

2019 Environmental Congress Report

On Tuesday, December 3, the EQB hosted the 2019 Environmental Congress at Minnesota State University – Mankato with the theme: The Climate for Action is Changing. This free, public event focused on strategies and innovative approaches for building prosperous, equitable, and resilient communities in the face of climate change. Event aims:

- Build partnerships and shared understanding across sectors and communities
- Provide a platform for dialogue about the strengths and challenges of climate change solutions, including policies and voluntary actions, and how these solutions will impact the lives of Minnesotans
- Highlight regional differences across Minnesota regarding the effects of climate change and locally-relevant solutions
- Be a forum for ideas on how Minnesotans can get involved with, and stay informed on, climate change issues that matter to them.

Justification

At its discretion, the board shall convene an annual Environmental Quality Board congress including, but not limited to, representatives of state, federal and regional agencies, citizen organizations, associations, industries, colleges and universities, and private enterprises who are active in or have a major impact on environmental quality. The purpose of the congress shall be to receive reports and exchange information on progress and activities related to environmental improvement. (Minnesota Statute 116C.04)

Acknowledgments

Many people contributed to the success of this event. We are grateful to Governor Walz for his call to action on climate, EQB members for engaging with Minnesotans throughout the event, the interagency planning team for developing and implementing the event, EQB staff for event support, presenters and contributors, Emerging Environmental Leaders (EELs) and EEL host organizations for designing and executing aspects of the event, Fermata Sol for an in-kind *a cappella* performance, Minnesota State University – Mankato for event support and in-kind rental, event volunteers for event support, and participants for engaging in learning and dialogue throughout the day.

Event Design Highlights

The Environmental Congress interagency planning team was led by the Minnesota Environmental Quality Board with members from the Departments of Administration, Agriculture, Commerce, Employment and Economic Development, Health, Natural Resources, Transportation; the Minnesota Housing and Finance Agency; and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. The EQB also engaged members and host organizations of the EQB Emerging Environmental Leaders (EEL) program in planning a plenary speech, breakout session, and welcoming exhibition (Postcard Project; see below).

The [Environmental Congress program](#) consisted of six sessions: a plenary, two breakouts, a leadership forum, a participant-driven dialogue session (Open Space), and networking hour. These allowed for a variety of ways for participants to learn, share, and engage with each other.

In order to promote participation of local, diverse, and underrepresented voices at the Environmental Congress, the planning team reserved pre-sale tickets and asked state agencies to extend invitations to target audiences to help ensure that a wide diversity of Minnesotans participated in the Congress, along a variety of spectrums – such as sector, geography, age, race, and ethnicity. After the pre-sale ticket invitation window passed, EQB opened general registration for the remainder of the tickets.

Additionally, one of the EEL working groups designed and distributed over 1,200 postcards to schools in the Mankato, Duluth, and Twin Cities Metro areas to bring youth voice into the event. The Postcard Project asked students to answer the question: “What would you like to see Minnesotans do to address climate change?” The Minnesota History Museum and Science Museum of Minnesota incorporated the scanned postcards into their collection. At the Environmental Congress, EEL members projected the postcards and responses around the ballroom and distributed postcards to Environmental Congress attendees.

The planning team piloted some measures to give Environmental Congress participants the ability to influence the agenda and dialogue at the event. During the morning, the EQB asked participants to use an online polling platform called Slido to submit and vote on questions for state agency leader to answer during the leadership forum. In the afternoon Open Space session, participants had the opportunity to set the agenda and select topics for discussion, and then join the dialogue group that was most interesting to them.

Event Assessment & Evaluation

In order to assess and evaluate the 2019 Environmental Congress, EQB staff collected information from planning team members and participants 1) during the event using an online polling platform called Slido; 2) after the event using an online survey tool called Snap Survey, and 3) via debrief meetings with the interagency planning team and EQB staff members.

Audience Recruitment

About 300 people attended the event at the Mankato venue, while around 75 people attended the plenary and leadership forum sessions remotely. Participants hailed from a variety of sectors (see Chart 1 below) at least 96 different zip codes (number of survey participants or “n”=179, Slido), with concentrations of attendees coming

from the Mankato and Twin Cities Metro areas. Three-quarters of the post-event survey respondents reported being “extremely familiar” with climate change issues, one-quarter reported being “somewhat familiar,” and none said they were “not at all familiar” (n=56).

