

State Natural Resources Conservation Council

An Agency of Vermont State Government, Serving Vermont's 14 Conservation Districts

NRCC Full Board Meeting

December 11, 2018 – The Annex Conference Room, Montpelier

Present: Bill Manner (Southeast Union Rep); Marli Rupe (DEC Rep); Nina Gage (VAAFV Rep); Jill Arace (VACD); Beth Moser-Duquette (Co-Chair, South Union Rep); Kerry O'Brien (NRCC Administrator); Susie Walsh Daloz (Ag Programs Manager); Somara Zwick (NRCC Business Manager); Rick Hopkins (Co-Chair, Central Union Rep); Tim Buzzell (Northeast Union Rep); Holden Sparacino (Water Quality Programs Manager); On phone – Vicky Drew (USDA NRCS), and Jonathan Chamberlain (South Central Union Rep)

Rick called the meeting to order 1:10pm

Roundtable introductions

DEC Update: Marli provided an update. Kari Dolan was recently elected to the legislature and will no longer be serving as the director of the Clean Water Initiative. Her position will be posted soon. She will be taking a leave of absence. When she returns she will have a different lateral position within DEC. Emily Bird is also away for family reasons. The program is going through a lot of changes as a result. Carolyn Alves has joined DEC, she used to work for NRCS. The Clean Water Board meeting scheduled for 14th has been moved to 21st. A survey for the Clean Water Board will be compiled for this meeting. A new Block Grant RFP will be released soon (for project implementation). DEC is setting up meetings with partners (including NRCC/Districts) first to discuss prior to issuing the RFP. **If NRCDs have any feedback on the Block Grant please share with Kerry to bring to DEC.** Business Office is cracking down on all its grant requirements, interim deadlines in particular. Districts may set up ACH payments with DEC to help expedite payments, NRCC will have a form from the state that Districts can request. Ecosystem Restoration Grants will be released in March. DEC was going to have a January and April grant rounds and are doing one in March instead due to staffing constraints and anticipated leaves of absence. DEC will have advance monies from FY2020 in this grant round, but will not be able to spend it until July 2019. Appointments have not yet been made to committee in the Legislature. Funding for Clean Water will be a hot button issue (again) this session. Wetlands will also be an issue as a major change in the wetland statute will be on the calendar. This will be a big conversation within agricultural sector as it will define exclusions. A wetlands non-reporting general permit (NRGP) was just released – if project fits parameters there will not be a fee. This will help expedite some projects that have been held up by the wetland permitting process. Marli will send link.

Previous Meeting Minutes: Bill made a motion to approve the minutes from the NRCC meeting on September 11, 2018, Beth seconded and the motion was approved.

Program Updates:

Kerry shared an update. Holden Sparacino started last week. NRCC submitted two proposals to DEC, one for Trees for Streams to fund buffer projects outside of the Lake Champlain Basin. NRCC was awarded funds from Lake Champlain Basin Program for Trees for Streams projects within the LC Basin. If funding is awarded from DEC, Trees for Stream programming will be available statewide and include ~\$257,000 in funding for NRCC and

Conservation Districts. The second proposal was to DEC for project development services. This will include a suite of services to develop projects listed as priorities in Stormwater Master Plans, River Corridor Plans and Tactical Basin Plans. The funding will help prepare projects for implementation, and support NRCC's existing Block Grant for project implementation. There were limited funds available in the RFP, and there was a minimum of two other organizations applying. FY19 Basin Planning agreements are getting prepared for Districts this week. Funding is also very limited for these services. NRCC has also submitted a budget proposal to VAAFAM for FY2020 that includes a proposed increase of \$68,000 in operating funds for NRCC and the Conservation Districts.

Susie shared that NRCC Ag-CWIP agreements are currently overlapping, and there was a recent reporting deadline for Ag-CWIP #1. AG-CWIP #2 is a more cohesive scope of work, primarily focused on technical assistance. There are five Districts who have hired part time staff under this agreement which has been exciting growth for the Districts. There has been a lot of focus on Nutrient Management Planning goCrop updates. Districts are collaborating to support a more unified approach. NMP classes are starting in January. White River has a new District Manager, Steve Mortillo, who replaced Marina Welch – White River also has Lisa Nicholi, Nutrient Management Specialist. Reporting period for Grassed Waterway projects coming up soon.

NRCC Business Update:

Somara provided an update on NRCC Business. A 6-month NRCC budget review was distributed. Revisions included updates to personnel budget, adding the new Water Quality Program Manager and reducing NRCC Administrator, as well as revenue adjustments from grants due to projections for the fiscal year. There is an unallocated surplus currently that may be assigned to increase Holden Sparacino's hours once additional grants are secured. Finance Committee approved amended or new personnel agreements through June 2019. Budget will be revisited again in March, and FY20 preliminary budgeting will begin. NRCC currently manages over 100 subagreements.

