

# State Natural Resources Conservation Council

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

---

## **NRCC Board Meeting**

Friday, May 24, 2024 9:00 AM

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/8798107090?pwd=c3luK1lzZm5MSTc4eWVTWfo2ZWYdz09&omn=84846569500>

By Phone: (929) 205-6099 Meeting ID: 879 810 7090, Passcode: 524884

## **NRCC Voting Members:**

Rick Hopkins - Board Chair, Central Union Rep, Winooski NRCD

Alan Shelvey - South Central Union Rep, Otter Creek NRCD

Linda Corse - Southeast Union Rep, Windham County NRCD

Richard Noel - Northwest Union Rep, Franklin County NRCD

Brian Vargo – Southwest Union Rep, Bennington County NRCD

Nina Gage - Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets Rep

Marli Rupe - Vermont Agency of Natural Resources, Department of Environmental Conservation Rep

Dan Lerner - University of Vermont Extension Rep

## **NRCC Non-Voting Board Members:**

Travis Thomason - USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Rep

Jill Arace - Vermont Association of Conservation Districts Rep

## **Attendees:**

### Meeting held remotely via Zoom:

Board members: Rick Hopkins, Central Union Rep & Board Chair; Richard Noel, Northwest Rep; Alan Shelvey, South Central Rep; Marli Rupe, Vermont DEC Rep; Jill Arace, VACD Rep; Nina Gage, VAAFM rep; Travis Thompson, USDA NRCS Rep; Linda Corse, Southeast Rep; Bill Manner, Southeast Rep Alternate; Kate Willard, Central Union Alternate Rep; Hannah Gianotti, Southwest Alternate Rep

Other Attendees: Molly Varner, VACD Communications Coordinator; Jess Miller, NRCC Grants & Finance Manager; Clare Ireland, NRCC Administrator; Sarah Damsell, District Rep, Orleans County NRCD District Manager; Emily Nummer, NRCC Agriculture Programs Manager; and Lina Smith, NRCC Grants & Finance Manager.

# State Natural Resources Conservation Council

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

---

## AGENDA

- Welcome & Introductions Rick
- Review & Approval of Minutes of October 18, 2023 Board Meeting Clare
- FY23 Annual Report Molly
- FY23 Services Report Clare
- FY23 Financial Statements Clare
- Core Services & Legislative Update Clare & Jill
  - o FY25 Funding Request
  - o Statute Review
- Break
- Funding Updates:
  - o New AgCWIP Agreement Emily
  - o RCPP Streams Release Jess & Jill
  - o Congressionally Directed Spending Request Clare
  - o Trees for Streams Updates Jess
- The Vermont Conservation State Initiative (VCSI) 30x30 Update Clare
- Other business, as needed

### **Welcome & Introductions**

The meeting was called to order at 9:14 am.

Introductions were made. Marli informed the board that Dan Lerner of the University of Vermont Extension Service is leaving his position and has shared the need for a representative to Council with Roy Bedford.

### **Review & Approve Minutes of the October Meeting**

Linda made the motion, seconded by Richard to accept the minutes of the October 18 meeting. Linda made note of an error using "conservation" instead of "conversation." Upon a call for a vote, all were in favor.

### **FY23 Annual Report**

Molly gave an overview of the annual report located at: <http://vacd.org/2023annualreport>

# State Natural Resources Conservation Council

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

---

## **Questions/Comments:**

In response to a question from Hannah about the breakdown of staff hours and how this information is used Clare replied that it can be useful information to share with our funders and partners. For instance, in the past it has been found to be aligned with TMDL goals. NRCC does not dictate any particular goals for district staff time allocation. Other goals for using this information could be a conversation in the future.

Sarah asked for separation of the VACD and NRCC data and asked how the report would be shared. Clare replied that a separation could be provided. Historically, we've reported all data together to represent the total operations of all things conservation-district related in the state, particularly given how intertwined our work has been, but more disaggregation could certainly be helpful, particularly in highlighting different funding sources or differences in organizational growth over time. Molly reported she has begun sharing the report publicly, releasing it on the VACD website, through newsletters, and reposting it to district websites. A press release could also be done. Rick encouraged Marli and Nina to share it with the commissioners and secretaries that they are in touch with.

