

**Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership (VAWQP) – Northwest Regional Coordination Meeting**  
**Notes**

Thursday, February 15, 2024

**51 Attendees** (\*Indicates Zoom participant)

Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VAAFMM)

- Brittany Cole (brittany.cole@vermont.gov), Water Quality Specialist
- Emma Redel (emma.redel@vermont.gov), Ag Water Quality Program Coordinator
- Maria Burnett (maria.burnett@vermont.gov), ECO Americorps
- David Wardrop (david.wardrop@vermont.gov), Water Quality Specialist
- Ellen Friedrich (ellen.friedrich@vermont.gov), Ag Water Quality Program Coordinator
- Luke Hughes (luke.hughes@vermont.gov), Water Quality Specialist
- Connor Steckel (connor.steckel@vermont.gov), Grazing Specialist
- Noah Gilbert-Fuller (noah.gilbert-fuller@vermont.gov), Water Quality Program Coordinator
- Ben Gabos\* (ben.gabos@vermont.gov), Program Coordinator
- Abbi Pajack\* (abbi.pajak@vermont.gov), Water Quality Specialist

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

- Travis Thomason (travis.thomason@usda.gov), State Conservationist
- Sarah Larose (sarah.larose@usda.gov), Soil Conservationist
- Jimmy Young (james.young2@usda.gov), Soil Conservationist
- Sean Pease (sean.pease@usda.gov), Soil Conservationist
- Mike Dickhaut (michael.dickhaut@vt.nacdnet.net), Conservation Planner
- Iliana Freiday (iliana.freiday@usda.gov), Natural Resources Specialist
- Renee Bolduc (renee.bolduc@usda.gov), Soil Conservationist
- Lauren Gibson (lauren.gibson@usda.gov), Soil Conservationist
- Emily Lugthart (emily.lugthart@usda.gov), Natural Resource Specialist
- Logan Reese (logan.reese@usda.gov), Natural Resource Specialist
- Chris Evans (christopher.evans2@usda.gov), Forester
- Luis Aponte (luis.aponte@usda.gov), Assistant State Conservationist- Field Operations
- Caitlin Silber (caitlin.silber@usda.gov), Program Assistant

Vermont Association of Conservation Districts (VACD)

- Emily Jaquish (emily.jaquish@vt.nacdnet.net), Program Assistant
- Emily Nummer (emily.nummer@vacd.org), Agriculture Programs Manager

Lamoille County Conservation District (LCCD)

- Peter Danforth (lccddirector@gmail.com), District Manager

Grand Isle County Natural Resources Conservation District

- Molly Varner (molly.gicnrcd@gmail.com), District Manager

Vermont Agricultural Water Quality Partnership (VAWQP)

- Alli Lewis (alli.lewis@vacd.org), Coordinator

Franklin County Natural Resource Conservation District (FCNRC)

- Lauren Weston (lauren@franklincountynrcd.org), District Manager
- Kate Wettergreen (kate@franklincountynrcd.org), Project Technician
- Mel Auffredou (mel@franklincountynrcd.org), Natural Resources Planner
- Dorothy Kinney-Landis (dorothy@franklincountynrcd.org), Projects Coordinator

- Meryl Braconnier (meryl@franklincountynrcd.org), Project Technician
- Kerry Brosnan (kerry@franklincountynrcd.org), ECO AmeriCorps

Orleans County Natural Resources Conservation District

- No one present

Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (VT DEC)

- Karen Bates (karen.bates@vermont.gov), Watershed Planner
- Marli Rupe (marli.rupe@vermont.gov), Agricultural Water Quality Section Chief
- Elijah Schumacher (elijah.schumacher@vermont.gov), District Wetlands Ecologist
- Krystal T. Sewell (krystal.t.sewell@vermont.gov), District Wetlands Ecologist

Lake Champlain Basin Program (LCBP)

- No one present

Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB)

- Holly McClintock (h.mcclintock@vhcb.org), Ag. Program Coordinator

University of Vermont Extension – Northwest Crops and Soils Program

- Ivy Krezinski (ivy.krezinski@uvm.edu), Crops & Soils Coordinator
- Amber Machia (amber.machia@uvm.edu), Crops & Soils Staff
- Jeffrey Sanders\* (jeffrey.sanders@uvm.edu), Agronomy Specialist

