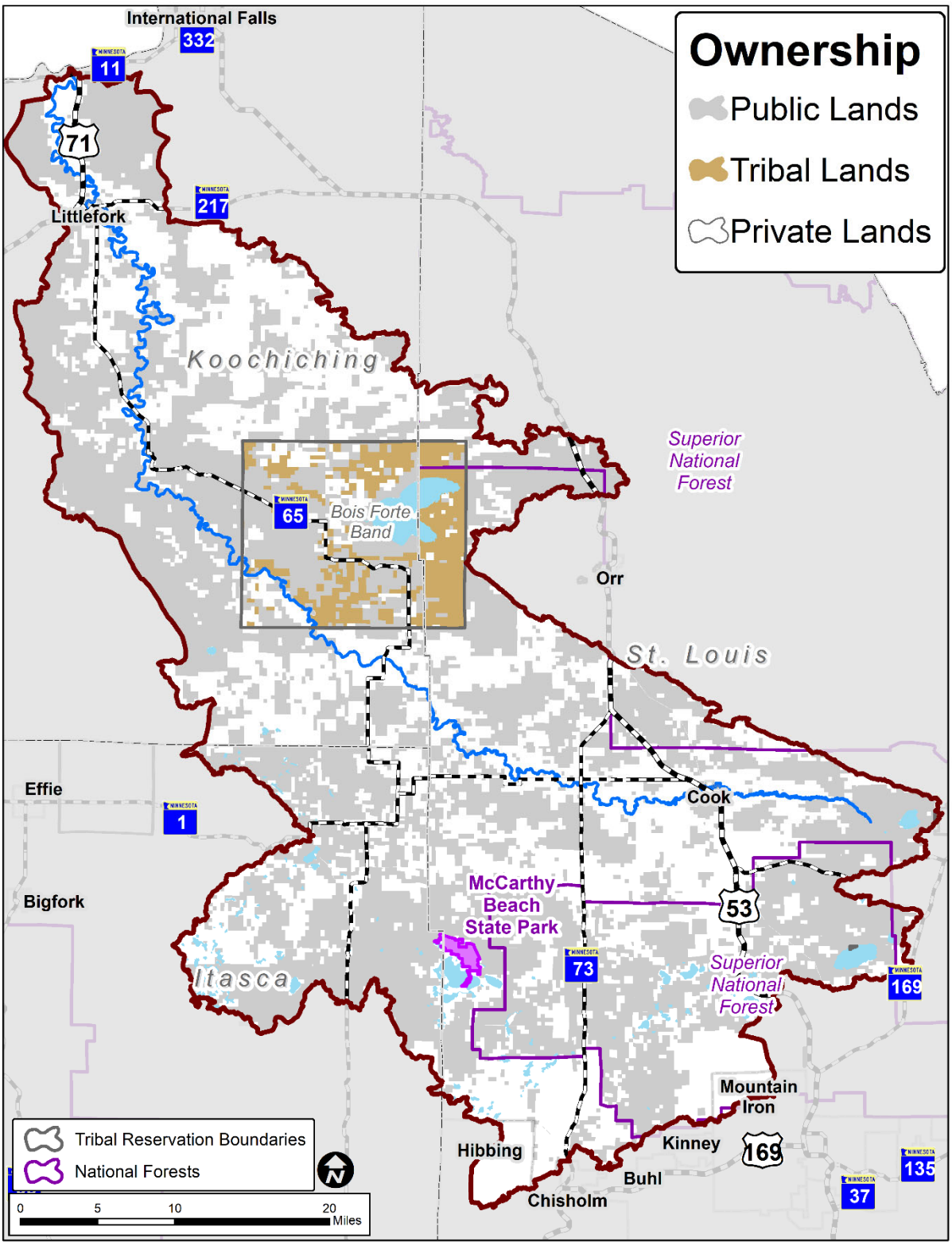

Figure 7 Land ownership in the LFRW.

References

Helgesen, Lindholm, and Ericson, 1976. Water Resources of the Little Fork River Watershed, Northeastern Minnesota.

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), 2015. Watershed Health Assessment Framework.

Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), 2017. Little Fork River Watershed Sediment Reduction Project (Total Maximum Daily Load).