VAAFAM Update:

Nina provided an update from VAAFAM. No news on the FY20 budget until the governor releases it in January. Nina concurred with Marli that the state is cracking down on its grants, they recently went through an auditing process. There is an emphasis/need to relieve farmers of grants administration, and providing additional support from service providers in a larger administrative role. When Mary Montour returns from maternity leave, they will be relaunching similar programming as the North Lake contractor program – which provides a higher level of support to farms. Capital Equipment Assistance Program (CEAP) received about 2 million in requests, anticipating to fund half, 90/10 cost share, 5-years of reporting required. There was a SARE grant that evaluated equipment programs – Nina will send to Kerry to share. She also shared the Dairy Data Summary. VAAFAM is projecting an increase in cost-share programs. The dairy data shows support for this. Increase in Farm Agronomic Practice Program (FAP) as well. Early snow impacted manure spreading ban which starts this weekend, a lot of winter spreading requests – they are working with farms to try and provide siting assistance (on snow) for spreading so there is not overtopping of manure pits in the spring. VAAFAM is launching a new website January 1st. Final testing is taking place on the Partners Database to track implementation of water quality practices on farms and track loading reductions. VAAFAM passed a rule revision to the RAPs – rodent guards on tile drains will need to be installed, no new surface inlets, no tile under production areas.

VACD Update:

Jill provided an update for VACD. She shared the Conservation Districts' annual report. VACD had their annual

meeting in October. They are in the middle of their federal audit. VACD has hired 4 new positions filling existing vacancies. They will be hiring a technical coordinator for Land Treatment Planners, and a Communications Coordinator. Ag Water Quality Partners meet monthly and are in a strategic planning process to focus on areas they want to collaborate, better serve farmers, address privacy, communications, NMPs, wetlands, etc. They are organizing the annual meeting on February 22nd at VTC – tile drains will be a topic this year. Clean Water Board was reconfigured this year and now includes 4 members of the public. Process of budget development is different this year – Clean Water Board budget was significantly higher than available revenue. Several agencies are asking for staff. Tax department is predicting 6 million in revenues. Capital budget is significantly reduced, increase in non-capital. Big questions – where will the additional revenue needed come from? Will the governor support it? How will the distribution of funds be organized? Multiple centrally managed grants or large grants shifting management to regional level? Jill has been involved in the Working Lands Coalition, they are asking for an increase through VAAF to 3 million to support farms diversifying or transitioning their operations.

NRCS Update:

Vicky reported for NRCS. Farm Bill has cleared the conference committee – which is good news and indicates a compromise between the Senate and House. May be signed soon. Payment limitations will be reset for farm contracts as soon as its signed, it could have contracting implications for NRCS. Language was added to EQIP statute which will provide more flexibility and not require “all or nothing” contracts. RCPP is reauthorized with more funding. CSP survived but will have fewer acres. President Trump is standing firm on funding the wall, so a Government shutdown may happen and would take effect on December 24th – which would require employees to come in on the 24th for shutdown procedures which usually takes 3-4 hours. Similar funding for EQIP expected for this year. Farm Show is in January – hoping to do accounting for phosphorus reductions and partner with DEC. Agency is working to fill 17 positions – about half have been filled, mostly field staff positions. Hiring has slowed down a bit due to hiring procedures changing. 100 applicants for Conservation Agronomist position, and 200 applicants for position in state office. FPAC called Vicky and asked about the status of the District Cooperative agreements and is offering support - so there may be movement on this soon - subcommittee may need to reconvene. Last year of funding for the 4 strategic watersheds. Funding will start for 6 watersheds this year.

Supervisory Union Updates:

Bill reported that the Southeast Union is working to have a meeting together in January with both Districts.

Rick reported that both White River and Winooski have new staff. Winooski has a number of projects in scoping stages, septic system conference in development. Winooski nearly had a supervisor election, but one candidate withdrew their petition.

Beth reported that they are hoping to connect more with Bennington County NRCD. Poultney Mettowee has a new hire, Stefano, hired as an agronomist. PM also has a newsletter that includes photos of their equipment rentals – no till drill and seeder.

Tim reported that Orleans County finalized their road erosion inventory with the town of Derby. Portable scales program in development, first farm visited. They are working with their NRCS outreach staff to show 1-minute service announcements highlighting farms – “Why Conservation Matters in Vermont” that will be shown ahead of movies. Suggestion that there is an opportunity for Districts to collaborate on insurance, and suspects after surveying Districts that many Districts may be underinsured. Somara noted this.

Vicky added a note that the 1-minute videos are available on farmers.gov – you have to scroll way down, but NRCS will send a link. In addition to showings at theaters, they can also be shown at annual meetings, events, etc. There are 8 videos.

Jonathan reported that the VACD annual meeting was hosted in Middlebury, he received a lot of good feedback.

Next Meeting:

March 12th 1-4pm at the Annex.

Adjourned: 3:25pm