Vermont Farm Service Agency (FSA)

- Ali Malone (alison.malone@usda.gov), Co Program Technician
- Connie Brigham (constance.brigham@usda.gov), Co Program Technician
- Eileen Powers\* (eileen.powers@usda.gov), Ag Program Specialist

US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

- Chris Smith (chris\_e\_smith@fws.gov), Supervisory Fish And Wildlife Biologist

Non-VAWQP Partners

Vermont Land Trust

- Tucker Malone (tucker@vlt.org), Project Director

Missisquoi River Basin Association

- Lindsey Wight (lindsey@mrbavt.com), Executive Director

Friends of Northern Lake Champlain

- Kent Henderson (khenderson@friendsofnorthernlakechamplain.org), Board Chair
- Bridget Butler (bbutler@friendsofnorthernlakechamplain.org), Executive Director
- Hannah Mahar (hmahar@friendsofnorthernlakechamplain.org), ECO AmeriCorps

**Minutes recorded by FCNRCD staff**

8:30 – 9:16 Guests begin entering the meeting space, mingling, and finding seats.

9:18 – 9:23 Lauren thanks everyone for coming, introduces herself and the space, and reviews the agenda. Leads reflection on the question “Why do you do the work that you do?”

9:23 – 9:24 Alli Lewis reads a land acknowledgment for the areas covered by the Northwest Zone.

**9:25 – 9:32 VAWQP, Alli Lewis**

Alli Lewis reviews the VAWQP partnership and the VAWQP vision, mission, and goals relating to water quality, technical assistance, partnerships, and farmers. She reviews the partnership’s collaborative

structure, 1619 MOU, which promotes greater and more efficient cooperation among partners in VT on addressing agricultural water quality concerns.

VAWQP's 5 year strategic plan is:

1. Build a stronger collaboration.
2. Identify, connect, share and coordinate research and learning across partners.
3. Utilize research and learning to evaluate and innovate specific practices and tools across partners.
4. Ensure staff is trained across partner orgs.
5. Create consistent messaging for partners, farmers, and the public.
6. Align tactical basin planning and ensure effectiveness of jointly targeted watershed strategies.

VAWQP Regional coordinators provide feedback to leadership on their specific region and opportunities for collaboration. We hope and encourage folks to connect with each other and find opportunities to address gaps and needs and share back to VAWQP leaders. We will be engaging in more formal surveying to receive feedback as well. As a result of previous regional coordination meetings, there is a new funders forum concept where we get financial managers together to talk about their programs, identify where there might be overlap, and where there might be opportunities to collaborate better. Please feel free to reach out with ideas.

### **9:32 – 9:59 Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets – Ellen Friedrich**

Overview of clean water report which shows state investment over the past year in Agricultural Water Quality Projects, Agricultural Conservation Practices, and a model of phosphorus reductions. There was more state funding this last year via the ARPA Federal funding, this is temporary funding, however. Program participation from farms has largely increased as visible through water quality grants. The Agency has increased regulatory visits throughout 2021-2023 and enforcement actions have also increased. Education and Outreach via technical visits has increased, there were around 1,200 technical visits in 2023 up from around 900 in 2022.

Clean Water Performance Report. Most of Vermont is covered with different TMDL's and water quality goals and this region is focused on phosphorus reductions. The Agency has modeled phosphorus reductions from 2018-2023, but they are modeled/estimates not measured. We can anticipate 2023 to look a bit higher in a few months after all the reporting has been input, which comes after the fiscal year. Also, the state and this model can't capture all practices. The data show the lion share of Phosphorus reductions are coming from agriculture, about 81% reductions. This is because agriculture is the most cost-effective while maintaining a large impact. Also, agriculture can capture and measure the reductions more easily than other sectors. Ellen reviews a graph that shows cost efficiencies and effectiveness of phosphorus reductions which shows that Natural Resources and Agriculture are the most cost effective with most effective results.

