

# State Natural Resources Conservation Council

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

## NRCC Board Meeting

Wednesday, January 26, 2022 10:00am -12:10pm

Join Zoom Meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87005499793?pwd=TDZqMmZCaUk2K2pDc2xIOVVNaXMrQT09>

By Phone: (929) 205-6099 Meeting ID: 870 0549 9793 Passcode: 942353

### NRCC Voting Members:

Rick Hopkins - Board Chair, Central Union Rep, Winooski NRCD  
Jonathan Chamberlin - South Central Union Rep, Otter Creek NRCD  
Linda Corse - Southeast Union Rep, Windham County NRCD  
Richard Noel - Northwest Union Rep, Franklin County NRCD  
Tim Buzzell – Northeast Union Rep, Orleans County NRCD  
Katy Crumley – Southwest Union Rep, Bennington County NRCD  
Nina Gage - Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets Rep  
Marli Rupe - Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation Rep  
Dan Lerner - University of Vermont Extension Rep

### NRCC Non-Voting Board Members:

Wynea Buford - USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Rep  
Jill Arace - Vermont Association of Conservation Districts Rep

### Attendees:

#### Meeting held remotely via Zoom:

Board members: Rick Hopkins, Board Chair/Central Union Rep; Linda Corse, Southeast Rep; Richard Noel, Northwest Rep; Tim Buzzell, Northeast Rep; Dan Lerner, UVM Rep; Marli Rupe, Vermont DEC Rep; Jill Arace, VACD Rep

Other Attendees: Mary Montour, Agricultural Water Quality Programs Coordinator, VAAFM; Sonia Howlett, Agriculture Water Quality Specialist, VAAFM; Cory Ross, Windham County NRCD District Manager; Chris von Alt, Northeast Rep Alternate; Sarah Damsell, Orleans County NRCD District Manager; Lauren Weston, Franklin County NRCD; Molly Varner VACD Communications Coordinator; Alli Lewis, Ag Water Quality Partnership Coordinator; Clare Ireland VACD Financial Manager; Emily Nummer VACD Agriculture Programs Manager; Holden Sparacino, VACD Water Quality Programs Manager

## Agenda:

- Board members: Approve meeting minutes, set next meeting time  
10:00-10:10am
- Sonia Howlett: VT Payment for Phosphorus Program  
10:10-10:25am
- Overview and update on program, discussion/questions from the group
- Marli Rupe: Phosphorus loading performance Report  
10:25-10:40am
- Overview and next steps, discussion/questions
- Clare Ireland: Budget and Program Updates  
10:40-11:20am
- Six-month budget revision (preliminary)
  - Legal question of what Council is
  - Capacity survey update
  - Q&A or other discussion
- Emily Nummer and Jill Arace: AgCWIP Proposal Updates  
11:25-11:35
- Overview of work proposed and possible future projects
- Holden Sparacino: DEI Updates  
11:35-11:40
- Progress on Survey and project with University of Michigan
- Chris von Alt: Northeast Supervisor Union Progress  
11:40am-11:55am
- Lessons learned in the Supervisor Union revitalization process
- All: Updates or time for other discussion  
11:55am-12:10pm

## Minutes:

Rick called the meeting to order 10:04 am and asked for introductions from the group.

### 10:10 am - Approve Meeting Minutes, Set Next Meeting Time

Richard Noel made a motion to approve amended minutes with edits from Linda and Rick. Linda Course seconded. Upon a vote, motion passed.

Marli asked to revisit the discussion on supervisor union communications that occurred last meeting, including increasing involvement and communications. Rick agreed and will look to continue work on further integrating communications and/or building recruitment. These conversations are in progress.

Thursday April 7, 1pm-3:30 is held for next meeting.

### 10:17 am – Sonia Howlett - Presentation on Vermont Pay for Phosphorus Program

- The lead partner on this initiative is VAAFM. The program is put together from a USDA grant that will span 5 years, with \$7 million total award, \$4.9 of which is direct to producers.
- This program is looking to build on payment for ecosystem services in Vermont, recognizing that there are other ecosystem benefits that happen on farms beyond food outcomes.
- Phosphorus reductions are easily quantifiable as a measure of ecosystem services, and have a great benefit to the state. P reduction per dollar is very effective on agricultural lands vs other similar \$\$ investments.