Nina acknowledged the challenge to prepare this report gathering information from so many organizations and noted that typically agencies are required to have reports by January to have them available for the legislative session. Clare explained the ongoing workload challenge for staff that caused the delay in getting this report out earlier this year, but typically NRCC's goal is to have the Annual Report done by December, which will be our goal again this year. We hope to have a full-time communications manager on board shortly which will help us meet this goal.

Molly was thanked as she wraps up her work as Communications Coordinator.

## **FY23 Services Report**

Clare shared the FY23 Services Report noting that it includes VACD because NRCC and VACD share staffing. She highlighted NRCC's direct assistance to districts and capacity building work.

## **FY23 Financial Statements**

Clare presented the FY23 financial statements that have been approved by the finance committee noting:

- 93% of projected budget received
- 95% of projected budget expended

She also noted the balance in the NRCC checking account, which has been accumulating in retained earnings. Currently there is no policy on what to do with retained earnings, so this is being discussed with the Finance Committee. Up until now, this balance has been used with Finance Committee approval to expedite payments to districts when there is a delay of payments from funders. NRCC could benefit from a more formal policy to that extent, or other uses of these funds could be considered.

# State Natural Resources Conservation Council

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

---

## **Comments/Questions:**

- Sarah noted the sharp growth in Council and asked what FY24 was looking like in terms of capacity. Clare replied she is not seeing income as expected for FY24 mostly because of timing in the Design and Implementation Block grant projects. Tentatively, she expects the Council budget will come in similar to last year. She added that Council's budget supports 3.5 FTE's (6 part-time staff people). She acknowledged that demand exceeds staff capacity, and she continues to advocate for more staff.
- Marli suggested taking a deep dive into workload and capacity issues, including looking into software tools that could help. Clare noted that work is being done to find efficiencies, but also welcomes the opportunity to have this conversation with the board. Some examples of current efforts:
  - Jess has been looking at Monday.com to do project management work to consolidate invoicing and manage subcontracts.
  - Staff is meeting once a month to look for ways to automate and standardize work.
- Bill suggested looking into the federal grant system noting a recent grant reimbursement went very smoothly for his district.
- Nina added that VAAFM's goal is to get payments out in 30 days, but there are a lot of reasons why payments can be delayed. The Agency of Ag continues to support organizational capacity for Council to produce a long-term benefit.
- Clare added that similar to districts, the Council budget is built by piecing together competitive grant funding sources. A lot of our staffing is coming out of overhead on those grants. Without that, we wouldn't have the ability to provide any of those capacity building services. It's not clear that the current level of staffing under Core Services would be enough to meet our statutory obligations for support of district elections, board meetings, etc.

## **Core Services & Legislative Update**

### **FY25 Funding Request**

Jill reported on the history of the FY25 funding request. Our FY24 budget of \$612,000 was cut to \$500,000 by VAAFM due to guidance from the governor which resulted in a very tight budget scenario for the Agency. However, with the help of Action Circles guiding us through Advocacy Day and districts giving great testimony to committees, the \$612,000 was restored with an additional \$100,000 of one-time funding. Jill emphasized this as an accomplishment in light of how difficult the year was financially in the legislature. The committees understood better what conservation districts do and there was support from the Senate Natural Resources committee and the Environment and Energy committee.

Clare reminded the board that the original request to the Agency of Ag was \$3 million. The restoration of the base funding and the additional \$100,000 is a good outcome and keeps us moving forward.

Nina thanked VACD and Jill for the work and dedication to this process and for leading the efforts with Action Circles on behalf of district funding. She hoped the district managers and supervisors recognized the importance and value of what Jill has brought to that effort.

# State Natural Resources Conservation Council

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

---

## **Statute Review**

Clare reported that the statute was not opened up in the legislature as was previously thought might happen. In the meantime, the VACD Governance Committee has been starting to work through this.

- Jennifer Byrne has presented an overview of our statute Title 10 Chapter 31. Clare has presented an overview of other places in statute where council, districts or supervisory unions pop up. Clare will send a recording of these presentations to Council.
- Clare is currently following up on two references that could help districts:
  - o The possibility of districts being able to requisition supplies, materials and equipment through Buildings and General Services (29 V.S.A. § 902)
  - o Districts access to state insurance coverage under a section of statute that instructs that districts are to be treated as a state agency for the purposes of insurance. (29 V.S.A. § 1407)

Richard reminded Council of the difficulty the state's per diem rates pose for securing membership on district boards, supervisory unions, and Council. Clare noted that the legislature has amended the language to allow organizations to request higher per diems, though we have not heard what that process looks like yet. She will look into this. Nina offered to help, in case that request needs to be supported by VAAFM.