Demand was very high for the event and general admission tickets were sold out quickly. Event planners overenrolled the event, however attrition was higher than expected at 20-25%, leaving about one in seven seats empty at the event.

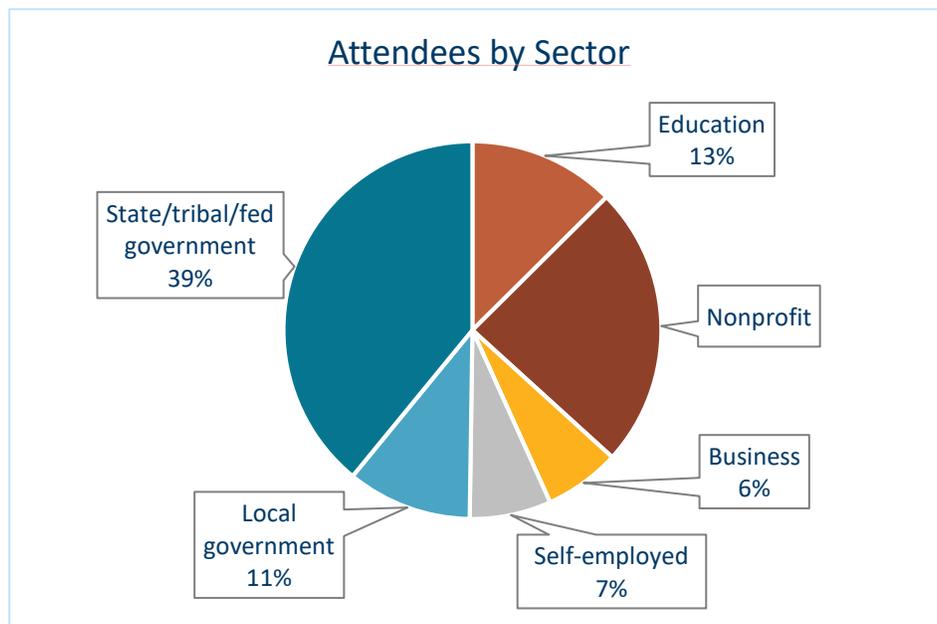


Chart 1 – 2019 Environmental Congress attendees by sector (Slido survey, n=215)

Strengths

- Sector and geographic diversity
- Strong local showing
- High demand for event

Challenges

- High unmet demand for the event
- Empty seats due to higher-than-expected attrition
- High proportion of State government participants due to planning, presenting, and support roles at the event
- Lack of racial and ethnic diversity [EQB did not collect this information, however this challenge was identified by participants during the leadership forum via Slido]

Value of Sessions and Outcomes

EQB received generally positive feedback on the sessions (Chart 2). The most popular session was the leadership forum, followed by breakouts and plenary. Results were more mixed for the Open Space and networking hour, however a large majority still viewed them as valuable. Event participants made use of the online polling platform. There were 296 unique Slido participants in total, 123 questions submitted for the leadership forum, and 1135 votes for the leadership forum questions. To view a list of these questions, please see Appendix 1.

There were more volunteers to host dialogues during the Open Space than rooms available, suggesting a high demand for participant-driven dialogues. Notes from the Open Space session are publicly available on the EQB's [Environmental Congress web page](#). Some presenters' slides are available on the webpage, as well.