- Typically, payment for ecosystem services programs are pay-for-practice (# of BMPs implemented, etc), versus pay-for-performance (P reduction etc). This program looks to pay per pound of P reduced on Vermont farms. This is an innovative approach, rather than paying farmers a portion of the cost to install a practice.
- Eligible producers are actively farming in VT, managing annual crop and or hay field, meet Agency of Ag guidelines, and have up-to-date Nutrient Management Plan in place.
- To calculate P reduction, FarmPREP will be used. This program incorporates location-specific information such as soil type and slope, will be provided at no cost to the farmer, and provides planning functionality/comparison of alternative management scenarios and outcomes.
- There are two types of payment: data entry payment (one-time payment) for entry into FarmPREP (TA assistance is available at no cost, and excel inputs are possible); and second type is annual payment for P reduction. \$100/lb P reduced beyond a 40% reduction threshold (up to \$50K annually), payments begin after 40% reduction has been met.
- If a farm you know wants to apply, make sure farm and maps are registered with FSA, and visit <https://agriculture.vermont.gov/vpfp> for more.

Linda Course asked if there's a preference for Lake Champlain Basin vs Connecticut River Watershed for this program in the competitive nature of the grant? Sonia replied that VAAFM has a stakeholder panel which includes producers across the state, and will be meeting in February to discuss review criteria for applications. VAAFM does want it to be statewide, but they recognize the LCB has large P issues. Breakdown may follow a 60% LCB, 20% Lake Memphremagog, 20% CT River Watershed for funding.

Marli Rupe noted that she's glad to hear that the \$4K is tied to data entry input. She had heard in the past that the \$4K is to increase participation as more of an award, but having heard this is really compensation for time and effort is good to hear and valuable. VAAFM may want to clarify that in their outreach materials. Sonia thanked Marli and noted that this is what VAAFM's thought process always was. The \$4K is not an incentive payment; it's a payment for time and effort. They will revisit press releases/website language to make sure it reflects this.

Rick asked if VAAFM has looked into tile drainage. How might that impact payment/reduction? Any tie-in to how farmers may reduce their feed that is brought in? Sonia responded that they have been looking at this, and VAAFM has been trying to figure out what effect that has. FarmPREP was calibrated with VT data, and initial data seems to suggest tile drainage may slightly reduce overall P runoff, converting surface runoff to subsurface runoff, but this is still preliminary. For feeding or other things brought into farms, VAAFM did look into manure tests.

Lauren added some feedback that farmers in Franklin County seem very motivated to apply for this program. She is expecting a lot more farmers to be invested in keeping their NMPs up to date as a result of this program. Jill added that this is good to hear, and the interface of this program with NMP development and implementation is very good.

#### 10:43 – Marli Rupe presentation on Clean Water Performance Report

- Marli provided a link to the report:  
[https://dec.vermont.gov/sites/dec/files/wsm/erp/docs/Reports/2021CleanWaterInitiativePerformanceReport\\_FINAL\\_updated%201-20-2022.pdf](https://dec.vermont.gov/sites/dec/files/wsm/erp/docs/Reports/2021CleanWaterInitiativePerformanceReport_FINAL_updated%201-20-2022.pdf)
- The Clean Water Initiative Program is legislatively required to put out this report annually, but Marli emphasized why it's worthwhile to review. This report makes it very easy to visualize what is

happening in your particular area, and how different industries are involved. It breaks down how you're looking at either different regions, different variabilities that affect outcomes, and impacts.

- Overall state investments for total phosphorus (P) load reductions has increased dramatically between SFY 2016 and SFY2021 to over 22 million metric tons/year. This is almost entirely agricultural related.
- There still aren't great tracking methods for stormwater and natural resources practices, but a majority of the work done to reduce P is still agriculturally-based.
- DEC is hoping to keep track of all Technical Assistance going out on the ground, which has been substantial in recent years.
- The report is done in a way that is easy to read and break down by region. Marli recommends everyone looks through this as it can easily paint a picture of what is happening in your area and what local impacts are occurring. She invited everyone to borrow graphics or outcomes from the report, and expressed hopes that people credit the report as they share the information it contains.
- Marli cautioned around explaining P reduction differences between agriculture and other sectors: agriculture's big portion of the overall reductions could go down from 95% to a lower percentage as tools to track natural resources and stormwater become more sophisticated, but this by no means decreases the good work and enormous cost effectiveness of P reduction on ag land that has been achieved so far.

#### 10:55 - Clare – Budget Update Report & Capacity Survey

- As of right now, NRCC is under budget for the year, which has a few reasons: invoices are booked when work takes place, which means previous period can be revised. As invoices come in for work happening now or previously, this number will similarly increase. Clare estimates this is somewhere around 10% lower than it will be ultimately.
- In addition, work is largely seasonal so reports at the six-month mark, we always tend to lag as winter is a slow season for a lot of project work.
- Clare noted that NRCC has several grants closing out this year, the largest one being the AgCWIP agreement which will close out in May.
- Personnel is also somewhat under budget due to some adjusting between staff costs to VACD vs. NRCC. VACD secured a PPP loan, which reduced our overall personnel expense, and also budgeted for a new position that has not been hired for yet.
- NRCC currently has some funds set aside for district leadership. In the past, this has been used towards things like Act 76 involvement, District representation at state-level meetings, etc. Conversations have been happening in the Finance Committee about how to allocate these funds in the future
- Travel and office expenses are under budget as low travel has happened vs. what was estimated, mostly due to COVID.

