

WCNRCD Board Meeting
September 12, 2023 6:30 PM
Geof Dolman's House: 301 Barrows Rd, Brattleboro, VT 05301
and over Zoom

Present: Cory Ross; District Manager; Isabel Bowman; Conservation Specialist; Heather Blunk; Agricultural Resource Specialist; Linda Corse, Meg Kluge, Geof Dolman; Board Members

Zoom Participants: Pieter van Loon; Katie Morrison; Board Members, Phyllicia Moore; NRCS Zone Conservationist, David Erickson; member of the general public

NRCS update from Phyllicia Moore

- Completed EQUIP, CSP, and RCPP obligations
 - Specific numeric information will be provided at WCNRCD's October board meeting
- FY24 begins October 1st. Specific program rollouts will be discussed later this month.
- Working to incorporate Heather in CSP workloads
- New staff in the south zone:
 - Many interviews have been completed
 - A soil conservationist position has been offered to an applicant
- Meeting about RCPP to streamline the process for FY24
- Requesting annual information from the District
 - FY23 successes
 - FY23 work plan
 - FY24 plans
- All program applications will be due October 20th

District Meeting with Action Circles Report Out

Members of Vermont Conservation Districts met with Action Circles on September 7, 2023 for a session geared toward district managers and supervisors after the House Agriculture Committee discussed opening up the Conservation Districts' state statute. Action Circles say they can't/won't approach the legislature on our behalf without consensus (even if this means districts agreeing not to oppose the proposed position) among districts before lobbying at the statehouse. When completing an exercise about goals 10 years from now, most, if not all, districts envision community-driven work.

· At this meeting, funding for Environmental Justice (EJ) positions and district manager positions through the Agency of Agriculture was discussed. This was brought to districts as they are already involved in local communities.

· It was noted that these changes will take over a year to be made given legislative procedure.

Board member comments on an Environmental Justice position

- The benefits associated with this position are:
 - If the position could encompass all community outreach, then this would allow the district to consistently work within an environmental justice lens. This would be beneficial as the district could improve its outreach.
 - As a pilot project, this would allow WCNRCD to provide leadership for other districts

- As districts have changed since they were established, a community outreach position would fulfill the needs of the growing population. A highly qualified staff member that focuses on communication would allow other district employees to commit more time to other responsibilities.
- This position fits within our mission to serve the community
- By reaching out to underrepresented communities in this role, we can make progress on our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) goals
- By accepting this work from the Agency of Agriculture, we assure the legislature that we are a capable organization for future funding requests
- The concerns associated with this position are:
 - Longevity of the position in terms of long-term funding
 - Possibility of a mandated position
 - Unsure if each district would be able to specify the posted job description
 - As of now, the three employees often work on projects collaboratively. We want to maintain this collaborative work environment

Board member comments on Statute Changes

1. Revise policy statement (§ 701. Policy)
 - a. Approve changing the policy statement
 - b. The new statement should be updated with current DEI and EJ language
2. Eliminate due notice language (§ 702. Definitions)
 - a. Approve updating this language
 - b. This should be superseded with open meeting laws
3. Revise composition of Council (§ 703. State Natural Resources Conservation Council (NRCC); members; duties)
 - a. Approve revisions to this section
 - b. Need to update the entity names
 - c. Prefer to have NRCC members remain locally focused, that way the Conservation Districts do not lose their electing power on boards
4. Review surety bonds language from NRCC authority (§ 705. Chair, quorum, compensation, surety bonds)
 - a. No discussion, presuming that it should be removed as it is outdated
5. Review elections procedures (§ 719. Elections) and 6. Review “landowner” language (§ 719. Elections)
 - a. Approve amending
 - b. Organizing a vote for landowners would be infeasible
 - c. All residents, not only landowners, should be allowed input
7. Review “can sue or be sued” language (§ 723. Powers of supervisors)
 - a. Approve amending the language
 - b. Want to retain the power to sue contractors if work is improperly completed
 - c. With the proper protections for supervisors, districts, as organizations, should be liable in suits
 - d. Want clarification on what “rules” mean here; do they refer to the rules that districts can make under the current statute?
8. Eliminate “seal” language (§ 703. State Natural Resources Conservation Council; members; duties & § 723. Powers of supervisors)
 - a. Approve removing the language
9. Review and eliminate authority to adopt rules. (§ 724. Land-use, erosion control, and natural resources conservation rules; approval)
 - a. Approve updating the language

