

State Natural Resources Conservation Council

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

NRCC Board Meeting

Wednesday, May 10, 2023 1:00 pm – 4:00 pm

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/8798107090?pwd=c3luK1lzZm5MSTc4eWVTWFO2ZWYdz09>

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

Katy Crumley – 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, Southeast Rep; 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; Alan Shelvey, South Central Rep;

Other Attendees: Chris Von Alt, Northeast Rep Alternate; Gordon Merrick, White River Alternate Rep, Molly Varner, VACD Communications Coordinator; Jess Miller, VACD Grants & Finance Specialist, Clare Ireland, NRCC Finance Manager, Sarah Damsell, District Rep, Orleans County NRCD District Manager; Cory Ross, Alternate Rep, District Manager Windham County NRCD, Jennifer Byrne, White River District Manager and representative to Environmental Review Board, Emily Nummer, VACD Agriculture Programs Manager and Lina Smith, NRCC Grants & Finance Specialist.

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AGENDA

1:00 pm	Call Meeting to Order Welcome & Introductions	Chair
1:05 pm	Review & Approve Minutes	Full Board
1:10 pm	Legislative Updates <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ FY 24 Budget Request▪ Statute Review▪ 	Clare Ireland & Jill Arace
1:40 pm	VACD Board Development Update	Jill Arace
2:00 pm	District Manager Representative Report	Sarah Damsell & Cory Ross
2:30 pm	Environmental Justice Representative Report <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community Engagement Recommendations	Jennifer Byrne
3:00 pm	Discussion about Future NRCC Board Meetings	Clare Ireland
3:10 pm	Other Business, as required	Chair/Full Board
3:15 pm	Adjourn	Chair/Full Board

Minutes:

Rick Hopkins called the meeting to order at 1:05 pm and welcomed everyone. Introductions were made.

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Review of Minutes

Chris Von Alt made a motion to approve the minutes of the February 8, 2023 board meeting with notation that Tim Buzzell was incorrectly included as board member. Linda Corse seconded the motion. Upon a vote, all were in favor and the minutes were approved.

Legislative Updates

Clare & Jill gave a brief history and the current status of the FY24 budget request which is currently under debate.

A \$3M budget was originally submitted to the House Appropriations Committee. Testimony was provided to the House & Senate Agriculture Committees. District Managers participated and reached out to legislators. Ultimately the house approved \$1M in one time funds. The senate has proposed \$250,000 in ongoing funds and it is now in conference committee. Jill noted the response received from legislators was very positive.

Once the number is finalized by the legislature, the method of distribution to districts will need to be discussed. Clare referred to 10 V.S.A §706 regarding allocation of funds by Council noting it is general and leaves it to Council to determine the allocations of funds to districts.

Last year, because the amount was not large, the consensus was for an even distribution among districts (\$20,000). Assuming there will be more money this year we will need to revisit this conversation. She has calculated the \$250,000 increase to be \$40,000 per district.

Nina asked if there was committee discussion in the legislature on how to interpret the statutory language. Clare noted that there has been discussion but not around the budget request. The House Agriculture Committee has indicated that they are interested in reviewing the statute

Marli asked if an evaluation of district urgent needs might be done given the language of the statute.

Jill noted there is quite a bit of temporary money right now in Vermont and the legislature is managing that as one time funds. They are looking for special projects where they can make an investment that

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is a springboard for the future. The ongoing funds we are requesting is more difficult. We might want to change our strategy and identify special projects in the next session as well as the ongoing request.

Linda noted that if we can get to the point that we have a full time manager for every district supported with consistent funding, then they could take advantage of these funds to address special needs in the districts.

Richard noted that the \$40,000 won't cover his district manager, never mind the 3 district employees.

Sarah asked if they can actually depend on this money. She also expressed concern about the legislature opening the statute without internal discussions and she expressed the need for multiple staff at a district.

Clare noted that once in the budget, ongoing funds are less likely to be cut.

The House Agriculture committee has begun to review Title 10 Chapter 31 with legislative council. Testimony met with questions about how districts are funded, the process of supervisor elections and they wanted to know how things are done in other states. The next step is to start pulling together information and decide on recommendations.

