

# State Natural Resources Conservation Council

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

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NRCC Board Meeting – Approved 2/27/2025

Thursday, December 18, 1:00 PM

Location: The Limestone Room, Davis 3 Building, Vermont Agency of Natural Resources,  
National Life Dr, Montpelier, VT 05620, USA

Zoom:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/8798107090?pwd=c3luK1lzZm5MSTc4eWVWTWFo2ZWYdz09&omn=81321197028>

Meeting ID: 879 810 7090 Passcode: 524884 Dial in: 1-929-205-6099

## **NRCC Voting Members:**

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

Linda Corse – Southeast Union Rep, Windham County NRCD

Richard Noel – Northwest Union Rep, Franklin County NRCD

Willie Nickerson – Northeast Union Rep, Caledonia County NRCD

Alan Shelvey – South Central Union Rep, Rutland NRCD

Brian Vargo – Southwest Union Rep, Bennington NRCD

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

Marli Rupe – Vermont Agency of Natural Resources Rep, Agricultural & Water Quality

Roy Beckford – University of Vermont Extension

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

Travis Thomason - USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Rep

Jill Arace - Vermont Association of Conservation Districts Rep

Meeting held in person and remotely via Zoom

## **Attendees:**

Board members: Rick Hopkins, Central Union Rep & Board Chair; Richard Noel, Northwest Rep; Nina Gage, VAAFM rep; Linda Corse, Southeast Rep; Bill Manner, Southeast Rep Alternate; Willie Nickerson, Northeast Union Rep; Kate Willard, Central Union Rep Alternate; Jill Arace, VACD Rep; Travis Thompson, USDA NRCS Rep

Other Attendees: Jess Miller, NRCC/VACD Grants & Finance Manager; Clare Ireland, NRCC Administrator; Emily Nummer, VACD/NRCC Agricultural Program Manager; Alli Lewis, VAWQP Coordinator; Julia King, VACD/NRCC Communications Manager; Katy Langenhorst, VACD ECO AmeriCorps; and Lina Smith, NRCC/VACD Grants & Finance Manager

## **AGENDA**

- Welcome
- Review and Approve June Meeting Minutes
- Grant Updates
  - Core Services One-Time Funding
- Statute & Admin Updates
  - Creation of NRCC Statute Committee
  - Research into District Admin Topics
  - NRCC Website
- Break
- VACD Report
  - Organizational Development Work
  - Action Circles Contract & Legislative Work
  - Jill's Retirement & ED Recruitment
- Partner Updates
- Supervisory Union Updates
- Future NRCC Board Meetings
- Other business, as required

### **Welcome & Introductions**

Introductions were made, and the meeting was called to order at 1:15 pm.

### **Review and Approve June Meeting Minutes**

Linda made the motion, seconded by Richard to approve the meeting minutes of June 17, 2024. After a call for a vote, all were in favor.

### **Grant Updates**

#### **Core Services One-Time Funding**

The legislature appropriated NRCC \$100,000 in one-time funding intended to be used for priority needs within the districts in FY25. This funding was appropriated on top of the \$612,000 appropriated for base funding. Clare reported she would be doing a request for proposals from districts. It's a flexible source of funding, but the idea would be to prioritize items that help a district meet a legal requirement or operational best practices. For example, we'd prioritize requests for items to meet Open Meeting Law requirements. All funds must be spent by the end of the fiscal year. Applications will be due by January 13.

Nina suggested Emily Nummer be involved to avoid duplicate purchases.

Discussion included the criteria for prioritizing use of one-time funds. It was suggested that NRCC add items to the application to solicit information about the sustainability of the use of these funds and the degree of impact these funds will have on district operations. Clare will amend the application form to include sections for these questions.

Linda made the motion, seconded by Richard to approve the RFP as explained by Clare to solicit applications through the RFP presented with the addition of a section for impact and sustainability. Nina recused herself because she is a grant manager. The motion was voted and passed.

## **Statute & Admin Update**

### **Creation of NRCC Statute Committee**

Rick explained that a year or so ago, VACD created a Governance Committee tasked with identifying changes to statute and reviewing VACD's bylaws. This committee has struggled to find the time to adequately tackle both subjects. The VACD board recently accepted the recommendation from the Governance Committee that Council take up the question of statute review. Rick asked for the board's approval in creating an NRCC Statute Committee.

Nina noted that NRCC cannot lobby. She outlined VAAFM's process for introducing "housekeeping updates" to statute. Proposed changes must be reviewed by the governor's office with requests due in July/August. She suggested that if this committee could have some recommendations around language cleanup or other simple changes by July, VAAFM could help facilitate getting those to the governor's office.

Clare noted that in addition to reviewing questions of statute itself, she would find benefit for a working group of supervisors and other reps to provide guidance on immediate operational questions arising from NRCC's status as an "agency of the state," and visioning around the mission, purpose, and overall structure of Council.

Willie asked if anyone part of the initial committee would want to continue. Rick stated he would and suggested opening it up to all supervisors. Travis noted he would be willing to participate, and suggested his role be advisory in nature. Clare suggested that meetings would take place once a month.

Next step: Rick will send an email out asking for volunteers to serve on this committee.

Richard made the motion, seconded by Linda to create a Statute Committee with the purpose of reviewing statutes. After a call for a vote, all were in favor.

Clare noted page 3 of the NRCC Administration Report that outlines the work she has already done with statute and other questions.

