



Connecticut River Joint Commissions

Claremont Savings Bank Community Center

Claremont, NH

Monday, October 16, 2017

Meeting Minutes

Commissioners Present:

NH–Jim McClammer, Jennifer Griffin, Barbara Robinson, Robert Harcke, Lionel Chute.
VT–David Deen, Jason Rasmussen, Steven Lembke, Chris Company, Beth Kennett.

Commissioners Absent: Alison Low, Kari Dolan, Michael Storace, John Mudge, Tara Bamford. **Guests:** Commissioner Lorraine Merrill, Secretary Anson Tebbetts, Marie Caduto, Sharon Francis, Steven Schneider, Paul Doton, Ed MacGlaflin, Tom Beaudry, Kathy Urffer, Sharon Frasier; Timothy Laroche, Eagle Times.

Valuation of the Connecticut River:

A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Joint-State Clean Water Spending

Presented by Jimmy Fair and Julia Decerega of the

Rockefeller Center at Dartmouth Policy Research Shop

Presenters distributed their research paper and provided an oral overview of their findings. Based on the analysis, the Connecticut River provides significant economic value to the State of NH. (An earlier analysis from the VT perspective confirmed similar impacts.)

A question and answer session followed the presentation. Among these were: Does the scenery/aesthetics of a farm along the river change its value? In general, the members of the farming community believe that the value of the land along a river is based on the agricultural productivity of the river bottom land. The lands along the Connecticut River Valley are some of the most valuable farm land in the world according to American Farmland Trust.

NH Commissioner of Agriculture Lorraine Merrill; VT Secretary of Agriculture Anson Tebbetts: *Issues faced by farmers and agribusiness as they strive to sustain a responsible and workable landscape in the Connecticut River Valley.*

Commissioner Merrill stated that NH Farm families take great pride in their land and

water stewardship. They have been using best management practices for decades. Northern New England farms have some of the highest costs of inputs of agriculture in the country. Farmers have adopted many of the best practices they can to improve the value of their land. Cover crops are used but can be difficult because of the weather – such as the cold wet summer experience this season. The primary crop harvest delay makes it difficult to predict how successful cover crops will be because the weather may be too cold by the time they are sown.

NH and VT differ in regulations. NH emphasis is on voluntary compliance. New Hampshire's Department of Agriculture has no enforcement authority. Enforcement is the responsibility of the Department of Environmental Services. Agriculture offer grants to assist with Best Management Practices (BMPs). They sponsor a manure exchange directory on their website. Merrill noted that while farms can impact water quality, EPA says that greatest threats to water are from urban soil. In NH only 7% of land remains in farmland.

Secretary Anson Tebbetts stated that if you go up on the VT side of the Connecticut River you will find very diverse operations from small family farms to very large operations. Much of VT land along the Connecticut is preserved in Conservation Trust, but it is also working land. Vermont is currently spending about \$5.2 million on water quality projects across the state. A program began in June to recognize and incentivize those farmers who go above and beyond in their efforts to reduce nutrient load by rewarding them with financial benefits and technical assistance.

As soon as the corn is cut they will begin testing the soils. Rewards may be one of several financial incentives. They also have a grant program to enhance farms that are looking to make capital improvements.

On the regulatory side, Vermont will begin site visits to small farms. Now all size farms will face review. Currently there is an over supply of milk for over the past 3 years. Both regular and organic milk has been subject to price collapse. This is a national and global situation. Some farms are doing things to add value, for example, artisanal cheese has been expanding to put the excess milk to work.

Tile drainage is a topic under discussion, and research is underway by UVM to determine its effectiveness. Members of the Connecticut River Watershed Farmers Alliance present urged that the study be expanded to the eastern side of the state as the soil compositions are quite different from those on the western side.

Approximately \$1 million each year is available in VT for grants for possible watershed

groups. These are listed on the Agency website. Infrastructure improvements and research by provider groups are the typical focus.

Support for environmental programs will remain in the farm bill and the conservation part of the bill is vitally important to what we do in the Northeast. The safety net program in the last farm bill has been a failure. The dairy component is going to be a fight as well as the specialty crop program. Joint Commissions might help support these aspects of the farm bill.

Commissioner Deen spoke about tile drains but there really needs to be some solid research on their impact. It may require a moratorium on tile drains while the research is conducted. UVM doing research, but raised that they tend to focus very locally and the soils are very different along the Connecticut River.