Jill felt the motivation from the committee was a positive one. They were surprised we weren't better funded and were interested in hearing what we think.

Rick asked if it would be good to form a sub-committee of supervisors and associates that are interested in this statute question.

Jill said it would be done through the VACD board.

Chris noted the reason districts were created and included in the statute was to increase the flow of information from the local level. It seems like it is the opposite now.

Richard agreed with Chris. USDA used to come to us for discussion on projects and what was needed.

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Travis recognized that locally led is the way to be successful and that the Agency shifted away from this. He stated he wants to work with DM's to develop a Continual Process Improvement (CPI) that looks more like what it should in VT. On an annual basis, the Agency solicits proposals from districts for important local projects. Last year, 3 districts submitted proposals.

She noted that we are selling ourselves to the legislature as Conservation Delivery Systems so to what degree do we have standard services around the state? Jill suggested this was a good topic for supervisor discussion.

VACD Board Development Update

Jill reported working to re-invigorate the VACD Board which fell by the wayside because of non-participation. It is composed of 14 board members (one representative per district).

It's been a slow process but we 9 districts are now appointed. An in-person meeting is planned for May 22nd.

The Board will establish a number of working committees not limited to board members.

- Governance – statute and VACD Bylaws
- Board Development – training, nominating committee
- Human Resources

District Manager Representative Report

There was no report because of time commitments.

Comments:

- Nina noted that the state struggles with consistent and quality services statewide.
- Cory acknowledged this difficulty for state agencies. As more money becomes available through Core services he would like to see deliverables that address quality standards.
- Sarah noted that districts have come a long way and she felt boards need training on what District Managers need to be successful and be able to deliver quality services.
- Clare thought being able to fund at least 1 FTE will put us in a better position to tackle these issues of consistency across the state.

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Environmental Justice Representative Report

Jennifer Byrne was appointed to the Environmental Justice Advisory Council formulated by Act 154 that establishes an advisory council of both community members and an interagency committee which has a representative of each of the named agencies across Vermont state government. The first meeting of both the council and the committee was held where the findings of Act 154 and the timeline for the next several years was discussed.

After the meeting ANR discovered that stipends had been taken out so they were recommending technical changes to the law. They won't move forward until this is resolved, hopefully by the end of the summer. In the meantime Jennifer is helping to put together educational resources to accomplish the goals.

The first target is to craft recommendations for the development of community engagement plans over the next 2 years.

Jennifer shared the document, Connecting People to Power and explained work done with BIPOC youth in the Burlington/Winooski area, 2 subsidized housing communities in Bennington and rural and mobile home residents in the Northeast Kingdom with monthly engagements. They talked about their needs and experiences with the environment and barriers they face in accessing resources. The document gives both broad and Vermont specific recommendations.

Jennifer clarified that any recipient of federal funds must comply with the civil rights act and that means having a Community Engagement Plan. Act 154 set the deadline.

It was noted that Council is not named as a covered agency in the statute therefore not subject to the deadline.

Clare noted that funds to develop Community Engagement Plans have been included in the legislative request but as the request has been cut down, how much is available to help with this process will have to be revisited.

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Discussion about Future NRCC Board Meetings

The following suggestions were considered for future NRCC Board Meetings:

- monthly, quarterly or some hybrid
- continue with 2.5 hours or schedule more frequent shorter meetings of one hour
- deciding on a consistent time and date

Linda thought the need for a meeting would depend on what is going on at the time. She suggested a poll be done.

Other Business

Clare asked that supervisory reps stay on after this meeting to touch base.

Marli shared that NRCS announced a \$9M backlog in EQIP applications that were not going to be funded this year. The Regional Conservation Partnership program has \$3.5 M in funds available but received over \$6M in requests. She noted that \$6M was the low end because they screened out medium and large farms. Only small farms were funded. She was struck that these are all farms doing this not because they have to but because they are trying to do good conservation work and/or improve sustainability. NRCS will have the opportunity to bring money in through the inflation reduction act in the next few years with focus on climate and there is also a huge backlog for water quality. She wondered if Council would like to talk about this and see what role it could play in helping with these challenges. She suggested this for a future agenda.

Adjournment

Meeting adjourned at 3:05 pm.

The next meeting was scheduled for June 22nd at 12:30 pm.