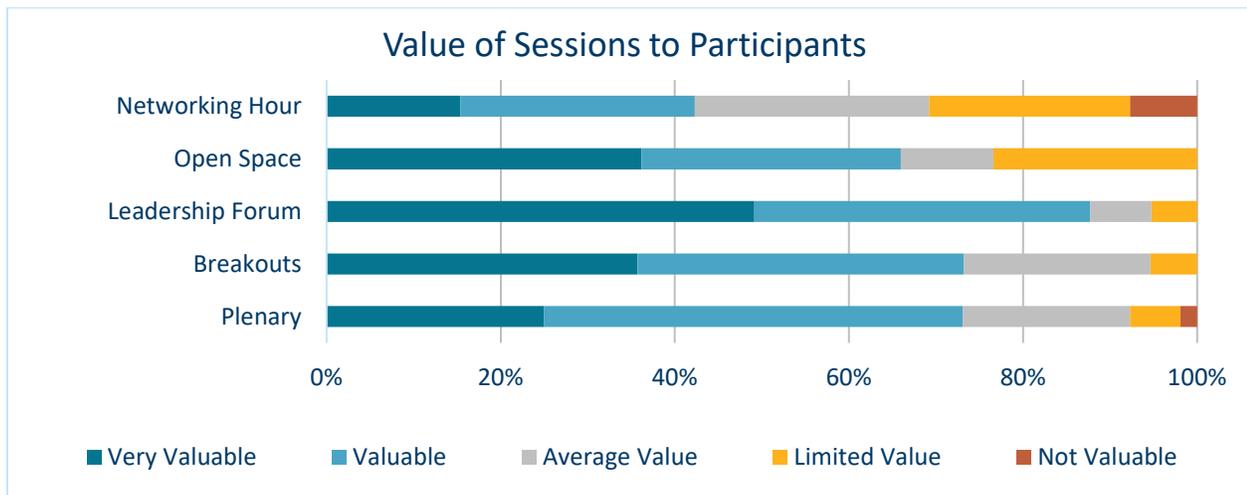


Chart 2 - Value of Environmental Congress elements to event participants (Snap Survey, n=59)

The EQB asked survey participants whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements regarding the outcomes of the event. Results are shown in Chart 3.

- The Congress was informative.
- The Congress was valuable for connecting with people who are part of my networks.
- The Congress was valuable for connecting with NEW people.
- The Congress exposed me to information and perspectives I had not considered before.
- The Congress allowed for an open dialogue on important environmental issues.
- Congress provided an opportunity to create common ground between people with different backgrounds or perspectives.
- The Congress inspired me to take action on environmental issues.

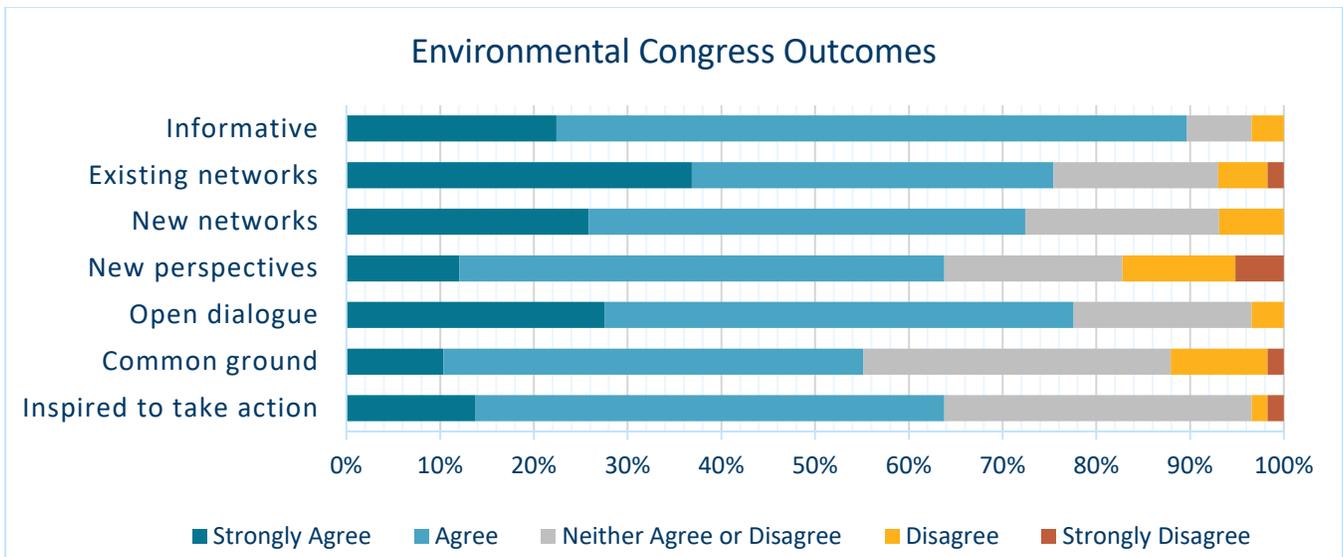


Chart 3 – Participant responses to outcome statements (Snap Survey, n=58)

