

SE Regional VAWQP
December 7th, 2021
Zoom meeting 9:00am -12:00pm
Hosted by: White River NRCD
Contact: Jennifer Byrne - whiterivernrcd@gmail.com



Agenda:

- Tools for Coordination: Local Work Groups, Partner Database, Tactical Basin Planning
- What are the biggest hurdles you face in administering or accessing conservation programs? What bottlenecks exist in your work in conservation delivery?
- Where do private, state, and federal programs work well together? Where do they clash or overlap? Where are there gaps in funding?

Attendance:

Abbie Corse, VT Climate Council
Alli Lewis, VACD
Amber Reed, Grazing Specialist, UVM & White River NRCD
Amer Suvalic, Engineer, VAAFM
Aaron Guman, VHCB
Bill Cavanaugh, NOFA VT
Caroline Gordon, Rural VT
Cat Buxton, VT Healthy Soils Coalition
Christine Lary, FSA
Cory Ross, Windham NRCD
Courtney LeCuyer, FSA
Danielle Owczarski, Tactical Basin Planner, DEC
David Blodgett, District Conservationist, USDA-NRCS
Heather Blunk, Windham NRCD
Jacob Senecal, Engineer, USDA-NRCS
Jennifer Byrne, White River NRCD
Josie Watson, Vermont Law School
Judson Peck, VAAFM
Julie Follensbee, DEC
Kelley Gilhooly, Conservation Planner, VACD
Laura Johnson, UVM Extension
Linda Corse, CRWFA, Windham NRCD, VACD
Lisa Niccolai, White River NRCD
Lyle Nichols, White River NRCD
Luke Hughes, VAAFM
Maggie Hayes, Soil Conservationist, USDA-NRCS
Marie Caduto, DEC Tactical Basin Planner
Marilla Muschett, DEC Americorps
Marli Rupe, DEC

Mary Russ, White River Partnership
Paul Doton, Chair of CRWFA
Phylicxia Moore, District Conservationist, USDA-NRCS
Sarah Flack, Grazing Specialist, Private Consultant
Stephanie Vasilopoulos, Soil Conservationist, USDA-NRCS
Sue Greenall, Ottauquechee NRCD

Tools for Coordination

- Local Working Groups discussion
 - Jennifer Byrne presented on [LWG Directives](#)
 - Conduct local needs assessment
 - Provide recommendations for state and federal policy to State Technical Committee
 - Provide input into conservation practice payment schedules
 - Members of the local work group must submit a request

Group thoughts on Local Work Group:

- Important opportunity to get local priorities into NRCS priorities.
- It will take some time to get organized and figure out how we work together – since we haven't done this in a while. Also an opportunity to highlight the work that has been done and what works. Highlight good work of farmers and highlight the practices they are using and why they get good water quality results.
- Many farmers don't know about these great programs out there (e.g funds for rotational grazing). There could be informational sessions too. LWG members could assist with outreach to farmers about programs.
- In the past these kinds of forums have been nothing but wordsmithing. Not very worthwhile. Districts who are charged with the NRCS directive need to be funded – they're at capacity.
- LWG is to "Assist NRCS and the conservation district with public outreach and information efforts and identify educational and producers' training needs."
- Lots of overlap between LWG and other state funded work groups - can we streamline?
- The hope is that the LWG becomes a state funded opportunity for public participation.

Farmers experience with state and federal programs (difficulties, wisdom)

- Hard to locate programs and put into practice on the farm.
- "We get emails every day saying there is money out there but how do we get it?"
- Veteran farmers don't have time to go through lists of what may/may not be available, never mind young, new or beginning farmers.
- As a farmer repeating the same forms for projects seems like a waste of time.
- Agency conflict between DEC and VAAF is confusing - who is in charge of medium farm operations (MFO)?
- Problems arise when VT farmers also have land in NH.
- There are some producers who do not work with the federal government. So, in this case state overlapping programs are helpful.