- b. With no county government in Vermont, the districts serve as a local form of representation. In theory, the creation of rules specified in this statute would allow for localized regulation pertaining to conservation issues. However, the board does not think that the districts would create novel rules for enforcement.
 - c. Organizing a vote for landowners on these rules would be infeasible
 - d. Enforcing these rules would be infeasible and put the districts in a regulatory position. The districts have been communicating with the public about being non-regulatory.
 - e. This rule-making has not been done in the years since the districts have been established.
 - f. An alternative to this rule-making is to create a formalized process that can empower districts and/or NRCC. Districts would be able to create an urgent communication, such as a report, that would be sent to legislative subcommittees which must view and respond to the communication. A formal process such as this provides the districts with an intermediate position where the public can utilize the districts as a channel so that they can be heard at the state level.
 - g. Additionally, requiring that council must comment on appropriate rules would allow for greater Conservation District representation.
10. Review and modify/eliminate rule making procedure (§ 726. Ordinances prescribing rules; referendum)
- a. Approved removing this section as the rule-making section should be amended
11. Eliminate on-site sewage section. (Subchapter 2: On-site Sewage Program)
- a. Approved removing this section as this is an obsolete section

Overall board comments:

- Many of the comments to the statute specify what a conservation district is. This looks different across the state and is unlikely to be met with agreement with all districts
- Noted that Title 29 chapter 55 states that we can get surety bonds. This complicates our involvement with the state as employees. The statute specifies that districts are employees of the state in a very limited scope.

FY25 appropriations Budget Request

- Overall goal for lobbying is to staff a district manager's position at each district
- A new column for flood-related expenses has been introduced
- This budget was created with the aim of supporting 40% of district staff salaries
- Creating an additional space for a small emergency fund for future natural disasters
 - Cory will follow-up with Claire to see if the district can hold funds like this

District Mission Statement Revisions

- Possible current mission statement: "Our vision is for a community in which all members understand their connectedness to the land and work together to maintain our natural resources and landscape through sustainable management practices."
- District staff will create a draft mission statement to present to the board at a later meeting

Annual Meeting Planning and Potential Conservation Award Recipients

- Districts should hold annual meetings
 - In the past, these have been held midday on weekdays and have shown the work we do, invited people involved in the agricultural community, presented an award to someone who exemplifies conservation in Windham County, and hosted a speaker.
 - Planning for a fall meeting:
 - Create a public-facing event; want to invite legislators, the public
 - Need to find a venue: Walker farm, Green Mountain Orchards, Riverledge Farm
 - Stuart Thurber possible recipient of conservation award
 - Speaker possibility: Tom Grasso

FY23 Financial Reports

Agreed to move these reports to another board meeting

District Manager's Report

- Cory and Linda to attend the NACD Northeast Conference September 17 - 20, 2023 in Portland, Maine
- The VACD annual meeting: November 1st and 2nd. Staff and supervisors are invited. It will be held at Lake Morey Inn, Fairlee, VT
- Heather invited to speak this weekend at the Windham County Farm Bureau Annual Meeting
- Isabel wrote 4 grant requests that were awarded through Project Development grant funding

Minutes

Motion to accept the August 9th meeting minutes was moved, seconded and passed.
Noted more detailed minutes desired for future meetings.

Next meeting will be October 11th at Geof's house.

Motion to adjourn the meeting was moved, seconded and passed.

Meeting adjourned at 8:40

Respectfully submitted,

Isabel Bowman