#### Clare - Capacity Survey

- NRCC and VACD staff have been hearing consistently from Districts that the nature of their funding structure poses a significant challenge: District budgets are comprised almost exclusively of competitive and project-based funding sources that are highly variable year-to-year and administratively burdensome. This makes long-term planning difficult and drastically limits any flexibility Districts have regarding how they can innovate or even around how they use their existing staff time.
- The financial position of Districts varies substantially between districts. Most Districts have little unrestricted cash available.

- Most Districts do not have investment or endowment sources.
- Average amount of ability to “float” operating costs varied between no ability to float to 12 months. Particularly for Districts with little to no buffer room, slow or delayed payments can really affect District ability to fund operating costs.
- Most Districts have one or two full-time staff. Some have additional part-time or seasonal staff.
- Wages/salaries and benefits: Clare reported that we would like to better align these with comparable organizations and agencies. Most requested aspects are more competitive health care and retirement benefits, followed by more stable funding, competitive wages, and lower administrative burden/additional help with administrative burden

Jill added that she wants to recognize the burden of grants-based funding: it causes challenges around reporting, planning in future years’ budgets, consistency for staff and responsibilities, and low flexibility on creative or different projects or tasks that do not have a grant associated. To help address some of this, VACD and NRCC staff are looking to assist Districts with financial development, board development and board involvement, and a legislative ask for appropriations from the state to Districts to cover Districts’ most basic functions.

- VACD is working with advocates to identify and secure funding from the legislature to support District staff which would supplement the core services funding Council has now. VACD and Districts are currently refining this request, which will likely be approximately \$1M. In addition, VACD and Districts have a one-time ask for staff time to attend trainings for ag staff and technical work (NMP development, soil sampling, etc) and a one-time ask for capital needs, like equipment, vehicles, and office space. The ask is relatively small to reflect real expenses that can be spent in the first year.
- VACD will be giving testimony, and will be asking District staff and board members for testimony also. NRCC’s role is strictly to provide information during this initiative.

Clare added that Action Circles is looking at how NRCC is structured as it is fairly unique in statute, and this will impact how we’re able to receive money from the Legislature in the future.

Marli reminded NRCC and District staff that there will be a capacity building grant that will be available via DEC. She anticipates about \$300K will be distributed to current partners after learning what is needed to process increased dollars. A consultant will be hired to help DEC better understand how to process new funds and structures (ARPA, LCBP, state funds, Act 76, etc.), and there is money to compensate people for participation in study on capacity building. The consultant’s recommendations will influence how funds are distributed for capacity building, goal is to have consultant study done by May.

Jill thanked Marli and affirmed that VACD will be looking forward to applying for those funds. Even with VACD’s legislative request, there will still be a need for capacity building money, for instance for more general HR and finance trainings for District staff and trainings for District supervisors.

Sarah noted that she is feeling overwhelmed. There is a lot of evolution happening at Districts, and we should think about how the District Manager job description should be updated or changed to reflect new responsibilities.

- In recent years, AgCWIP agreements have been instrumental in building District capacity as well as Council capacity. The current AgCWIP agreement is ending this year.
- New proposals are being finalized. They are due Monday, and these budgets represent the next four years of support for a variety of activities and staff.
- VAAFM's contribution to the Vermont Agriculture Water Quality Partnership (VAWQP) is also paid via VACD's AgCWIP agreement.
- This time around, the proposal will be a unified ask from NRCC on behalf of the Districts. Many conversations have been happening regarding how to divide up budget and work across the state.
- There are ongoing conversations about how programs and funding should/can be uniform or different across Districts to recognize a balance between joint work and shared identity and the need to meet individual, unique local needs.
- The funder for this is the Agency of Agriculture, they have done a lot of work getting District feedback prior to bid going out in terms of making the performance measures effective, etc.

#### Holden – Summary of DEI Initiative

- The all-staff and all-District survey have finished. Holden extended thanks to everyone who took the survey and/or helped distribute it to their staff and Districts. This survey aimed to assess where Districts are currently on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and to look at strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for the future.
- Next steps include working with the University of Michigan group to analyze survey results, report out summary of results to districts and NRCC, and develop a toolkit of recommendations for future steps.
- A report/summary of survey results will be made available to NRCC later this year.

