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EXPLORING A MORAL OBLIGATION MODEL OF RIPARIAN BUFFER MANAGEMENT AMONG LANDOWNERS

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ABSTRACT: Water resource professionals are increasingly dissatisfied with the outcomes of incentive focused conservation adoption programs. Complaints tend to underscore that resources available to fund these programs are limited, ecological results are typically piecemeal, and benefits may be temporary. Past human dimensions research further calls to question the role of economic incentives as a driver of conservation practices. This paper examines a new approach to understanding and promoting water resource conservation practices. Most existing outreach and education efforts have assumed a rational comprehensive approach which purports that individuals weigh the personal costs and benefits of a behavior, and if the benefits outweigh the costs they will adopt the behavior. Unfortunately, many conservation practices, like riparian zone management, have limited tangible personal benefits especially in the short-term, requiring that rewards like financial remuneration be provided externally through cost-share programs or direct payments. The rewards of the behavior then are not internalized and thus, if the rewards are removed (e.g., program funds are cut) or the rewards for not engaging in the behavior outweigh behavior engagement rewards (e.g., commodity prices increase), the behavior will desist. A moral obligation model (MOM) posits that individuals feel morally obligated to engage in certain behaviors, if certain basic values (e.g., collectivism) and behavioral norms are activated. This paper examines the potential for MOM to explain behaviors through a self-administered survey of riparian landowners in a transitioning watershed in Minnesota';s Twin Cities Metropolitan Area. Survey findings indicate that respondents deem values associated with nurturing and cooperating with community members as important. Respondents predominantly agree that riparian buffers are important for improving water quality for communities downstream. Furthermore, respondents believe that it is their personal responsibility to help protect water quality. Resource managers, decision-makers, and water professionals should explore opportunities to promote voluntary conservation practices as a civic responsibility and integral to community stewardship, as well as ecological stewardship.

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