

# State Natural Resources Conservation Council

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

## **NRCC Full Board Meeting**

June 4, 2019 – 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); Jess Buckley (Ag Programs Manager); Somara Zwick (NRCC Business Manager); Tim Buzzell (Northeast Union Rep); Richard Noel (Northwest Union Rep); Holden Sparacino (Water Quality Programs Manager); Vicky Drew (USDA NRCS); John Thurgood (USDA NRCS); Rick Hopkins (Co-Chair, Central Union Rep)

**Meeting Opened:** Beth called the meeting to order 1:05pm

**Previous Meeting Minutes:** Beth made a motion and Bill seconded to approve the previous meeting minutes as presented. The motion was approved.

### **Staff Updates:**

- Kerry: Kerry is managing the Core Service agreement and Capacity Building, the rest of the NRCC agreements are now managed by Program Staff through VACD. Conservation Districts have been working to upgrade our google drive platform and are now video conferencing regularly on Zoom. There have been financial management trainings funded through the Core Service agreement. There is a need to increase operational funding in this agreement, and VACD will be exploring opportunities on NRCC's behalf.
- Jess Buckley, our new Agriculture Program Manager, introduced herself to the group. Welcome!
- Holden: There are three Trees for Streams agreements in the works, the DEC agreement was just signed, Pur Project agreement is signed but waiting on execution. Basin Planning agreement for FY20 is in the works - hoping to increase funding for expanded services with agricultural regional coordination workgroups. They are also evaluating the oversight arrangement from Basin Planners. Our current Design/Implementation Block Grant has about \$7000 remaining that is not obligated. A new award was provided to NRCC for Design/Implementation Block Grant for \$925,000. There will be a greater focus on nutrient reduction in this agreement. The Project Development agreement has been signed, \$55,000, which will help support Districts ready projects for the Design/Implementation Block Grant. Holden has been working on the new google Team Drive and are also working with Districts to edit their websites on the VACD website. Holden will share a list of projects that have been funded through the Block Grant.
- Jill provided an update on Ag-CWIP, she's been covering while Jess transitions into the position. Ag-CWIP #1 is wrapping up, the agreement will be closed shortly. Jill is interested in sharing reports with NRCC. Ag-CWIP #2 is producing excellent results, Districts are tracking outreach to farms. Conservation Signs are still going out, promoting conservation practices on farm fields. Scales are becoming a common tool, weighing manure spreaders to better target application rates. NMP updates are taking place around the state, with goCrop trainings. Sharing of program ideas among Districts has also been excellent.
- Somara: Somara distributed a list of current agreements. FY20 Budget is in the works as revenues become finalized. She reviewed the current accounts receivable. There has been discussion of exploring

a line of credit, so invoices from NRCDs can be covered up front rather than wait for the revenue to come in from funders. Somara will be looking into it, there are more specific rules as a government organization.

Approval was requested for NRCC full board to authorize the NRCC Finance Committee to complete the FY20 budget, in order to execute business starting July 1. Bill made a motion and Richard seconded. The motion was approved. Approval was requested for the NRCC Finance Committee to execute necessary amendments for FY19 for Somara, VACD, and Caledonia County NRCD. The board was supportive of the Finance Committee executing amendments on year-end contracts as needed and supported by the budget. NRCC financial information will be available on the new Team Drive. Holden will send NRCC board members links to get access once it's set up. A training for NRCC members was suggested for the next NRCC meeting.

Somara has done "site visits" with every District to review their financial operations, with the support of VACD Capacity Building funds. She will be preparing a report for VACD and can share it with NRCC.

A policy was adopted for meals reimbursement, based on the state policy, to cover meals expenses for NRCC staff at conferences, etc.

Rick shared on behalf of the NRCC Finance Committee that they will be providing a one-time year-end bonus in recognition of her capacity building work with NRCC.

#### **NRCS-NRCD Cooperative Agreement Update:**

NRCS has been working on codifying agreements between NRCS and NRCDs. This has been in the works for several years with a committee helping build content. The national office was reviewing it and it was delayed. Three weeks ago, a national template for the State Level Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) was released. There is a goal that each agreement will be in place by December 2019. Changes to the agreement would be challenging and cause more delays, but NRCS would like feedback by the end of July if there are major changes suggested. Each State level MOA would be signed by each NRCD, NRCS, VAAF, and ANR. NRCS will also need to enter into separate "Local Cooperative" agreements with each District that is co-housed with NRCS and codify the exchange of resources. This will happen after the State level MOAs are signed. Kerry/Jill/Holden will organize a zoom meeting for District staff with NRCS to discuss and review the agreement.

#### **Legislative Update:**

S.96 passed with a "permanent" source of funding for Clean Water, which will utilize a portion of the Rooms and Meals tax and Property Transfer tax. The legislature declined to utilize funds from the Education Fund, and instead decided to utilize funds from the General Fund. Funding distribution is restructured and will be distributed regionally through Clean Water Service Providers based on phosphorus reduction targets. There is no obligation currently for VAAF funding to be included, however a report was required evaluating this from the Agency of Administration. A Water Quality Enhancement Grant program was set up through S.96, which will allow for water quality services outside of impaired waters and fund projects statewide that don't necessarily have a phosphorus reduction target. Conservation Districts and Watershed Groups pushed to increase the funding for this grant, it currently is funded at 20% with a \$5 million cap. DEC will need to develop a formula to quantify phosphorus reduction by project, assign \$ per reduction target, and develop a process to set up Clean

Water Service Providers (CWSPs). CWSPs also will include Regional Basin Councils, which will have decision making authority, Conservation Districts, RPCs, Watershed groups, and municipalities are on the Basin Councils.