#### Chris – 11:50 NEK Union reactivation process

- Chris reported that he has been going through statute with the goal of better matching the obligations of NRCC to District needs, to re-establish Union between Districts, and to increase communication between Districts and NRCC.
- He reported that the Northeast Kingdom's Supervisory Union has been reestablished. He set up initial meeting to do introductions, and in that meeting, the group elected a chair, and established responsibilities and future tasks.
- District managers were asked for areas of mutual benefit. The general belief is that board members and the Supervisory Union can help Districts better meet shared goals. DMs would like to have some funding to support a facilitator or consultant to find greatest needs and path forward.
- They would like to increase level of conversation between NRCC and the Districts. More work is needed, but in the end, there will be better outcomes for everyone.

Jill thanked Chris for his work, and noted that she is certainly learning by watching as this union is set up. She is looking forward to seeing a voice developed for the whole union.

Clare reported that she has been digging into the state archives to find some of the founding documents for Supervisory Unions. These are entities established in statute and some of the documents she's finding might help with the questions Chris has brought up about why things were established the way they are and how they have run in the past.

Jill added that VACD full board meetings are also being rebooted. The VACD board is a good venue to talk about District-specific topics, such as District manager compensation, getting feedback on VACD's legislative

ask, etc. This kind of structure is more feasible with specific people from each District rather than every District board member (a group of 14 vs 40-60+).

#### Adjournment

Richard Noel moved to adjourn meeting. The motion was seconded by Tim Buzzell. Meeting adjourned at 12:18pm.

#### **Updates provided by board members and partners via email prior to meeting:**

##### Richard Noel:

Franklin Co. Cons. District held its meeting 1/20! Voted on board member positions I'm still Chairman! Appointed a new member Carissa Stein recently retired ASCS soil con, brings a lot of experience and expertise to the board, Discussed upcoming tree sale coming up in May. Did salary discussion with District Manager Lauren Weston and adjusted the rates for her and staff! Next meeting Feb. 23! All for now also minutes of Jan. 20 meeting are available if anyone is interested!

##### Marli Rupe:

Here is the link to the newly published [Clean Water Initiative Performance report](#). I don't think it's necessary to go into the weeds on this tomorrow but just briefly give you an overview of what it contains. Believe me, it's interesting reading!

As for other updates from DEC:

- Clean Water board meeting – Feb 8. This will include discussions of capital vs ARPA funding in different categories. The current budget submitted by the Gov includes an additional \$10M of ARPA funds to the CW fund – a substantial amount going to AAFM and other funds to 3 acre work.
- The RCPP (Regional Conservation Partnership Program) supplemental agreement with NRCS was signed last week. This is a major step towards 2022 implementation and we are working closely with partners to identify priorities for this year, and collaborating with other RCPP awardees. DEC will be hiring a f/t position for this, so please share when that comes out, but the process of hiring is glacial speed at best, so not likely for about 6 months. However, lots of work happening anyway and excited about moving this forward. It is likely the priorities for 2022 will be some forest easements (already identified in another prior RCPP), small wetlands and a couple agricultural practices. More asap.
- DEC will be issuing an RFP probably this week for a consultant to work with partners (both current and potential) about capacity needs as we have substantial increases in state and federal funding, and as we transition to a CleanWater Service Provider model of grant implementation. This consultant will provide recommendations back to DEC and an additional \$300k is available to help implement these.

##### Mary Montour:

- [AgCWIP](#) Proposals (Emily & Jill discussed in meeting) and the [Vermont Pay For Phosphorus Program](#) (Sonia shared slides in a separate email) application deadlines are both January 31
- [VAAFM Technical and Financial Assistance For Water Quality Report](#) and VAAFM'S [Enforcement report](#) are available on our website.
- As Marli mentioned, Ryan Patch (formerly Deputy Director of the VAAFM Water Quality Division) has transitioned to a new position as VAAFM's Agricultural Climate and Land Use Policy Manager. He will be the VAAFM's lead for Climate work.
- There are many programs and grant opportunities across VAAFM currently available, not just within water quality, such as grants for Community Supported Agriculture (feeding kids with local food), Food Hub Infrastructure, Dairy Food Safety, Specialty Crops, and more. Check out and sign up for Agency newsletters for updates and announcements - <https://agriculture.vermont.gov/administration/vaafm-news>

Tim Buzzell:

Hello Holden. This is the NEK (Orleans, Essex, Caledonia) response to your request that partners provide written updates prior to today's meeting. Supervisors and Managers met on 1/18 to establish a Board for the NEK Union. Discussed at the meeting were: Authorities; Responsibilities; and Logistical matters. Chris von Alt was elected Chairman. Tim Buzzell will remain for the time being as the NEK Supervisor Rep at the NRCC. Time constraints limited discussion about ideas being developed by District Managers. To this end, a follow up meeting has been scheduled for next month. Respectfully submitted by Timothy Buzzell, Orleans Supervisor