According to the post-event survey, 59% of participants answered “Yes” to the question: “Will you make a change or take a specific action as a result of your participation in the Congress?” (n=56). Below are some examples of reported and planned actions from the survey:

- I am certainly going to talk more about climate change with my colleagues, friends, and family.
- I will do more research regarding health and climate change.
- Assess how every aspect of our manufacturing processes can become more energy efficient.
- Engage and work on forming relationships with tribal people.
- Applied for Climate Change [Advisory] Council.
- I already wrote an article and posted it to my blog.
- I am inspired to work more in my local community on local climate action plans.

Strengths

- Variety of offerings – mix of formats
- Incorporated new ways that participants could influence the agenda and discussion
- The event was informative, sparked open dialogue, connected people, and inspired action
- Many participants made use of opportunities to submit questions for the leadership forum and host Open Space dialogues

Challenges

- Event tries to do many things for many people in one day; it is difficult to give adequate time for all activities and meet everyone’s needs
- Short timeframe for Open Space limited the ability to address all desired topics; short timeframe for breakout sessions may have shortchanged opportunities for dialogue in breakouts
- Number of rooms limited the number of Open Space dialogues

Ideas for Next Environmental Congress

Desired Topics and Activities

In the post-event survey, participants were asked what topics they would like to see the EQB address in future events. Four main themes emerged from the responses: climate change, climate justice, agriculture, and environmental actions. The following responses or composite responses are representative of the main themes expressed by 33 survey respondents:

- “The only topics that should be presented for the foreseeable future are those related to climate change.”
- “More conversations about the intersections of climate change with a justice mindset.”
- Agriculture as a solution to climate change. How can we move forward with water quality and economic sustainability? [composite of multiple responses]
- “I would like to see more topics about feasible actions we can take.”

The EQB asked post-event survey participants to indicate the priority level of the following activities for future Environmental Congresses (“How high of a priority do you consider the following for future Environmental Congresses?”). The results are shown in Chart 4, below.

- Interacting with people already in my networks
- Meeting new people
- Determining actionable steps on environmental issues
- Open-ended, participant-driven dialogues (i.e., via Open Space)
- Engaging with state leadership
- Learning about existing environmental initiatives
- Presentations from leading topic experts
- Other