Lake Champlain TMDL. The State is 20% of the way to the goal towards the Lake Champlain TMDL. The US EPA has noted that we are going to have to accelerate our progress towards the TMDL in order to meet the goal. Different lake segments have different phosphorus reduction targets and are at different levels of progress to meeting those targets. We can see the Northeast Arm is 73% towards their goal. The

Missisquoi Bay is 15% of the way to their goal but their target is much larger so that is very large progress.

Kent Henderson (FNLC) – Will those goals be reassessed after the time is up?

Marli Rupe (DEC) – Not planned.

Agricultural reductions in phosphorus in the Missisquoi basin is responsible for 35% of all agricultural reductions statewide and 28% of ALL reductions. This region is doing lots of important work!

Ellen reviewed two cover crop project examples on two farms in the Missisquoi region. These two projects on two farms resulted in 1379 total kg P reduction, which would contribute 12% to Missisquoi's agricultural reductions progress in FY2023. These projects can have a large impact.

“Conservation on farms can be a bit like completing a puzzle, taking one piece at a time and finding the best fit.” Our farmers are doing really important work and each project is important.

Contact Nina Gage, Assistant Director Water Quality Division, if you have any questions.

Nina.Gage@vermont.gov // 802-622-4098

#### **9:59-10:10 – Break**

#### **10:10 – 11:45 Round Table Organization Updates**

Each organization's representative provides a brief update on programs, staff, events, grants, and/or project updates.

#### **10:10 – 10:23 VAAF, Ellen Friedrich**

Staff introduces themselves. Connor Steckel is in a new position of Grazing Specialist. Nina Gage is the Vermont Pay For Performance program coordinator as they are interviewing someone for the position to fill Brodie Haenke's role.

CSP Assist -- Has provided 80 farms with incentives for enrolling in CSP. Applications for this year are open now.

CEAP – This past year the conservation tillage equipment grant maximums were increased to \$30,000.

Farm Agronomic Practice Program – Payments are currently in progress; some farmers have received them some might still be waiting. Top payment increased from 8,000 to 10,000. We also added a practice: frost seeding is now allowable under no till pasture and hay land renovation. Spread the word.

Two new coordinators for the Best Management Practice Program Emma Redel and Ellen Friedrich to tidy administration and communication. Emma specific for this region. April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024 deadline for priority funding for this program. Good year to apply to BMP because extra funds from ARPA means not as competitive.

Changes coming for Grassed Waterway and Filter Strip Program, more focused on filter strips. Also, a new Water Quality Sampling Position, which will do things like testing on wells, etc., is starting soon.

NMPs - We noticed that record keeping for manure application and crop yields is in need of improvement and soil sampling and manure sampling being kept up to date. Inspectors are noticing an issue with this.

MFO general permit is being revised, so expect changes to come.

The [Vermont Food Security Roadmap to 2035](#) and [Ag Recovery Task Force](#) examining extreme weather are good resources to check out online.

### **10:23 - 10:32 VHCB, Holly McClintock**

VHCB overview. VHCB's main role is as a funder, distributing state funds.

Water Quality Grant - Farmers can apply in Jan and Feb. \$1.9 Million in requests and only \$800,000 to distribute, very competitive program. \$50,000 cap award. Funds are usually used as match for CEAP and other state programs. Decisions will be made in March.

Act 59, Vermont Conservation Strategy Initiative, 30x30 – Goal of conserving 30% of the state by 2030 and 50% of the state by 2050. VHCB and ANR will be developing a 2 phased plan. We are in the first phase of determining how much land VT already has conserved and what should be counted as conserved land. There is an agricultural working group working on whether agricultural conserved land should count towards the goal. Inventory must be finished by the end of 2024, and the plan finished by 2025.

VHCB and other partners will be hosting a Conservation Conference at Vermont State University in Randolph on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2024. Will be putting out an RFP for presentations, workshops, lectures at this conference.

Land Conservation – Working with the Vermont Land Trust to bring those projects to us, applications are rolling in. The partnership is important because you all are often helping out with these applications.