There is some resistance among farmers to apply for federal grants. CDFA grants have not been used in agricultural economic development. Sharon Francis spoke about a conference that CRJC convened several years earlier to look into opening new markets for agricultural products and suggested it might be convened to work with Connecticut River Farmers. Secretary Tebbetts cited access to interstate highways I-91 /I-89 provide access to large markets in Massachusetts and Connecticut for Vermont products. The most significant technical assistance requested from the State of Vermont is help in complying with federal food regulations.

Commissioner McClammer asked about labor shortages. Both Tebbetts and Merrill cited low unemployment, people unable to pass drug tests, migrant workers having great difficulty getting approved, and the difficulty that is posed by the national debate on immigration as exacerbating the labor shortages. And, although there is a program for seasonal farm workers, there is no labor program for year-round workers such as on dairy farms.

Former Agriculture Secretary Chuck Ross is developing a strategic plan for UVM Extension but it was noted that there has been no real focus on the Eastern side of the side of the state. Secretary Tebbetts noted that Dartmouth is an important asset that might be tapped to help bring focus to the Connecticut River Valley.

Both Merrill and Tebbetts agreed that there is not necessarily a shortage of young people who want to farm, but they need to know that they can succeed financially. And, in some cases the lack of support for farmers on a consistent basis has been a problem with our national farm bills.

Erosion and loss of farmland due to erosion were discussed. The farmers present noted that erosion is greater above the dams than below them, indicating that the changing water levels have a noticeable effect.

Commissioner Rasmussen thanked Merrill and Tebbetts for their willingness to join us at the meeting.

Business Meeting convened at 3:40 P.M.

- Adopt Minutes of August 21 Meeting

Comm. Lembke moved to approve the minutes as presented. Comm. McClammer seconded the motion. Vote: Unanimous

- Accept the August 2017 Financial Statement

Comm. Campany moved to accept the August Financial Statements. Comm. Lembke seconded the motion. Vote: Unanimous.

- Correspondence / August Follow Up

A thank you note from the Sloat family for CRJC condolences was presented.

Comm. McClammer requested staff to draft thanks to both presenters.

Discussion about future Commissioners/Secretaries attending CRJC meetings followed. The ANR and DES will be invited to the February meeting and asked to specifically focus on Connecticut River issues. CRJC will provide a couple of specific questions for that event, including how both states work on cooperative activities.

- **Officer Vacancy**

Due to an employment change Christopher Yurek will no longer be able to serve as a Commissioner or as CRJC Treasurer. Comm. Griffin volunteered to move into that position and was appointed by the Executive Committee without objection.

With the recent resignation of Rick Walling, CRJC also needs to nominate someone for service on the Upper Connecticut Mitigation and Enhancement Fund. Comm. Robinson volunteered to serve which seemed appropriate since the MEF deals with projects in her service area. Comm. David Deen moved to appoint Barbara Robinson to that position. Comm. Chris Campany seconded the motion. Vote: Unanimous.

- **Water Quality Certification Route 12 Walpole/Charlestown Project**

Comm. McClammer noted that the water quality certification for the project between Walpole and Charlestown was comprehensive, but was not consistent with the alteration of terrain rules. There is concern about run off despite the current design. A

draft letter to DOT was reviewed and with minor edits approved by the Commissions.

Comm. Robinson moved and Comm. Lembke seconded the motion to approve and to send the letter. Vote: Unanimous.

- **Staffing LRS**

Comm. Robinson presented NCC's plan to facilitate the Local River Subcommittees. Alex Belensz lives in Lebanon he will be the lead planner and will facilitate Upper Valley, Mt. Ascutney, and Wantastiquet. Nick Altonaga will work with Alex and will take the upper region Riverbend and Headwaters. Nick resides in Conway. The objective is to manage the subcommittees well. They will provide a written summary report from the LRS's at each of the Joint Commissions meetings. The question of the effectiveness of the subcommittees was always an issue. One suggestion was to engage the subcommittees to work on recommendations in line with corridor management plans. In past years subcommittees were helpful in implementing those plan objectives.

Staff was asked to resend a request to Commissioners regarding the desire for emails on subcommittees.

December meeting suggested agenda – Jessica Savage on the VT Outdoor Economy initiative. Vermont Governor recognizes the significant revenue generated from outdoor economy and is holding public forums on this topic. Comm. Rasmussen will contact Ms. Savage and staff will investigate whether there is a similar initiative in place in NH.

Adjourn: Comm. Company moved to adjourn at 4:30 p.m. seconded by Comm. Deen.

Adopted: Monday, December 18, 2017 at CRJC in Lebanon.