

Essex County Natural Resources Conservation District Board Meeting

January 21st, 2026

Meeting was called to order at 12:30 PM

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

District staff: Sam Mayne, Clara Fernandez Odell

Public:

Opening remarks

Bill welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Approval of meeting minutes:

Chris moved to approve the November meeting minutes, Tim seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Financials

- Two transactions of interest were noted, and Sam described what they were. Clara mentioned that she had more detailed financial tracking of the nursery if anyone is interested. Chris recommended continuing to update and share the spreadsheet with forecasted funds, and Sam agreed.
- Chris moved to approve the financials, Tim seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Accomplishments/Updates:

- Grant Updates
 - o Sam gave an overview of grants that had been submitted, including
 - 7 clean water grants (3 lakeshore, 3 wetlands, and one stream crossing projects)
 - Applications for a similar amount of money as current levels for agricultural and NRCS technical assistance
 - An application to be on the State's list of approved vendors for future Lake Watershed Action Plans, which will now be considered on a retainer basis.
 - o The WUV Capacity Building application to improve the function of the Tri-District Union has been awarded, and the subcommittee focusing on this task is having their first meeting January 27th.
 - o The joint Tri-District application to provide grant writing, program navigation, and marketing services to NEK working lands businesses was not funded. The amount of requests were almost 6 times the available funding, and we have requested specific feedback on what would have strengthened our application.

Meeting Topic(s)

- Clara provided an agricultural program update
 - o We held a Local Work Group meeting recently. This meeting is defined in federal statute as a way for Conservation Districts to inform NRCS funding priorities. Professionals working in land management related fields attended, including staff from VT DEC, the County Forester, Northwoods Stewardship Center, VT Agency of Agriculture, Memphremagog Watershed Association, and NRCS. Clara gave an overview of the public feedback we've received through our public meetings and survey, and then all

discussed how best to address the natural resource concerns identified through the public feedback and their professional experience. A member of the public also attended and provided thoughts. The consensus appeared to be that the highest priority resource concerns were associated mostly with forested land. Some of the suggested NRCS practices included, forest roads & trail improvement, stream crossing improvement, timber stand improvement, forest management planning, and invasive species management. Clara plans to create a Local Fund Pool application to NRCS VT which will set aside funds specifically for Essex County relating to these practices. A full application will be presented to the board in February. Minutes from the meeting are available

- o Clara discussed other ongoing agricultural work, including assistance with NMPs for local farms. All discussed the poor harvests from both corn and hay in 2025 and the challenge this faces to producers.
- Clara gave an overview of nursery operations
 - o She has begun stratifying seeds and will begin sowing them in February. She is still evaluating greenhouse space options, but there are many available. MWA has ordered trees for next fall. Clara will be selling some trees and willow stakes at the NEK Conservation Fair & Plant Sale in the spring.
- Sam updated the board on the ongoing construction on Baptist hill in Lunenburg
 - o Construction is ongoing and is not expected to be complete by February 1
 - o Concrete strength measurements came back below the expected strength. There is still time for the wall to reach the design strength, but it is possible that it won't. If it doesn't it will need to be removed and repoured. In that case, the road would probably be reopened for the rest of the winter and the pouring resumed in the spring. **Note: further concrete strength measurements received after the meeting showed it had reached design strength and would not need to be removed**
- Sam asked the board to consider two changes to the current benefits package
 - o The first was changing the language surrounding healthcare provided to reflect the existing benefit provided, a \$4,000 QSHRA. All discussed the relative costs and benefits of different healthcare benefits. All agreed the cost of health insurance is intractable and the District should do something to help with that cost.
 - o The second was a request to increase the maximum hour cap on personal leave. The board had concerns about the liability an increase would create if employees had large amounts of leave stockpiled. They were concerned that an employee leaving and needing to be paid for their banked time could be a financial strain on the District. They were also concerned that an employee taking an extended vacation could be a strain on other employees depending on workload. Ursula noted that the District had worked to ensure leave policies matched federal guidelines previously, and believed the current policy included an increased accrual rate after 3 years of service. Sam said he would check his files to confirm this.
 - o The board did not make a motion on either request.
- Sam asked the board's opinion on providing hazard pay for herbicide application
 - o The board debated the value and ethical considerations of herbicide use for invasive plant control due to long term health impacts. Some voiced a concern over whether ECNRCD staff should be doing it at all and preferred hiring a contractor for all herbicide application. Some were comfortable with ECNRCD doing herbicide application with sufficient training and PPE. Sam noted that ECNRCD staff member Sean was currently at an herbicide applicator training. There was also concern over whether providing hazard pay increased liability in the event of an employee or former employee suing due to health issues. Chris recommended speaking with our insurance provider before adding hazard pay.

Other Business

- None

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held at 12:30 PM February 18th in the conference room at the US Fish & Wildlife Service Silvio O. Conte Refuge Nulhegan Basin Welcome Center in Brunswick, VT.

Ursula made the motion to adjourn at 2:32 PM. Bill seconded. Motion carried unanimously.