Farm and Forest Viability Programs – \$75 application fee, then farmers will get assigned a business partner to help farmers write a business plan. \$75 refunded if farmers don't get accepted. 2 year program.

### **10:32 – 10:39 UVM Extension, Ivy Krezinski**

Over the past few years, we have been working on an Agriculture Water Quality Curriculum. This included a 'Teach the Teacher' workshop which walked teachers through bench top and field experiments. This curriculum focused on teaching students about the scientific process, developed online tools including games about water quality and soil health, as well as AgConnect which is a web-based platform that walks students through the scientific process. Lindsey Ruhl has been working on this and other resources for educators.

The UVM Extension team works with farmers on their NMP, which just wrapped up our 6 week course this week with the help of other technical assistance providers. We host that class but also work with farmers individually year to year on their plans and keeping them updated.

We are also hosting custom applicator and manure certification courses coming up in Newport, Middlebury, Berlin, and St. Albans.

Research Farm in Alburgh – Over 60 experiments, 90 treatments, 900 plots of individual research. Partners can see the various projects at our yearly field day. Research on neonics and water quality monitoring. Neonics seed treatment webinar series is all online.

UVM Extension has a lot of events coming up including in person conferences again.

No Till Conference, Building Resilience and Profitability in Your No-Till System – Thurs, Feb 17<sup>th</sup>

Winter Farm Meeting – Wed, March 6, 10am-2pm

Precision Dairy Farming Webinar – March 18 – April 1, Mon, Wed, Friday from 12pm-1:15pm

More information about events is on our website.

**10:39 – 10:51 - US Fish and Wildlife Service, Chris Smith**

Chris Smith reviews the US Fish and Wildlife Mission; working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats. Located in Essex Junction, they cover the Lake Champlain Basin in VT and NY. They also do work in the Connecticut River Basin. There are 3 main program areas – Sea Lamprey Control, Fisheries Assessment and Restoration, Habitat Restoration Programs.

Habitat Restoration Program – Where we do the most work with all of the partners in this room. The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program was created to provide habitat restoration on private lands.

Since 2018 we have worked on 52 barriers and opened up 600 stream miles via dam removals, culvert replacement, culvert retrofits, instream habitat structures. All of these projects provide a host of co-benefits, all of them have led to water quality improvements.

Reviewed projects including tree plantings and dam removals, many of which are in Franklin County. In addition to water quality benefits, there is habitat connectivity benefit and terrestrial habitat benefit. If you run across these types of projects, please reach out to any of us.

**10:51 – 10:57 DEC, Marli Rupe**

Marli Rupe thanks the Agency of Agriculture for working with VAQWP partners in close collaboration over this past summer that proposed many challenges with rain, flooding, and soggy fields. DEC is working on processes to deal with more flooding and rainfall events so we are prepared for the future. DEC is in the middle of their second RCPP, Regional Conservation Partnership Program, grant. They were just awarded another \$10.5 million to move this forward. They are excited about this grant because they are going to be looking at the intersection of water quality, flood resilience, and habitat and narrowing where they target that work. They will be working with a lot of the partners to figure that out. DEC is in the process of hiring a new Head of the CAFO Permit Program and getting back to speed on that.

**10:57 – 11:02 DEC, Karen Bates**

Karen Bates, the Watershed Coordinator for the Missisquoi Bay, Lamoille, and North Lake Direct Basins, gave updates on tactical basin planning targets. The basin plan being worked on right now is the Northern Lake Champlain Direct Drainage (Basin 5) which includes everything that is not the big, major river basins on the Northern part of Lake Champlain. We are looking at the progress in different lake segments to address nutrients on the land in these basins to meet these targets.

In meetings we've had so far, we discussed NMPs and implementation and increasing the use of Manure Injection. We would like to increase the use of manure injection but equipment seems like a barrier. We also talked about gullies, especially in the Rock River, and how to get farmers to address gully management.

### **11:02 – 11:07 DEC, Vermont Wetland Program, Krystal Sewell and Elijah Shumer**

Krystal covers Franklin County and Elijah covers Grand Isle and works statewide on ARPA.