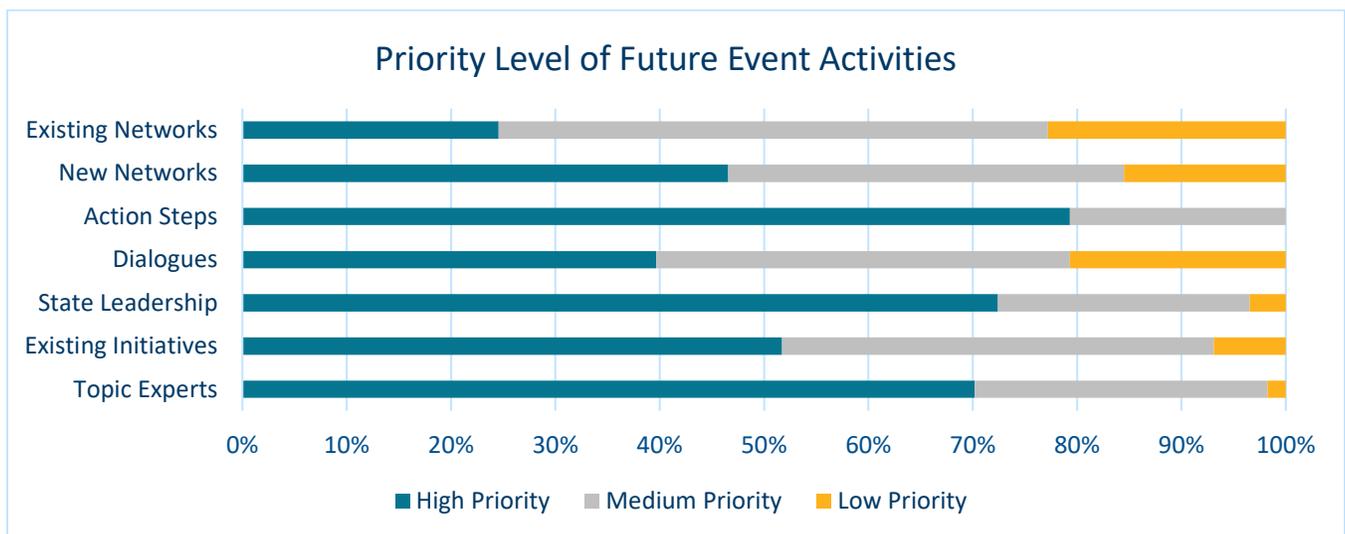


Chart 4. Priority level of activities for future events – participant responses (Snap Survey, n=59)

The top three high priority actions are: determining actionable steps on environmental issues, engaging with state leadership, and presentations from topic experts. The largest majority of respondents would like emphasis on environmental action, as noted above in the desired topics.

There were 6 responses to the “Other” category, with most requesting engagement/dialogue activities. For example, one suggested methods for ranking Open Space topic conversations for selection, and another suggesting “facilitated engagement with participants, experts, and leaders.” Notably, over three-quarters of respondents identified all activities as high priority or medium priority, suggesting that a variety of activities are desired.

Ways to Increase Diversity and Inclusion

During the Environmental Congress leadership forum, the highest rated Slido question was “How can we diversify this room?” with 80 “upvotes” from the crowd. In the post-event survey, EQB asked, “How can we make the Environmental Congress more inclusive?” Among the 37 survey responses, the following themes emerged:

- Target recruitment to include those who make decisions on environmental issues and those who are most affected
- Co-create the event with diverse partners; involve partners in planning the event
- Align content with target audience interests to ensure relevancy
- Reduce barriers to participation
 - Event capacity: select an event venue, structure, and/or format that addresses unmet demand for the event
 - Timing: hold the event on a weekend day or evening
 - Location, access: [multiple, conflicting answers] host the event in different areas of the state or host the event in a highly populated metropolitan area; ensure the event is well served by transit
 - Child care: offer child care to enable care givers to participate

Conclusion

Many agencies, partners, and participants contributed to a highly successful Environmental Congress in 2019. The event feedback was overwhelmingly positive, but also indicative of the opportunity for further work. For example:

- “While I had some expectation that the Congress would be a watered down, ‘Hey, look how great Minnesota is doing on climate change! Tech is going to save us! No worries!’ thing, instead the presentation was a pretty honest assessment of the dire straits in which we find ourselves. There was some talk of things we hope to do and some that we’ve implemented already, but mostly it was a recognition that we have a long way to go. Even here in progressive Minnesota.” [Excerpt from a blog post]
- “All in all it was a pretty inspiring conference. There were real conversations and challenges. I don’t know if we’ll end up doing enough but we’re talking a good game so far.” [Snap Survey response]

- “I’m glad I attended. I had an opportunity to meet some amazing people, deepen some relationships, and learn a lot about the state agencies and NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] working for climate justice.” [Snap Survey response]

At the Environmental Congress, Governor Tim Walz spoke at length about the administration’s commitment to climate change. On December 2, the day before the Environmental Congress, Governor Walz issued Executive Order 19-37, “Establishing the Climate Change Subcabinet and the Governor’s Advisory Council on Climate Change to Promote Coordinated Climate Change Mitigation and Resilience Strategies in the State of Minnesota.” As a result, the Congress served as a venue for a responsive discussion about Minnesota’s newly-unveiled climate change initiative.

For the next Environmental Congress, survey respondents expressed a desire to continue a focus on climate change using a climate justice lens and emphasis on actions, and also a look at the role of agriculture as a solution to climate change. The EQB has opportunities to take on these issues while finding creative ways to address the unmet demand for the Environmental Congress, and making the Congress welcoming and inclusive to a diversity of Minnesotans.

