

WCNRCD Board Meeting

March 13th, 2024 6:30 PM

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

Present: Cory Ross: District Manager; Isabel Bowman: Conservation Specialist; Heather Blunk: Agricultural Resource Specialist; Meg Kluge, Geof Dolman, Katie Morrison: Board Members.

Zoom Participants: Phyllicia Moore; NRCS Zone Conservationist, Joseph Bondi; Drew Adam, VACD Planner; Pieter van Loon, Linda Corse, Board members.

NRCS Update:

- Working through Brattleboro lease negotiations, Phyllicia will update once she has news.
- Locally Led Funding Pool - looking forward to seeing what comes out of that (April 2).
- March 24th - transitioning full time to the DC position.
- Get back to Phyllicia with feedback.
- Access to alearn - talking about how that can happen without a gov computer.
- Program assistant: interviewed 2 people, came to a consensus on an individual, hopefully an offer will be out soon.
- Phyllicia is also participating in interviews for implementation specialist, VT position, through AFT. Currently there is one in the central zone, but they've been promoted to be a supervisor for the newly hired implementation specialist. Helping folks implement NRCS contracts - esp support for folks who are behind schedule and need support. Can also provide technical support. They'll be based in Rutland but working throughout the state.

DEI Self Assessment:

- It is a large survey, going to fill it out in sections.
- Will fill out at every board meeting now through November.

0-Haven't yet started, 3- Have started this, 5-Have integrated this, 7-Have documented and formalized this

1. We have a clear and est procedure for reporting discriminatory or harmful behaviors:

3. have started. Franklin County hired someone to draft a policy, might be good to take from theirs.

2. We have a system in place to hold coworkers and superiors accountable when inappropriate workplace behavior is reported.

3. have started.

3. We have trained in and understand the processes for reporting and accountability.

- 1.
4. We encourage a healthy work/life balance.
 5. Have integrated this. Not documented in district policy but feel like Cory encourages it and has established it as org culture.
5. We build space into the workplace for staff to share their diverse skills, perspectives, and stories
 6. We do it, it's documented in minutes but not in policy.
5. We hold space for staff to celebrate and learn about holidays, histories and cultures.
 1. Have done a couple things but could do more with this.
6. We have a monthly study group where people meet to learn about DEI work.
 1. Not doing that much. NRCS has held a diversity day in the past that NRCD is welcome to join.
7. We have a monthly group where staff can study anti-racists works and unlearn white supremacy.
 0. Doesn't happen. Monthly feels like it would be a lot in terms of time.
8. We have incorporated the [safe space model](#) into our work communications.
 0. Haven't talked about this yet.
9. Communications styles and preferences sheet - have reviewed it
10. Basics of a safe space - have reviewed
11. Safe space video - haven't reviewed.
12. [White Privilege - Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#) - haven't reviewed.
13. What are we doing that is working?
 - The willingness of district staff and board members to engage in this process is positive.
 - We have a collegial atmosphere that we have all built together and we appreciate when each other shares our skills and experience.
 - DEi is regularly brought up as an issue and idea that we should be incorporating into district programming and meeting agendas.
14. What barriers and challenges are we facing?

- Lack of capacity and funding for more regularly engaging in this work.
- Lack of diversity in our board, staff and the population we serve.
- Lack of tolerance for diversity of staff background in some of our clients (a script would be helpful in guiding responses to this sort of encounter).

15. Who could we collaborate with in this process to further develop our efforts?

- Lost River Racial Justice, local Abenaki groups,

16. How could we implement changes into our work to progress further in this area.

- Continue to devote time in monthly meeting to this work, work towards district policies that are needed, incorporate into staff and board training, create a DEI committee to work on this issue in between meetings.

Land Access:

Mike Ghia, Land for Good:

- Lives in Saxton River, Farmed full time for 8 years (late 90s/early 2000s) and did sugaring for 17 years. Since 2009 working for Land for Good as a VT field agent, a small non-profit in NE. Works on farmland access and tenure issues. A lot of work with VLT and other conservation orgs in the area. Also helps with succession/ farm transfer planning. Does work with non-farming landowners. 1/3 of farmland is owned by non-farming landowners and is leased to farmers. Part of his work is encouraging written legal agreements between landowners and farmers.
- Funding - often able to find funding such as through the VT Farm and Forest Viability program.
- Website has resources for farmers and landowners, both from Land for Good and other orgs.
- Does training around the country.
- Manages website - NE Farm Finder. Property owners can post their property and farmers can post their profile; the Vermont Land Link site also helps connect land and farmers (but the website currently has some bugs).
- One way the district could help support Land for Good is finding a way to get more landowners to post their land to rent.
- Another way NRCD could be involved is helping connect new farmers with older farmers who are looking to retire and transfer their farm.

Maggie Donin, VLT, Farmland Access Director

- Works with the Farmland Access Program at VLT.
- Need for this work: dairy farming is still the biggest chunk of farm landscape, but the reduced number of dairy farms has resulted in a change in land use. A lot of dairy farmers are looking to retire (~300 in the next 5 years). Finding affordable land is a top challenge for young farmers.

- Tools: purchase easements and development rights to make a farm more affordable, update older easements, farm seeker and seller matchmaking, assistance with land transactions, interim ownership of land with lease to own option.
- Today's challenges: increasing real estate prices (10% increase year over year), hard for small farms to compete with large farms, lack of housing, purchasing power of folks from other parts of NE (Vermonters can't compete).
- Recent innovations have included interim ownership of land, exploring shared equity models, applying lessons/strategies from the affordable housing model, adjusting definitions for what is considered a farm and considering smaller properties as farms.
- 30 by 30/ 50 by 50 and Act 250: A big challenge is balancing farm viability with climate change, and dealing with weather challenges. Integrating weddings and on-farm events is one solution, but brings up the question: how do we define a farm? Navigating policies can be difficult for new farmers, especially related to accessory on farm businesses.
- Mike - concerned that reforming Act 250 will result in additional homes built for second home owners. Seems like the proposed reforms are balanced - allowing for new affordable homes to be built, clustered in villages but not resulting in an explosion of a lot of new second homes.
- 30 by 30 and 50 by 50 - doesn't think monocultures should be counted in those goals.

District Manager's Report:

- Women's Landowner Summit - takeaways: heard a talk from Julie Michaelson who works with Xerces, which is a pollinator group. Important to encourage pollinators from the ground up - soil, leaf litter, up to the canopy. Women often outlive men and thus end up being landowners but often feel intimidated. Women-only workshops would be useful: women-only tractor/equipment workshop; women-only land transfer workshop. VLT is involved in the Womens in the Woods (WOW) program, and Pieter thinks there is a Women in Ag Group as well, will look into it.
- Cory sent out the water quality survey and got 480 responses that look like they're fraudulent; Cory will report that with the attorney general's office.

VACD and NRCC Updates:

- The House Ag committee did recommend the fund request but the request was cut; money is tight this year. Cory will reach out to the chair of the appropriations committee to push for funding to be included.
- VACD has posted a communications manager position (full time); Cory will be on the interview panel for that.

February Minutes:

- **Motion to accept Feb minutes.**
- **Motion passed.**

Next Meeting:

- **Wed, April 10, 6:30 at Geof's.**

Meeting Adjourned at 8:42pm

Respectfully Submitted, Katie Morrison