

Essex County Natural Resources Conservation District Board Meeting

April 16th, 2025

Meeting was called to order at 12:35 PM

Board attendance: Tim White, Chris von Alt, Bill Manning, Ursula Johnson

District staff: Sam Mayne, Clara Fernandez Odell

Public: Michael Strait

Opening remarks

Bill spoke about a grant application he worked with several others to submit for bioremediation efforts on Lake Memphremagog and other lakes in the region. He confirmed that ECNRCD would act as the fiscal agent with a 10-15% administrative fee to complete the project. The board discussed some specifics of the project which would deploy floating mycelium islands to reduce pollutants in Lake Memphremagog.

Approval of meeting minutes:

Chris moved to accept the February meeting minutes. Tim seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Ursula moved to accept the March meeting minutes. Tim seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Financials

- Sam presented the February and March financial reports and financial projections for Calendar Year 2025. He noted that approximately 4 full-time positions worth of funding had been secured for staff expenses.
 - Ursula moved to approve the financials, Tim seconded and the motion passed unanimously.

Accomplishments/Updates:

- Sam described the status of ECNRCD's USFWS contract to complete construction on culverts in Brighton and Lunenburg. These funds, which had been frozen have now been released for continued work.
 - Sam confirmed to Michael that since the construction was on a private road the Brighton town governments did not need to anticipate any major impacts.
- Sam updated the board on events in the local USFWS office.
 - The refuge biologist will be retiring. USFWS does not expect to be rehiring this position in the near term, in line with the approximately 25% expected reduction in staff nationwide.
 - Although we had previously anticipated needing to change offices within the building, that appears to no longer be necessary.
- Nursery update (Clara)
 - Clara has started a number of seeds in the basement, and has decided that an outdoor seed starting space is an important infrastructure investment in order to meaningfully scale up production.
 - VT Fish & Wildlife donated a 1000 gallon water tank, previously used at a hatchery, to use as a backup water supply at the nursery. Clara will be installing a water catchment system to fill it with roof runoff.
 - Clara will be reopening the nursery in the coming weeks with assistance from NorthWoods staff.
- Agriculture update (Clara)
 - Clara's NRCS background check is complete and her computer is on the way.

- o NRCS VT was allocated an additional \$8 million for direct farmer payments, which will be applied to existing applications.
- o NMPs are complete and farms are gearing up for the field season
- o All were excited about the Locally Led Conservation meeting in Guildhall, and were excited to continue this public engagement work. Chris reminded everyone that he has several movies, including Common Ground, that would be good to watch as part of a community gathering. Clara mentioned that ECNRCD and Connecticut River Watershed Farmers Alliance would be hosting another community event in Canaan this summer.
- o Clara has begun discussing with the County Forester putting on events for public engagement about forest management and Current Use.

Meeting Topic(s)

- Sam asked the board if they are interested in hiring a new employee.
 - o The board was supportive of hiring given that funds were secured already to cover their time for the next year. They also voiced an interest in hiring someone with a background in public engagement, fundraising, forestry management. Sam agreed and also said he envisioned them contributing to invasive species and restoration project work.
- Wild & Scenic Designation Study for the Nulhegan River and Paul Stream
 - o Chris described the previous process through which the Nulhegan River and Paul Stream were put forward for a study to determine the impacts of a Wild & Scenic designation by US Congress. The study would identify the value, process, and local impacts of the designation and solicit public feedback. ECNRCD along with a number of other entities previously signed on in support of this study, and Sen. Welch intends to resubmit the proposal to congress this year. The board expressed their continued support for the designation study. If the designation were to move forward, additional restoration and protection funding would be available as well as added protections.
- The board discussed the VACD Capacity Building report completed 4/1/25
 - o The board agreed with many of the conclusions of the report, but were concerned that the next steps were not evident. They were hopeful that many items in the report would be adopted, especially reinvigoration of VACD and NRCC boards, though there was some conversation about whether the role of Supervisors was too demanding for volunteers. There was continued frustration with the lack of accountability within the system, the lack of a clear process for VACD receiving funds allocated to NRCC, the inherent conflict of interest present in the current NRCC/VACD structure, and the lack of NRCC boards' ability to make informed decisions based on limited information provided to them before meetings.

Other Business

- None

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held 12:30 PM May 21st in the conference room at the US Fish & Wildlife Service Silvio O. Conte Refuge Nulhegan Basin Welcome Center.

Ursula made the motion to adjourn at 3:03 PM. Tim seconded. The motion carried unanimously.