

Windham County Natural Resource Conservation District Minutes

Wednesday, January 10, 2024, 6:30 pm

Geof's house, 301 Barrows Road, Brattleboro, VT

Present: Meg Kluge, Geoff Dolman, Linda Corse,
Katie Morrison, Pieter van Loon in person; board supervisors;
Cory Ross: district manager; Heather Blunk: Agricultural Outreach Specialist; Isabel Sullivan:
Conservation Specialist; Phyllicia Moore

Update from Phyllicia:

- Current local fund pool: Heather is working on local fund pool applications that didn't get funded last year and following up to see if they're still interested, will likely be able to fund all of them. They are Encouraging producers to adopt climate smart practices if it fits for them. Will rank applicants in local fund pool and EQIP to see where they qualify.
- Likes that coffee chat program is growing and would love for it to happen more often.
- Hiring one more person. Recently (within the last 6 months) NRCS has been hiring 2 people in Rutland, 1 in White River, 1 in Brattleboro, and will likely hire one more person in Rutland, likely an implementation specialist. That person will focus on implementation of practices and do some contract management (that person can work in Windham County as well as Rutland). There is a possibility of one more position in Brattleboro but Phyllicia is currently assessing the workload and evaluating whether that is necessary. Either way, it is important that folks who are hired are adequately trained, which takes a year or so. Looking for a balance of how they distribute the workload, how training happens, etc.
- NRCS is supposed to have someone start acting in Phyllicia's position by Jan 29. They'll overlap for 2 months, but she'll continue to be the person to communicate with Cory.
- Michael (from Bennington County) submitted an application from Windham County and wasn't entirely straightforward about that. Phylixia will touch base with him to make sure he's not misrepresenting applications and that communication is more open.
- It has been proposed that Windham County should be considered as a locality pay based on cost of living in the Boston area, starting in 2025. That means that staffing might improve because the pay will increase. Also, looking at how NRCS is doing payment schedules: do we cater payment schedules by the county? That means if Windham County comes up as locality pay then Windham County can potentially get increased payment rates for practices.

VACD Update:

- Budget is included in tonight's board packet. They are requesting an increase for a total request of \$3,000,000. Possible that belt-tightening will be happening (plus other factors impacting the budget such as the flooding).

- Next meeting isn't until Feb 8 b/c of scheduling conflicts. Chris Van Alts has resigned from the NRCC finance committee, the VACD governance committee, and the VACD executive committee for personal reasons.
- Median district manager pay rate is \$27/hour. Is that related to longevity? Not necessarily, some of the lowest paid are the longest serving DMs. Median longevity is 4 years. Median salary for an sg specialist is \$52,000/ year and median salary for a conservation specialist is \$57,000/year. Goal is to give districts guidelines for hiring, pay and benefits. Thinking of changing the title of district manager to executive director, which might help with hiring (and it's more reflective of the job as it's evolved).
- Linda is going to the NACD national conference in San Diego in February to represent VACD.
- VACD also trying to work on getting supervisors and DMs trained and up to speed consistently.

Topics for Future Meetings:

- It would be nice to get away from "the minutiae" of current projects.
- The staff is raising the idea of having presenters come to talk at board meetings. For example, if a need came up that we could use other insight about, or keeping the board knowledgeable on conservation/ag related news or topics.
- Is there a trend that you're seeing that we haven't really talked about that we should start to consider?
 - Agroforestry
 - Land Access - VT Land Trust: Maggie Donin would likely be able to come and speak.
 - 30 by 30 - VT has passed legislation conserve 30% of the land by 2030, and 50% by 2050. How do we solve the housing crisis and preserve the landscape of VT?
 - There is a need for new farms to be able to produce business plans. How do we keep new farmers? Issues include - Land access, access to markets, employees, housing, access to tools.
 - VT Housing and Conservation Board - has a business planning program. They are overextended though.
 - There has been a desire to connect owners of conserved land to folks who are interested in using land. It would be great to create an app to help connect people who have and are looking for land.
 - Carbon programs - not clear what's happening. Some programs were introduced and haven't been successful.

Southeast Supervisory Union Annual Meeting

- January 23, 2024, via Zoom.
- Update from each district, things they're proud of.

- Conversation about council and what's going on with that. Linda will have an update for that.
- They have a new district manager - Kelly Stettner - who they're bringing onboard slowly. She was the leader of the Black River Action Team.

District Manager's Report:

- We have to hire an archaeologist for the Ellis Brook Berm Removal Project. Meg has some background in archeology and is willing to help with the hiring process and any other archeology related translation, communication, etc.
- Land Link is a partnership between NOFA and Intervale. Retired folks etc get indigenous seeds and grow and cultivate them and bring the grown vegetables to be dispersed to Native populations. It's a way to learn more about the Abenaki community.
- Workshop idea: Decolonizing your Garden: supporting Abenki. Hoping Chief John Stevens - state rep for Abenaki tribes and Rich Wholeshoe can be involved. Workshop will include a discussion of what seeds mean to members of the Abenaki culture. It is planned for Sat Sept 14, 10am. It would also be good to connect this workshop with local school groups and Farm to School programs. There is already a homeschool curriculum. Katie can help make this connection.
- Isabel has recently been working on a stiltgrass grant. Currently aiming for a \$32,000, which would allow Isabel be the point person on stiltgrass in Windham County and provide a seasonal employee as well.
- Working on a report for the Whetstone Invasives Mapping project which is happening on 1/31 at 6pm.
- Molly Verner is leaving her position as communication coordinator. It's becoming a full time position. One question: do they need to meet as often as they do?

Associate Supervisors:

- What did we decide on this?
- We're going to remove everyone's name except for Andrea because they haven't been involved in several years.
- Linda will email them and let them know that we're going to drop their names and if they want to stay on in that role to contact us.

Annual Report:

- Isabel crunched the annual report down to a 1 page report, which will get sent out to towns, along with a letter from Cory.
- Add to letter: we work with some municipalities (i.e. partnerships with WRPC).
- Edits: update Katie's name to Katie Morrison and update Isabel's name. Edit Farm Service Agency Executive Director to Courtney LeCuyer.

December Minutes:

- *Motion to approve minutes with corrections.*
- *Motion Approved.*

Next Meeting:

- Wednesday, February 7, 2024, 6:30pm at Geof's

Executive Session: Isabel's Annual Review:

- Board reviewed Isabel's performance review.
- *Motion to accept Isabel's performance review and increase Isabel's pay to the next step.*
- *Motion approved.*

- *Motion to Adjourn,*
- *Motion approved.*
- *Meeting adjourned at 8:44pm*