

Local Fund Pool Proposal FY 27 Meeting minutes

Tuesday, February 10th, 2026

28 Vernon Street, Suite 332, Brattleboro, VT 05301

Hybrid Zoom

Present in person: Heather Blunk (Agricultural Resource Specialist - WCNRC), Cory Ross (District Manager - WCNRC), Isabel Bowman (Conservation Specialist - WCNRC), Emma Kuester, (Soil Conservationist - USDA NRCS), Emma Gregg (Agricultural Resource Specialist - WCNRC), Abby Reed, (Americorps serving with WCNRC).

Online: Michelle Simpson (Director – BEEC)

- Recap of our January 27th Local Workgroup Meeting:
 - Top practices identified:
 - Brush management
 - Practice for invasives management
 - Wildlife practices
 - Promoting wildlife and natural habitats in forests
- Goal for this meeting is to define:
 - Proposal goal
 - Project area
 - Impact of proposal
- Multiple articles that we need to submit:
 1. Conservation Action Plan (CAP)
 2. Appendix C
- Review CAP for changes:

Introduction:

~ Sheet flow and erosion → Not forest-specific. Potentially add more impacts to forestry here as that was a highlighted concern

Proposed Actions:

#3: Remove, “need to ask Emma”

Remove ? after filter strip

#4: Add 216 practice for soil health

#5: Add cover crops

Add 216 practice for soil health

Add erosion -what we identify in “A: Extreme Weather and its Impacts” in this section

Capture RPP program in this language

Proposed recommendations:

- Cost list updates by NRCS for FY 26.

- Payment rate list is drastically different than in the past
- Key examples:
 - Individual plant treatment (herbicide):\$36.48/acre
 - Chemical control (#314) no longer has light, medium, or difficult. The FY26 rate for 314 is \$25.98/acre but on difficult for FY25 was \$895.88/acre
 - Cost share historically covered the practice
 - Foresters try to match the rate that NRCS has even though this has been a lower price point than is realistic. The FY26 payment rate steeply dropped, and will be at too low a price point for contractors to take this work on. This is something that has been identified as an issue for the past 5 years on our conservation survey
 - Site prep (#490) Heavy Use Mechanical, Heavy with chemical application is at \$585.99/acre
 - To implement, likely need hand saws, bronchos, hack and squirt method
 - Would not be able to pull invasives under this payment
 - Implementation would have to be cut stump, or cut stump and foliar spray
 - The goal would be to control invasives and replace this footprint with a tree planting, i.e. have regeneration for tree and shrub establishment *however, invasives recruitment is likely*
 - Forest stand Improvement (#666) practice can be used to create early successional habitat, followed by 490
 - This usually requires fencing, meaning the state biologist for NRCS would have to be on board
 - Fencing around the practices hasn't been workable in VT so far
- While we have organized this fund pool around these changes to payment rates, we will be missing out on those who do not want chemical treatment options
- Engineering practice payments jumped or were reduced
- Cover crop payments are consistent with the past
- Low payment rates for: agroforestry and tree planting, alleycropping and silvopasture
- Bedded pack practice payment was removed
 - This directly impacts producers in need in Windham County
- Under 647, patch cuts were removed but mowing was included

- Patch cuts are included in 666, but payment rates went down by 50%
- These are practices that foresters are not inherently interested in as they are not directly profitable. By reducing the payment rates, they will not be incentivized to complete these practices
- VT state forester and biologist is working on a plan to implement these practices given the scenarios available
- Livestock grazing had payment options under AFT, but this funding source will end soon
 - Payment rates on fence, livestock, and water through NRCS will need other funding options to get implementing
- Advocating for increased financial assistance

Actions Windham NRCD can take:

- Actively try to help find financial assistance for these practices.
 - Potential VACD statewide proposal for this
 - Talks on establishing a nonprofit to take on NRCS practices
- Support Windham County engineering needs for practice implementation
 - District staff to potentially getting trained in engineering approvals
 - More staffing
 - District staff getting job approval authority
- 10: Help implement versus identify
- 11: Potential remove
- Add: Grassland Bird Project

Local Fund Pool Application:

- Project area: Windham County
- Proposed goal: Support native or naturalized habitats
 - Impact: treating invasives
 - Support one farmer one application format
- Apply for the same quantity of money as the past plus inflation
 - \$900,000
 - Rationale: this is a way for producers to implement non-fund pool practices to be implemented that may be less financially accessible. This follows the “one farmer, one application” approach where customers who have an interest in multiple practices can be served
 - However, this fund pool/NRCS funding systems still have barriers to access for those who have fewer resource concerns
- Next steps: Ask Toby Alexander about the fiscal feasibility of our Fund Pool:
- Fund pool: 5 practices:
 1. 612: tree and shrub establishment (+ 490 site prep = supporting practice)

2. 314: Brush management supported by 666
3. 645: Upland Wildlife Habitat Management
4. 391: Riparian Forest Buffer
5. 420, 512, 327 - One should be selected

Last year in the forestry fund pool: 314, 315 (herbaceous weed treatment), 391(riparian forest buffer), 396 (aquatic organism passage), 420 (wildlife habitat planting)

~ Spot or hand application mechanical: FY25: \$57/acre FY26:\$17/acre

~ 512: Pasture and Hay planting: Replanting hay field for better species composition

- Could be combined with grassland bird project efforts

~ 645: Upland Wildlife Habitat Management: can add lime assessments to make it more applicable for this fund pool

~ 327: Conservation Cover: Could be more applicable to birds by providing a grassland planting rather than a pollinator planting

- pollinator plantings have not been wanted once the designs are shared with the producers

~ 391: Riparian Forest Buffer: Consistent with state priorities (on PR list)

~ Payments FY 26: 300 trees: \$6500

~ Increased from \$2,377 in FY25

~IMPAC goals: new USDA goals

-Want to align with those on this application

Feb 27: Appendix C is due

April 8 - present to State Technical Committee

~If selected: At the end of April, Appendix D will be written

Meeting Adjourned at 11:30am

Respectfully submitted,
Isabel Bowman