The EQB welcomes ideas for how to incorporate the Environmental Congress into the state’s climate work or other environmental initiatives to meaningfully advance discourse for the benefit of Minnesotans and the environment. At the March 16, 2020 EQB meeting, Board members will discuss ideas for the next Environmental Congress and welcome the public into this dialogue.

Appendix 1

Leadership Forum Questions and Votes Submitted by Participants

Question text	Votes
How do we diversify this room?	80
What are your administration's top goals for the upcoming 2020 decade to combat global warming?	65
How can the state effectively partner with MN Tribes/sovereign nations to address climate change?	64
What are key ideas you have to ensure equity is a focus as we beneficially electrify Minnesota?	63
In this country, Climate Change is a byproduct of our finance, governance, and education systems. Why aren't we talking about these as core drivers that are the truly necessary solutions?	63
What will be done to assure racial justice in decision-making?	54
How can we help to ensure farming is part of the solution, not part of the problem?	49
What incentives can we provide farmers to integrate pollinator-friendly plants and regenerative agriculture practices? What do we have already?	43
What steps can Minnesota take to ensure that Natural and Working Lands play a major role in helping us meet our goals for mitigation?	34
How can we best collaborate and engage one another in acting on climate change?	33
How can we change the state building code to require all new buildings to be zero emission structures?	27
What are the most significant obstacles for climate mitigation and related policies in Minnesota?	24
The Enbridge Line 3 Pipeline will contribute ~ 200 million tonnes of carbon emissions annually. Right now, Minnesota's total carbon emissions from every sector is only 130 - 140 million metric tons. Do you support stopping this project?	24
Why can't we get bipartisan support for a 100% renewable elec. standard??	22
What kind of sustainability education are we giving students in k-12 and how can we do more?	21
How can Minnesota better support farmers to implement climate mitigation/adaptation strategies?	18
Now that transportation is the leading source of emissions, what can we do to reduce emissions in this sector?	17
What can individuals do themselves to make meaningful emissions reductions?	17
How do we disrupt the industrial food system that is such a major contributor to climate change, water quality, and human health problems, as well as the decline of our rural communities?	17
How do we get a more engaged citizenry involved in addressing climate change?	16

Question text	Votes
What do we do to address the climate change issue with people who are resistant to the facts or are science deniers?	16
Clean cars have been in the news a lot lately, but science tells us that we also need to get people out of their cars. What will it take to transform Minnesotan's transportation habits?	15
Are there any plans for water reclamation/grey water program implementation to aid in conserving our water resources?	14
How do we support farmers' transition to more sustainable agriculture in a way that includes them, not denigrate them?	14
As leaders in state agencies how are you working collaboratively with other agencies and the legislature?	13
How will we ensure rural communities aren't left behind in the energy transition and because of climate change impacts?	13
How can we make environmental education more accessible and diverse?	10
If we are so concerned about climate change why do we reward the behavior that causes it?	9
What is Minnesota doing to fulfill its role as part of the US Climate Alliance?	9
We know better insulation of buildings/homes is a large issue for reducing energy use - how is the state addressing this in housing financing?	9
How do we hold big businesses accountable for their mass waste?	9
Will MN follow California in banning new purchases of cars from manufacturers that support Trump's rollback of emission standards?	9
How can we ensure that workers employed in conventional energy jobs (e.g. coal fired power plants) can find good, family-supporting job opportunities building our clean energy infrastructure?	9
How do we incentivize and reward farmers in greater Minnesota to use climate friendly practices such as strip till, planting prairie plants, etc.	9
What are the long-term plans from the state to fund water retention across Minnesota?	8
Why don't we take a firm stand and stop Line 3?	8
How can we allow agriculture to expand and protect our water, air, and soil, while mitigating climate?	8
Will the Governor's new cabinet include an independent science panel to provide peer review of the cabinet's work?	8
How do we get the youth more involved and at the table in meaningful ways?	8
How can we turn back non-sustainable row crop production and feedlot expansion?	8
How do we ensure that when we are bonding for statewide capital investments, the projects should move us in the right direction from a carbon emissions perspective, not be adding to the problem?	8