The VT Wetland Program administers wetland rules, assesses the chemical and physical health of VT wetlands, and updates and refines mapping. There are 7 district wetland ecologists providing assistance and project review to their regions of the state. They provide public education on wetlands and wetland rules. Eshqua Bog is the newest Class I designated wetland in 2023 with a 200ft buffer. They provide water quality technical assistance and refer projects/ideas to partners. They are available to producers to provide desktop reviews and field visits to help them understand where wetlands are on their land. They are hiring an intern for this summer which could turn into a 2 year assignment.

#### **Elijah Shumer – Mapping Update**

Vermont Significant Wetlands Inventory built off the National Wetlands Inventory. Finally getting updated which will allow it to be more accurate. By 2026, the entire state should have updated mapping which will allow landowners and farmers to know where wetlands are on the landscape.

### **11:07 – 11:16 FSA, Eileen Powers and Ali Malone**

FSA conservation programs include CRP, ECP, and EFRP.

Big update is that CRP doesn't have to get sent all the way down to Washington and wait between 2 and 8 weeks to get them back. Typically, we have a waiver to send to Washington, these waivers are now sent to a state office so turn around should be much quicker.

ECP Update – December 2022 Winter Storm Elliot damaged a lot of sugar bushes and producers should finally be getting payments for that. Just under \$1mil in payments for Franklin and Grand Isle producers. FSA is still processing applications for farmers affected by July flooding this year, no expected date for when payments for that will be rolling out. More ECP January Windstorms that damaged sugar bushes. FSA is accepting applications.

EFRP - Still taking requests to run this program for January Windstorm damage.

Franklin County Office – CED retired in May last year, the plan is to advertise for this position this Spring. The IRA has been forgiving loans for our borrowers and borrowers can make payments online. Farmers experiencing effects from the disasters this summer, FSA can still take requests for emergency-based loans up to nine months out.

Dairy Margin Coverage Program is their biggest program and ensures a payment when milk prices drop. Franklin and Grand Isle dairy producers received \$8.4 mil and statewide paid out \$28.4 mil to VT's working dairy farms.

**11:16 – 11:22 VACD, Emily Nummer**

Nonprofit organization that supports Conservation District's work. VACD does legislative work, grant management, coordinating with partners, and technical staff to support NRCDs. Molly Varner is transitioning away from Communications role with VACD and moving full time to Grand Isle District Manager. VACD will be posting for the Communication Position in the coming weeks. A Graduate Student Team helped create a DEIJ Toolkit and Assessment that districts have used. VACD is doing work to ensure all districts are utilizing this resource.

**11:22 – 11:26 NRCS, Sarah Larose**

Work with landowners to address resource concerns. Right now, NRCS is working through 200 applications for CSP, EQIP, RCPP, and AMA. First round for CSP deadline has passed and waiting to hear preapprovals for that. Next, EQIP, RCPP, and AMA ranking deadline is March 15<sup>th</sup>. EQIP Disaster had 61 contracts administered in the Northwest Zone alone with about \$3 mil. FY2025 earlier sign up in August, please spread the word since this is a lot earlier than in the past. NRCS is focusing attention on the local funding pool and local work group to funnel more money to local priorities in the Northwest Zone. Please attend events for the local work group and encourage landowners to attend to have their voice heard about local conservation efforts.

**11:26 – 11:33 Lamoille County NRCD, Peter Danforth**

The Lamoille County NRCD watershed work is guided by the tactical basin plan. They are engaging in Lake and Watershed Action Plans, Lake Wise, work with rivers including riparian areas, culvert replacements, dam removals, wetlands, easements, tree plantings, knotweed removal, and Stream Wise. Lamoille County NRCD will be doing Stream Wise assessments again next year. The NRCD also wants to lead a more coordinated effort to address river concerns in our area.

Education – City Forest School, trying to make our new Nature Center accessible year-round. Thanks to the Agency of Ag for funding the new pavilion and trail signage.

Outreach – Land treatment plans, NMPs, want to work with NRCS and our local workgroup for the local funding pools. We host a lot of workshops where we promote this. We work with pollinator pathways and we try to get landowners who attend these events tied to NRCS programs.