A bill on Toxics was passed, tightening the regulations on these (PFOAs, etc.). There was a lot of discussion on Act 250 and Current Use, but no bill was produced. Miscellaneous ag subjects bill was extensive. Wetland Bills needed more time, there will be workgroups convened this summer. They did make some changes, however, including a \$200 max permit fee for water quality practices in wetlands, \$200 max permit fee for manure storage in wetlands as well.

The Clean Water Network is hosting a legislative panel next week on June 12th – 8:30-am – 12:00 at the Main Street Landing Performance Arts Center in Burlington.

Working Lands Enterprise Fund received an additional \$1 million.

### **DEC Update:**

DEC will be making a big effort to encourage outreach on wetlands, noting the lower permit fees. There is an interest in developing a consistent message on wetland outreach, and preparing a training that will include NRCS, VAAFM, and DEC to agree on messaging. (Army Corps as well?) DEC has hired a temp staff person to delineate wetlands. VACD is re-envisioning funding from LTPs and will be focusing it on outreach related to wetlands and natural resources, more details soon.

Water Science Week took place – 30-35 participants each day, including national experts, to discuss the latest in research and brainstorm what should be prioritized in conservation work. Methane digesters, two-tiered ditches, no-till, soil health, etc. topics were discussed. Ag Water Quality Partnership is interested in doing this again and providing trainings regionally.

WISPr program and State Revolving Loan Fund program may be providing bridge loans for farmers, if paid back within 12 months, there is 0% interest. It's still getting finalized. VEDA (VT Economic Development Authority) will be managing these loans, Marli will let us know as soon as she hears, and certainly outreach will be necessary.

Alli Lewis is on maternity leave, Marli will be the contact for grants.

### **VAAFM Update:**

Nina shared the Dairy Data Summary. Milk prices are going up (slightly), but we are still losing farms. TSP Certification program will begin soon. VAAFM was given authority to provide technical and financial assistance through the VESP program, pilot phase will continue this year – currently using the RSET tool but will be comparing secondary evaluation tools. They also received authority for the AEM Program, which includes conservation easements, land acquisition, and decommissioning ag buildings – no more than \$200K in individual agreements and only when the farm is suitable, willing and able to retire, and willing for the land to be conserved and no longer in ag. CREP is now in statute at state level. Wetland messaging necessary. Soil Conservation Working Group – report due to legislature 2020 to explore opportunities to provide payments to

farms for ecosystem services. There will be meetings through July – December to develop this. There are changes to the FAP program (check their website), raised cap per farm to \$8000, increased rate for cover crops from \$40 to \$45. Agency has been funding aeration for a decade, this is the last year VAAFM will provide this funding. Rotational Grazing practice funding at \$25/acre, technical assistance cost share for improvements, available when the farm has a plan, livestock exclusion, and adequate vegetation. Partner Database will soon be how all Ag-CWIP grant recipients will report their technical assistance with farms, waiting on a Quality Assurance Plan that we'll need to sign. VAAFM will refuse access to database if not following QUAP. Urged NRCC Finance Committee to request an increase in budget funding sooner than later – and add a different date to agreement, suggested FY21 budget meeting in July. Kerry will follow up with Nina. RFP for Clean Water Funding will be released soon – includes Organizational Development, Farm Conservation Surveys, and Equipment Assistance. June 15<sup>th</sup> release date, July 15<sup>th</sup> questions due, August 1<sup>st</sup> return date. Awards will likely be amendments to existing agreements when possible. VAAFM catching up with the hemp growing craze, will be preparing outreach materials and draft rules – participating in providing feedback in rule making process is welcome, Nina will send Kerry a link.

#### **VACD Update:**

Grant received from NACD, \$122,500 funding 2.5 positions supporting NRCS programs. They are assessing the roles and responsibilities of VACD staff and how they are supporting Soil Conservationists – “lean” process planned for July. Discussions with NRCS to expand the role of LTPs, broaden. Districts are beginning outreach of RCPP program to sign farms up to develop NMPs.

#### **NRCS Update:**

Vicky: Thursday night on PBS at 7:00 will premiere “Faces of Agriculture”. NRCS is low on funding, more so than usual. There were 9.7 million in applications and only 2.7 million available. There is likely to be no more funding outside of Lake Champlain unless it can be funded through Long Island Sound RCPP. Applications will rollover, but ranking criteria will change and tool they use to rank. They've filled only a couple positions, currently at 59 employees but should be at 73 – Human Resources is at half capacity. This is the last year of focus funding for Lake Champlain – interested in hearing from partners on developing funding priorities around the state, survey likely. Farm Bill requires an increase in wildlife focus. Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) announcement is out now, demonstration/research for innovative conservation practices with outreach. Pur Project is working with Extension to develop Forest Buffer Innovation Center.

#### **Supervisory Union Updates:**

Orleans County NRCD DM is moving to part time, but all programs are covered. PMNRCD is still tree planting. Rutland NRCD had their annual meeting – it was excellent. Mettowiee River in New York has been dredged. PMNRCD is moving their nursery from Green Mountain College to town owned land. Ottauquechee NRCD has expanded their monitoring but have noted that LaRosa lab is at capacity. Winooski held their septic conference and “septic socials”. They've also received funds to develop a strategic plan and have hired a consultant. There is a new DM at White River, Jennifer Byrne. David Ainsworth passed, his wife Peggy was on the White River NRCD board, and he was a legislator.

**Next Meeting: September 10<sup>th</sup> 1-4pm The Annex**

Meeting Adjourned: 4:10pm