In response to a question from Nina, Clare reported that this section of statute only refers to districts. Clare is in contact with the Agency of Administration, and there is still a question about how this will be implemented (for instance, how do districts pay for insurance without a line item in the budget?).

Travis spoke about the PO566 program. He noted they just hired someone to oversee the program and recommended Conservations Districts be part of it acknowledging it is a bit challenging for districts because of the required match. Statewide trainings to come soon.

Travis asked if there is a mechanism in terms of liability for districts to hold employees accountable for the work that they do? Is there a system in place for conservation districts to review performance of employees? Clare noted that most districts are getting insurance as though they are a municipality through VLCT as public employees and supervisors as elected officials. However, if they are covered under the state's general liability, the actions and decisions of conservation districts and their staff are potentially incurring liability for the State of Vermont. Once we receive clarification on how this will work, it may require training in the future. Linda added that Windham County does District Manager performance evaluations on an annual basis. This seems like a best practice for all districts. VACD is working on producing guidance and recommendations around this through the Capacity Building committee.

## **Funding Updates:**

### **New AgCWIP Agreement**

This topic was deferred to the next meeting due to time constraints.

# State Natural Resources Conservation Council

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

---

## **RCPP Streams Release**

Jill reported that although Council has had this agreement for several years, it had not started any work under this grant due to lack of staff capacity to navigate the agreement requirements and manage subagreements. Taking into account other funding opportunities that are available and can support these kinds of projects, staff recommended that Council would not move forward with the RCPP Streams grant, and the finance committee voted to release it. We have been in touch with NRCC, and they assure us that they welcome future RCPP applications from Council.

Travis noted that these funds will stay in Vermont and be implemented through their regular process with the original intention. He also noted more RCPP opportunities in 2025 and 2026.

Rick acknowledged that this decision and decisions like this in the future should be brought to Council's attention earlier on. We do not anticipate being in a position to have to release funding very frequently, but if this type of situation arises again, it will be brought to Council for discussion.

## **Congressionally Directed Spending Request**

Clare explained that a Congressionally Directed Spending Request brought forward by Michael Fernandez, the District Manager of Bennington County NRCD was submitted to Senator Welch and Representative Balint's offices. Council and the Agency of Ag applied for \$7.45 million to add money to the Agency of Ag's existing working lands grants programs. These grants, which go to producers for the purposes of innovating or updating equipment and practices, are wildly popular and oversubscribed. She heard from Representative Welch's office this past week with interest to move the proposal forward.

The majority of funds under this grant would go to the Agency of Ag, but \$700,000 would go to Council to support grant administration and support incorporating districts into these grants to provide outreach, project verification, and give districts the opportunity to talk with new producers to offer them services. Council would be sub-awarding to the Agency of Ag who would do the direct awards management, so Council would rely on VAAFM's existing grant-making infrastructure to do awards to producers. Council's role would be to manage the portion of this grant that goes to districts.

Hannah acknowledged and thanked Clare for the quick turnaround time on this grant application.

Clare noted this is a very different funding source for us (Housing and Urban Development), so this proposal has to be tailored specifically towards serving low- and middle-income communities within the agriculture sector.

Nina asked if EPA standards for eligibility apply? Travis answered that they typically would, but that congressionally directed spending funds can sometimes have a different process. Clare acknowledged this will be new and will need to work through all the questions if and when we get to the stage of negotiating an agreement.

## **Trees for Streams Updates**

This topic was deferred to the next meeting due to time constraints.

# State Natural Resources Conservation Council

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

---

## **The Vermont Conservation State Initiative (VCSI) 30x30 Update**

This topic was deferred to the next meeting due to time constraints.

## **Other Business, as needed**

- Richard thanked everyone who deals with this bureaucracy.
- Marli noted a public meeting for Act 59 on June 27 at 4:00 pm which she will send an email about.
- Clare let Council know that she will be on maternity leave from July through September.

**Next meeting will be June 17<sup>th</sup> at 2:30 pm.**

Richard made the motion, seconded by Hannah to adjourn the meeting. Upon a call for a vote, all were in favor. Meeting adjourned at 11:32 am.

**Next Meeting: June 17, 2:30 pm.**