

WCNRCD Board Meeting

May 15, 2024 6:30 PM

Geof Dolman's House: 301 Barrows Rd, Brattleboro, VT 05301
and over Zoom

Present: Cory Ross, District Manager; Geof Dolman, Meg Kluge, & Linda Corse, board supervisors.

Zoom Participants: Katie Morrison, Pieter van Loon, board supervisors; John Ragonese, License Manager, Great River Hydro, Jennifer Griffin, Licensing and Compliance, Great River Hydro; Cat Abott, Putney Mountain Association; Phylixia Moore, NRCS; and Heather Blunk, WCNRCD Ag Resource Specialist.

NRCS Update from Phylixia:

- Moving through preapprovals, looking at applications for the Farm Bill program, including Equip, AMA, RCPP.
- Missed other updates from Phylixia
- Program assistant: finishing up the background check process, sounds like they just got cleared.

Relicensing Process (John Ragonese):

- Going to respond to the comment letter draft.
- Look at the best times to generate based on price and demand.
- Projects have a fluctuation range of a couple feet each day.
- A lot of travel time considerations. Water that starts at one stream can take a day to get to locations downstream.
- Biggest change to: from daily peak to run of river operation. Have some discretionary hours but it's limited (less than 5 hours per year).
- Wintertime: gas prices high, volatile markets, prices and demand can go up.
- GRH is proposing a fish friendly turbine at Bellows Falls to allow downstream passage of American Eel and Shad.
- Regarding Windham County NRCD's draft comments about erosion: CRC had a third party consultant that reviewed their studies. GRH did extensive studies, site specific studies that looked at the kinds of sediments in these rivers and identified these stages to erosion that have been occurring for a very long time, since Lake Hitchcock drained. This is a cyclical erosion process that requires periodic, annual high flow events. GRH notes that some notching has occurred as a result of their daily fluctuations and anticipates these will be reduced if not eliminated by the planned change in operations. Notches can also be caused by wake boats and other water uses. Bench formation needs to occur before the bank can become stable.
- The bank on the slope below the Vernon dam receded after the change in operations at the Northfield Dam. GRH reports just as much erosion above their projects as they see below their projects, and FERC concurs with this finding. FERC accepted all of GRH's responses to the study cited by CRC. We see flows that are 9 times our project

operation on these rivers. Monitoring may capture this but will not relate to the project operation.

- Regarding investments in recreation: GRH does have significant recreation currently and are proposing significant improvements, including improvements to make them ADA accessible. GRH hasn't worked on terrestrial invasive species thus far. Talking about improving portage conditions at all of our projects. GRH doesn't believe FERC is likely to issue some of these requirements because they are outside of land GRH owns. GRH has an enhancement fund and FERC was not involved in this fund. GRH is the primary sponsor of the Connecticut River Paddle Show. GRH has a number of their own sites. GRH supports VCE financially. GRH is a major program sponsor for Grafton County(?).
- Number one expense is local and state property taxes, which can make up as much as 40% of their total profit. GRH believes these funds can be used for the types of improvements Windham NRCD is seeking.
- FERC is likely to require a recreation plan already. GRH won't propose a plan until such time as FERC finds its appropriate to develop.
- Some of the language in the letter about Upper Meadows is misleading. GRH believes it would still implement delayed mow practices even without NRCS funding. The farmer receives the grant funding, not GRH. GRH thinks it would be better to have the flexibility and does not think this should be a mandate. A balance should exist between supporting ag and resource protection. GRH's lease has a very specific approach to how the farmer has to do things. GRH would appreciate it if our comments did not suggest that delayed mow is at risk without a FERC mandate.
- GRH believes the expansion of the project boundaries to include all properties GRH owns flowage rights on is highly unlikely to be enacted by FERC. GRH believes the idea that they can flood these properties as needed is "nonsense." GRH does not flood some of these properties on purpose, but they flood because of 100 or 500 year floods that occur naturally. GRH works to mitigate these effects in partnership with the Army Corps of Engineers.
- Questions: Cat Abbott can confirm that we have 3 Eastern Meadowlarks that are nesting at Upper Meadows. These have not been present since 2020. Nesting was documented in 2020, the last time Windham County had documented nesting. Cat has been working with farmers in Vernon to try to establish new nesting sites but nothing else has developed thus far. Cat would like to share some language with John that explains how a lease and EQIP requirements are different. GRH wonders why the focus on Upper Meadows when they have large parcels across the river that have not attracted the same attention. These are prime ag lands and GRH doesn't charge the farmer at all. GRH wants to support ag.
- GRH is thankful that we invited them to hear their side of the process. This is a big change, you'll see more habitat and more recreational opportunities.