Question text	Votes
What will Minnesota government do to substantially take on climate change? How can people support to make sure it's done quickly?	6
How can Minnesota work better with bordering states and provinces to maximize their resources to work on climate issues?	6
When will MN create a state wide Adaptation/Resiliency Plan that brings solutions and resources to local units of government who are on the front lines of climate change?	6
How do we encourage and foster long term Ag-Urban partnerships to address no -point runoff and sedimentation as well as erosion and nutrient damage to the ecosystem in the MN River?	6
What suggestions do you have for convincing others that climate change is a reality?	5
What is the % of the State budget goes into adaptation or migration the climate change?	5
Even if emissions stopped today, we would still experience changes for over 1000 years, what are you plans to ensure adaptation to current and expected climate change?	5
How do we tackle the changes required to the Farm Bill and the way we grow and distribute food to ensure safe and healthy food, people and ecosystems?	5
What can we do to address food waste across all sectors here in Minnesota?	5
Now that the American Public Health Association has recommended a moratorium on CAFO's, does Minnesota have a plan to relook at our policy in this regard?	5
How can clean water funds and LSOHC funds better align with or complement each other for Multipurpose water storage and retention projects?	5
In what ways have you personally improved the environment? Please share your practical and effective contributions so others may join in.	5
How & when can we update our statewide MN climate action plan to meet new UN goals of 50% by 3030 and 100% by 2050 and launch & manage implementation with NGOs, UMN, RDCs to cover all sources while advancing racial & geographic equity?	5
How can small nonprofits empower local community members to impact personal and systemic change?	4
What steps will state government and policy makers be taking to ensure that BIPOC leaders will have a seat at the table and that our ideas will be heard?	4
How will we ensure the viability of our essential ecosystems -- our environmental commons -- to make adaption to climate change possible?	4
With increased interest in composting organics, what steps are being put in place to address the lack of permitted compost sites In MN to adequately manage the increased volume of materials?	4
How can we discuss climate change and related environmental issues without typical us vs them argumentation?	4
How can youth and adults work together to form a coalition to achieve environmentally just communities?	4

Question text	Votes
Summits like this and others are great and generate enthusiasm, but what concrete action steps can we put in place at the local, regional and state levels to make a difference for this and future generations?	4
Do you support Line 3?	3
What are the long-term plans from the state to fund water retention across Minnesota?	3
What will it take to get funding allocated to develop very high quality local climate projections and make the data publicly available for use by government, business, and NGOs?	3
Will the Walz administration refuse to allow big Fossil Fuel infrastructure expansions in MN such as Enbridge Line 3?	3
The Governor has a very hopeful message — as well as a challenge to all of us. What gives you the most hope for our ability to meet this challenge? What successes have you seen that we can build on and learn from?	3
It would appear that MN is not offering any Electric car tax credits & incentives for 2019. If we want public to adopt and make transition to EVs, why not offer attractive incentives that will Improve those adaptations. Several states do.	3
Diversity has many dimensions including race, gender, geography, economic status, religion, etc. How do we best define and best make our climate discussions diverse across so many different dimensions.	3
How can we as citizens best help to further the clean energy transition in Minnesota	2
What is the biggest obstacle for achieving greater emissions reductions?	2
What are your thoughts on incorporating health equity throughout the state’s approach to mitigation and adaptation?	2
What will we do with all the internal combustion engine (ice) vehicles once we transition to electric vehicles to meet our 100 percent renewable energy goal?	2
Where can we get doctor Bauman slides?	2
What types of strategies and conversations are implemented to engage those that either do not acknowledge or passively acknowledge climate change?	2
Why should we risk damaging sensitive ecosystems by mining for copper and nickel in northern MN?	2
There are several state plans that call for water storage and water retention across the landscape of Minnesota. How will the state fund this at the local level?	2
Watershed districts, SWCDs, counties, regional water management boards and other local governmental units are primary vehicles to implement water storage and retention. How will the administration work closer with local and regional government?	2
What important next action steps do you want to come out of today’s conversations?	2
As the Federal Govt. has spiraled into dysfunction on Climate change how can MN and local communities lead the way?	2