- Confirmation of districts' ability to make purchases under the state's contract process through Buildings and General Services. BGS confirmed districts' eligibility for use of their negotiated contracts on November 13, and guidance was issued to districts November 21.
- Confirmation of districts' ability to obtain insurance through the state via the Agency of Administration. Clare is waiting on process details from AoA.

- Confirmation of how the new open meeting law impacts conservation districts. Clare is waiting on a ruling from the Secretary of State's office regarding districts' status as either "advisory" or "nonadvisory" public bodies under the new law. Guidance will be provided once received.
- Research into districts' eligibility under the state's Municipal Equipment Loan Fund. Clare is working with the Office of the State Treasurer around eligibility questions.
- Research into state staffing for NRCC and supervisory unions. The state attorney general's office has confirmed such staffing is allowed under statute but has referred NRCC to the state Department of Human Resources to discuss options.
- Research into health insurance and other benefits for districts. Clare has reached out to NFP and VLCT to explore options for contracting additional professional support and training for districts. Initial meetings will be held before the end of December.
- State website for NRCC. The Agency of Digital Services has confirmed this is possible and previous billing questions have been worked out with VAAFM. Clare, Julia, and Katy will be revisiting this in the new year.
- Per Diem. NRCC's request to increase per diems to \$100 (up from \$50) was discussed with VAAFM. Under a recent change to per diem law, per diem increases go through an approval process that is tied to the budget process. VAAFM reports they were not able to support the requested increase for FY26 and were not able to submit NRCC on a schedule of entities that receive per diem through their agency since VAAFM does not directly administer this per diem. NRCC will need to seek guidance on next steps and may need to submit per diem information and the increase request directly to the governor's office or to the legislature.

Richard noted that the State's lack of support for per diems doesn't make sense to him and would like to see an increase to help farmers be more involved in districts and Council.

In response to Richard's question regarding mortgages, Clare reported that districts cannot have mortgages, but they may be able to get funding through other financial vehicles such as municipal loans.

In response to Travis's question, Clare reported that the State's insurance could include vehicles, general liability, and professional liability as well as insurance for directors and officers.

Clare noted that Council is changing how per diems are done and is now proactively keeping track of attendance.

Finally, Clare noted that NRCC has a webpage located on the VACD website. She is hoping to migrate it to a state website.

### **Partner Updates**

**VAAFM.** Nina reported on a recent mandate by USDA to continue monitoring the milk supply for the Avian Influenza. Winter spreading began September 15th. They are waiting for an EPA corrective action plan to be submitted to the EPA.

**NRCS.** Travis shared VTNRCS's Monthly update for partners, including partner funding opportunities, public information, and producer funding opportunities. He reported that new "Act Now" funding allows an accelerated time frame (45 days) from program application to contract obligation. He also reviewed "Strengthening locally led conservation delivery in Vermont" and noted the upcoming organizational realignment for NRCS zones.

**VAWQP.** Alli gave an update on the Agricultural Water Quality Partnership noting there are five regional coordinators who have all had meetings this fall. VAWQP is currently in the process of doing an annual review and updating their 5-year strategic plan. The next Partnership Annual Meeting will take place Tuesday, March 11 at Killington, with a backup snow date of March 13<sup>th</sup>.

### **Supervisory Union Updates**

**Northeast.** Willie reported that a lunch is planned next week for the union members. A tri-district meeting was held to elect representatives.

**Northwest.** Richard reported that Franklin NRCD has moved into their new office. Their District Manager is sidelined with knee surgery, but all is going well. Franklin, Lamoille, and Grand Isle are having local work groups with much success.

**Southeast.** Linda reported an upcoming annual meeting with Ottauquechee. Windham has had successful Conservation Coffee Chats. Their district is busy with exciting new projects. Bill reported that Ottauquechee NRCD has hired a contracted person to help with grants, administration, and bookkeeping with funds from a capacity grant.

**Central.** Kate reported that White River is having their annual meeting on Friday. Rick reported that the new Winooski district manager has been there for six months. Winooski NRCD has also filled two vacant positions plus added an additional half-time person. They recently completed the Hands Mill Dam removal, which is a great example of flood resiliency work that needs to be done.

### **VACD Report**

Jill reported that more funding opportunities have led to VACD growth resulting in growing pains. There is a need for more support for districts, and VACD engaged consultants Momentum Communications and Structural Integrity to look at existing structures and make recommendations for improvements.

Jill is retiring in March. Discussions on the transition from Jill to a new director have been taking place. There are not enough staff to provide the services districts are asking for and some things may fall through the cracks as VACD brings on a new executive director and reorganizes staff work.

VACD is gearing up for a new legislative session. NRCC submitted a \$3 million core services request to the Agency of Agriculture earlier this year. VACD will be lobbying for this request with the legislature and has signed a contract with Action Circles again this year. As Jill transitions out of her role as the executive director, Clare will be doing more representational work. Julia will also be working with Action Circles.

Council is named in two study committees or task groups by the legislature:

1. Regional and County Government Study Committee. This study committee is looking at options for county and regional governance in Vermont, and NRCC has been added to the Technical Advisory Group. This work is currently on hold pending the start of the legislature.
2. Committee to roll out new statute provisions on Act 250. NRCC was named to the group working on recommendations for Tier 3 lands. This work is slated to begin in January.

Linda and Jess reported that VACD Executive Director recruitment has begun. They have had some good candidates and are hoping to make an offer in mid-January.

### **Other Business**

There was no other business.

The next NRCC board meeting is scheduled for February 27, 2025.

The meeting adjourned at 3:32 pm.