Approval of Comment Letter:

- We can make changes to the comment letter.
- Linda: has heard these presentations several times, has thoughts but not specific feedback.
- One perspective: limit comments to points related to Windham County.

- They think changes will limit erosion and would like a chance to monitor the impact of changes.
- What is the best way for GRH to move forward to address concerns?
- Less fluctuation on a regular basis will reduce erosion/ improve the situation, but seems important to document the changes/impact.
- Meg: If more money is committed to something, increased monitoring (point A) doesn't seem like a priority.
- John stated that there will be a recreational plan once it seems appropriate (which doesn't seem super helpful and doesn't seem to conflict with our request for a recreation plan). We should actively encourage them to write a recreation plan as they stated they will.
- Management of the Upper Meadows: Kat: bottom line is that it's all about money. There is a flexible farmer who is willing to do delayed mowing; needs a certain amount of money to cover fuel, transportation, labor costs, etc. The ask is to make sure the money is there from GRH in the future so this program can continue.
- 2 fields in Herrick's cove that have been under delayed mow in the past. But the current compromise - fields planted in conventional corn - that package expires in 2025. GRH owns a lot of land. The fields across the river would be perfect; they are currently managed right now for conventional corn. The balance between agriculture and habitat is important. Meadowlarks need 80 acres to breed, a compromise at Upper Meadows won't work for them.
- We need a regional plan that encompasses both sides of the river.
- Change the wording - we don't want farmers to be required to do delayed mowing unless they're compensated properly. Current compensation \$178/acre. For any dairy farmer, that amount of money (\$15,000/yr) is huge. Tie it to NRCS schedules to make sure they continue to get paid.
- Is it possible that the ecology will change? What if 30 years from now these grassland birds are gone from Windham County. Tie it to VT Fish and Wildlife Species of Greatest Need (which would reflect any major shift). Cat can have Roz from Fish and Wildlife/ Wildlife Action Plan write that portion of the comments.
- #3 - will be taken t out because it seems like it doesn't have a chance.

Revisions to Pay and Benefit Policy:

- Cory needs to present a draft budget at the June meeting, so helpful to have salary numbers now.
- Committee - Have been working on pay for DMs throughout the state. There is a range of \$60-90,000.
- Talk about changing the DM title to Executive Director.
- Cory adapted range across the pay scales.
- This is a 20% increase, but should help in future hiring.
- Currently hiring at \$19.06, would be difficult at that rate. Cory increased it to a 9% increase.
- Our billable rate will cover these increases, the district might just have to focus more on what the grants are paying for.

- In terms of concerns about whether we can afford this in the long term: if needed, can decide to to move to the next step during tighter financial periods.

Plant Sale Follow Up:

- Linda: hard to improve, great job!
- \$10,000 profit after staff time is taken into consideration.
- Note cards: bring the cards back - will also have a list of what has been picked up.
- Geoff: at his table - wants a list of customers with details, to have an overview, much quicker to check a customer off and see who has picked up.
- Coach runners that they need to confirm that they're picking up an order.
- Extra plants: Katie will be delivering them to schools next week. The extra trees aren't in high demand, Cory says they might be able to use them for plantings.

Minutes

- **Motion to accept the minutes from March 13 and April 10, 2024 meetings. Motion approved.**

VACD and NRCC Updates:

Motion to enter executive session for personnel issues; motion approved.

Motion to leave executive session. Motion approved.

Motion to send letter to White River NRCD as discussed in executive session. Motion approved.

Motion to approve Slate Rock Timber LLC's bid for the Dummerston gully project as discussed in executive session. Slate Rock Timber LLC's bid was for \$21,000, which was the low bid for the project. Motion approved.

Greeter Program

- They have 4 names. 3 with the program last year, re-hired. The fourth comes recommended through the town of Wilmington. We need another greeter (1 greeter had to bow out at the last minute). The following individuals were recommended for hire by Cory Ross:
 - Magnus von Krusenstiern
 - Alejandro Hernandez
 - Joanne Fowler
 - Armand Tognan

Motion to approve as outlined in the board packet. Motion approved.

District Manager Report:

- Cory wrote a proposal for Watershed United Vermont Clean Water Workforce Capacity Development grant. Include investments including a shed to store the stream table, waders, kayaks, etc. Contract with CPA to look at books to design a system so it's more efficient and a contract with a qualified firm or individual to facilitate updated strategic planning.

Next meeting:

Wed June 5 at Geof's place.

Motion to Adjourn. Motion Approved

Respectfully Submitted,

Katie Morrison