

## **Northwest Zone Public Local-Led Conservation Meeting**

Tuesday, March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022, from 5:30-7:30 p.m.

at Valley Dream Farm

5901 Pleasant Valley Rd. Cambridge, Vermont, 05444

5:44pm: Introduction of Peter Danforth (District Manager, Lamoille County NRCD), Molly Varner (District Manager, Grand Isle County NRCD), and Lauren Weston (District Manager, Franklin County NRCD). Thanks to hosts at Valley Dream Farm. This meeting led by the Conservation Districts (NRCDs) in the northwest, working with Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through a Memorandum of Understanding.

5:46pm: Round of introductions – see sign in sheet for list of participants.

5:54pm: Peter Danforth introduces first presenter: Wynea Buford (NRCS Northwest Zone Acting District Conservationist).

What is a working group? For the years [Wynea Buford] has been here, it has been a remote survey used to gather information to identify priorities in each county. The working group this year is looking different, it includes a survey component along with an in-person meeting. Local led working groups started in 1930s, to focus programs locally, not a state or federal focus. It is used to address resource concerns specific to each county. Basin plans are used now, and will be used in future years, to identify priority areas to determine rankings and federal programs. NRCS has statewide funding pools which can be competitive.

The future with these working groups is going to be more specific funding in smaller pots of money. The districts propose priorities to NRCS, who distributes the funds. The NRCS payment schedule means that we are about 18 months out for changes to be implemented. Suggestions out of these meeting will be made for FY 2024 if they are in by June, otherwise they will be for FY 2025. We want to identify training that producers want, not just the UVM recommendations submitted to state committee. NRCS will respond within 90 days and provide information back about how recommendations are being used.

Overview of NRCS FY 2021 applications and funded programs. 57.2% of applications were funded. For 2021 adding an EQIP incentive RCPP, and Cold Hollow to Canada RCPP. \$4.4 million spent each year in the northwest zone. Franklin County receives the most funding followed by Addison County then Orleans County.

6:12pm: Lauren Weston gives overview of the handouts provided.

6:14pm: Break for dinner.

6:45pm: Peter Danforth begins an overview of the Conservation Districts. They are community driven and provide technical assistance and connect people with funds. Focus on conservation and connections in the community.

Molly Varner: There are 14 conservation districts across Vermont. There are four program areas agriculture and forestry, natural resources conservation and restoration, education and outreach, and

stormwater. The methodologies and outcomes are water quality, soil health, climate resilience, and economic viability.

Dan Lee: Presents slide on agricultural programs by the numbers. The numbers included are just for the northwest zone.

Question and discussion on tree sale, trout sale, and Matt Danaher Fisheries.

7:00pm: Natural resources by the numbers slide is presented. Lamoille County has a big focus on stormwater. In Franklin County, Dean Pierce at the Northwest Regional Planning Commission is the best person to contact about stormwater.

7:03pm: Lauren Weston presents agriculture and forestry slide. Districts provide soil and plant health monitoring and are here to be connectors in the community which can be a fun and challenging job. Discussion questions from this meeting will go to NRCS and the Agency of Agriculture as well as informing goals as Districts.

7:06pm: End of presentations and opening room for discussion. Starting the discussion with the positives, what is beautiful/appreciated about the northwest zone of Vermont? Answers from community members:

- the woods
- fewer people
- mixed landscape
- farms on all different landscapes
- hold out county in the state in terms of agriculture, lots of farms
- French heritage and not quitting easily
- hobby farms
- diversified farms
- service to community on so many levels
- quality
- sap and syrup
- connecting farm and community
- diversity of farm operations
- farms come together for education and collaboration
- The landscape has changed because of young farmers. There has been a decrease of dairy farms, but young people have diversified the landscape
- Farming has survived here because of the soils. Dairy farming is a lot of work.
- quality milk
- The infrastructure is not here for dairy nor the mills for flour. Lacking the infrastructure to produce quality diversified grains.
- Great that there are young people interested (Molly Varner joining Grand Isle NRCD. Heather Darby makes things happen.)
- Committed board members being here for 40 years.
- The northeast was the breadbasket of the US. There were 480 Farm Bureau members in Grand Isle at one point

- Challenges of diversity, soil health, and climate resiliency
- Need to be preventing soil loss, we aren't rotating crops the way we should.
- There is a problem with the way we are importing grain and the imbalance between cows and land.
- We need to push the infrastructure for grains, cornmeal, etc. Heather Darby grew Red Wheat and is thinking about other crops, but we need the infrastructure.
- Challenges affording land. We need to make smaller farms profitable.
- People are open to new ideas here unlike other places. We need collaboration and discussion and learning not just the infrastructure.
- We need to rotate crops and only have the animals the land can support.
- It is a challenge that business plans don't incorporate conservation. The monetary pressure can be at odds with conservation.
- Nutrient planning makes economic sense. If we aren't feeding the soil, we are wasting money.
- Nutrient management planning is just a piece of the conservation plan. Resource management plans in Oklahoma are a more holistic way to think about planning, but it takes time looking at all the pieces of a diversified farm.
- Thinking about ecosystem services and ways to pay people for conservation. Do we need something more than pay for phosphorus?
- Prices for corn and other feeds are fertilizers are going to increase. There are a bunch more people looking at injection to utilize manure more supply and prices may drive good management practices.

Wynea Buford: There are currently six NRCS planners have 30+ conservation plans each and each planner is wearing every hat. Hopefully this working group will help drive those areas we need to focus in. There are NRCD staff going through the conservation planner training to increase capacity. We are trying to hire more people across the state, but at this point we can't meet the needs. This group will help drive what areas that need more focus. This needs to be a continuous conversation and this working group is to identify what's missing in the ranking.

- VACD hired a lobbyist to raise the voices of NRCDs in VT. Politics and bureaucracy are unfortunately how the system works.
- The Farm Bureau is hearing that not all farms can do a complete nutrient management plan. Discussion on the 2018 farm bill changed to progressive farm planning, so a farmer doesn't need a finished plan before they can access NRCS programs.

7:35pm: Lauren Weston thanks everyone for attending the meeting and the hosts. Wynea Buford thanks Molly Varner, Lauren Weston, and Peter Danforth for putting this meeting together. She shares with the group that Sarah Larose will become the NRCS Northwest Zone District Conservationist starting on Monday (3/28/2022).

7:37pm: Discussion that online survey closes Monday so that there is time to review responses for FY2024. The survey may remain open longer for recommendations for future years. The next steps after this meeting are going to be meeting with the USDA representatives. This information from the meeting goes to Sarah Larose at NRCS. Proposals for FY23 are due in June 2022. The district managers would like to keep hosting these in person meetings annually if not more frequently.

7:38pm: The meeting is concluded.