- Difficult to decide between production vs involvement in a conservation program.
- By the time you hear all the requirements you give up. Yes there's a program, but it will take 5 years. Not a hurdle, it's a wall.
- Most programs would go more smoothly if I work with someone who knows the technical side.
- Lack of responsiveness to proactivity.

Programs

- Hard to find most appropriate program for funding projects on farms.
- Every year programs change so quickly it is hard to keep up with these changes and finding these changes can be difficult.
- Viability is important, but Conservation is not included in the Viability Program, which silos the business planners from the conservation planners.
- Lack of specialists and training for specialists to implement programs.
 - Not fair to not have enough training for new hires. New hires have to build knowledge over years of relationship building and program understanding. It takes years to understand the landscape.
- In making tactical basin plans, there is a lot of state, federal, and outside overlap in funding programs. Hard to decide which is most appropriate for a project, which program and source to go to.
- Strong partnerships with VACD and Conservation Districts have helped provide some support.
- There is a need for a list of funding and list of who is able to help farmers to implement.
- Long learning curve, keeping track of changing coverage of programs is difficult
 - Bottleneck of technical expertise, lacking tools to answer and refer to a third party, high turnover
- BMP and NRCS engineers are working well together for laneways, gutter (barnyard projects).
 - Engineering bottleneck always exists. Projects get kicked down the road & farmers get fed up.
 - Need basic engineering technicians to do simple engineering work like laneways, gutters, irrigation, diversions, patching up barnyards, water management
- VHCB view: clearly not enough capacity to provide technical service. Takes 6 - 12 hours to fill out an application, never mind managing funds and reporting. "Feels bad sending more forms to producers to fill out."
 - VHCB outreach is targeted at service providers and org partners (ag water quality, NOFA), not farmers. The TSP's find the right farm where applying would be 'worth it' for the farm.
- FSA perspective: Limited ability to find producers for disaster programs, logging & CREP. If a producer doesn't reach out to us, we don't know them.
- NRCS view: need to focus on prioritization/time management when dealing with applications.
- NRCS wants to put planning first: good in concept, difficult in practice due to workload, staffing

- A lot of programs come out and then how do the TSP's find the farm within the deadline time? The right farm? Farms may not score high enough leaving farmers disheartened. It's hard to plan. Shifting focus too much (from one program or deadline to the next) creating difficulties in management.
 - Districts are an entity that have a little more flexibility in whom can get funds , more flexibility than NRCS, state etc.
 - Participants wonder if Districts can hold SFO lists
- State programs are more flexible, work well when NRCS is not a fit, but the rates are intentionally lower.

Program recommendations:

- There is a lack of integration of various informational funding pages
 - It would be nice to have VAAFM create a form that has all the info that compares programs and which programs fit the particular situation the farmer is in.
 - One form/program entry point to input farmer info/data/ project ideas so that their eligibility can be determined for which programs
 - (Health Connect example) compare programs, select three programs you're interested in, check boxes of what is covered and what isn't. Would help farms pull out what they need, specifications of compliance. Visual table of what programs cover, eligibility for other programs that are available.
- What farmers need to do could be streamlined, especially for those working with multiple agencies. Work could be shared by all of the agencies. The need to keep separate records for each agency (VAAFM, FSA, NRCS etc) silos farmers.
- Could ask farmers to sign up as cooperators with the Conservation District to access programs, develop conservation plans.
- More Agriculture Outreach specialists would help with program outreach
 - Outreach never covers everything, so why not consolidate it?
- Working well between state and federal programs is when the scheduling aligns and everybody can get out on the farm at the same time.
- Conflict with NRCS planned something to manage a resource concern and then the DEC not being satisfied with the 'fix', leaving the farmer in the middle. Could this be solved by [Farm Teams](#)? A proactive approach rather than a reactive approach. Protect the farmer.
- BMP and EQIP seem to work well together. Open line of communication between regulators and TSP's is very helpful in trying to bridge the gaps.