Legislative work – working with VACD to get more core funding. If our partners could provide testimonials to District Managers, we are going to be at the State House February 27<sup>th</sup> and want to share the work that we do and the strong partnerships we have.

**11:33 – 11:39 Grand Isle County NRCD, Molly Varner**

NRCDs look different in each county based on local needs. The goal of NRCDs is to ensure that funded projects have an impact in our communities and provide voice to our communities. Grand Isle County



NRCD works closely with Franklin County NRCD to provide agricultural assistance to farmers. This summer Grand Isle County NRCD will be working with Friends of Northern Lake Champlain on Stream Wise Assessments. If you are doing site visits with farmers and they don't mind Molly tagging along, she would love to learn more out on the field!

#### **11:39 – 11:45 Franklin County NRCD Lauren Weston**

Franklin County NRCD has an updated Mission Statement. Franklin County NRCD works on NMPs, education events, grant assistance, and soil health training programs. The NRCD is [recording all of the Soil Health Training webinars](#) which are great resources for onboarding. They recently hosted a [Why Farmers Spread Manure Webinar](#) that is recorded if partners would like to share that with folks. The NRCD has received a new grant to work with more maple and forest producers.

Friends of Northern Lake Champlain, Missisquoi River Basin Association, and Vermont Land Trust are also here today so feel free to reach out to these organizations.

#### **11:45 – 12:23 Break**

#### **12:23 – 12:50 Presentations from Sean Pease and Noah Gilbert-Fuller**

##### **CSP Outreach – Sean Pease, NRCS**

The Conservation Stewardship Program is an NRCS program that has been around for a while but has recently been injected with new funds.

There is a new, increased minimum base payment of \$4,000 for this 5 year program. There are Annual Payments and Supplemental Payments. Producers are reimbursed for implementing conservation practices. Once they are in the program, and they are determined to meet at least 2 priority resource concerns, the money is not tied to anything. Producers can use the money in any way they prefer, which farmers really appreciate.

Eligibility: Which 2 resources will you improve? Applicants must agree to Meet or Exceed the threshold for at least one additional priority resource concern by the end of the contract. This program is meant to reward landowners for the beneficial practices they are implementing.

CSP Plans are very work intensive on the NRCS side, there are a lot of moving parts and a lot of information NRCS needs to know so better to get involved sooner rather than later. CSP has a lot of Inflation Reduction Act dollars.

Likely any farmer you work with can apply for this. Participants can decide what tax year to receive payment based on tax implications. For this program, it doesn't matter how many acres a producer has. Please tell the farmers you work with.

Applications are accepted all year round, if they are signing up for EQIP they should also click the CSP box. A farmer can be in EQIP and CSP. EQIP is to fix a problem, CSP is to incentivize continuing to work on problems/doing beneficial practices.

NRCS is seeing an increase in applications for this program since the base payment increased. If a farmer has two operations (ag and commercial), they can apply for CSP for each separate operation which adds up. For agriculture operations, the land needs to have a crop history which is due to legislative language and the farm bill.

**VAAF – Vermont Farmers Ecosystem Stewardship Program (CSP Assist), Noah Gilbert-Fuller**

This program is quite simple. When a producer applies for NRCS's CSP, they can also apply for this state program. This program provides additional incentive funding to farmers who apply for the CSP. Farmers get \$2,000 when they complete an assessment with NRCS. An additional \$7,500 is provided to farmers selected by NRCS for the CSP program. Vermont farms who plan to submit or have submitted applications to the CSP program are encouraged to apply. Applicants may submit CSP applications to NRCS at any time.

Applicants must be a Small Farm Operation or larger and apply for CSP assistance on associated agricultural lands to be eligible for state incentive payments. Just under \$500,000 was distributed last year. Payments from this program are not taxed.

**12:51 – 12:52 Closing Remarks**

Lauren Weston asks that if anyone has suggestions for the next meeting please let her know. She thanks everyone for their time and for being here.

**12:52 Lauren concludes the VAWQP meeting.**