Question text	Votes
The Minnesota IR party appears to be one of the biggest barriers to climate change and have embraced science denial. How should we deal with a party that rejects the facts?	2
We've mostly been talking about large scale, structural fixes. How are you, as an individual, modeling specific climate friendly changes in your life?	2
How do we garden with wet soil?	1
Don't some climate trends for MN actually show slightly cooler summers, in short run at least?	1
How can state agencies partner closer with local government on multipurpose water storage that meets both local and state goals?	1
Incorporate Traditional Ecological Knowledge in all Environmental work.	1
What tools do we have for flood management in urban areas?	1
What regulatory system is in place, or needed, to ensure purportedly renewable electricity is actually generated by, e.g., wind turbines or solar panels?	1
How do we make it economically viable and accessible for all Minnesotans especially low-income, BIPOC residents, youth etc. to combat climate change?	1
Can Dr. Brauman present her slides to us via zoom?	1
Is it wise to risk our clean water - as we watch it diminishing rapidly - for the mining in the northern lakes? Should we be concentrating on recycling and longevity of electronics?	1
How can we ensure that MN workers will benefit from our transition to clean energy infrastructure?	1
Where does MN rank with other states as it relates to proactive efforts to mitigate issues affecting our water, land, air, energy and climate?? Does EQB exist in other states?	1
The state is encouraged to increase funding for the Flood Hazard Mitigation program for water storage/retention and flood damage reduction. What are the plans of the administration to increase funding?	1
Does the state know how much water storage is needed across MN to mitigate flood damages? What are the plans to gain more data about statewide water storage needs?	1
When are we going to start getting concerned about residential lawn sprinklers that water more concrete and asphalt than grass? It's unbelievable how much water goes onto impervious surfaces and runs off.	1
While it may seem inconceivable, has the state ever investigated the economics of piping floodwaters to non-flood areas? Oil, natural gas, drinking water and wastewater is sent through pipes.	1
Public Drainage Systems can also incorporate water storage. Can the state increase funding to the BWSR multipurpose Drainage water management grant for watershed districts to increase Water storage?	1
Water storage projects require permits. Given the call for statewide water storage, can the state further streamline permitting and environmental review processes?	1

Question text	Votes
How can we better use WCA to encourage water storage in conjunction with flood storage and mitigation projects when wetland banking is involved?	1
Could the state consider a dedicated annual fund for multipurpose flood hazard mitigation efforts across MN?	1
How to ensure current & future MN industries/businesses Operate in environmentally safe & responsible/ethical/legal ways?	1
Is MNDOT working with local government to protect state transportation assets from reoccurring flooding?	1
What better funding program can we develop to help small municipalities deal with increased water treatment needs and infrastructure inadequacy?	1
How do we create opportunities/incentives for individuals to install solar?	1
Do you have staff researching the potential of using finished compost to increase sequestration of carbon as well as drought resistance?	1
How can we normalize positive environmental initiatives?	1
What is our state's plan to deal with global climate refugees who want to come to a place with abundant fresh water?	1
What environmental media/category (air, water, land, wildlife, etc.) are you most passionate about?	0
What are some opportunities for U of M students to get involved?	0
Where did Dr. Brauman get the climate projections?	0
Any update to include tribal government in the planning?	0
How can state government and agriculture best work together to address excess water on the landscape?	0
Progress was made reducing GHG emissions through Legislative action on renewable energy and household energy. Currently tackling transportation fuel through rule making. What are the next sectors for us to tackle and how should we do it?	0
What does a just transition to a clean energy economy look like to you?	0
What is the state doing to encourage cooperative efforts between local government and tribal nations on multipurpose water storage?	0
How can we ensure REAL collaboration between government and non-government sectors in addressing climate change? Government tends to dominate, and doesn't build in the time and process for in-depth engagement with other sectors.	0
Will MN take bold action and divest from fossil fuels?	0
Will Kate Bauman's presentation (and others) be available on this event's website afterwards?	0