

# Vermont Citizens Advisory Committee (VTCAC) on Lake Champlain's Future

Monday April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021

5:00 pm – 7:00 pm

## MEETING SUMMARY

**Committee Members Present:** Mark Naud (Chair), Eric Clifford, Wayne Elliott, Lori Fisher, David Mears, Rep. Carole Ode, Hilary Solomon

**Committee Members Absent:** Bill Howland (Vice-Chair), Bob Fischer, Jeff Wennberg, Sen. Ginny Lyons, Sen. Randy Brock, Rep. Leland Morgan

**LCBP Staff in Attendance:** Sarah Coleman (VTANR), Katie Darr, Eric Howe, Lauren Jenness

**Speakers:** Ryan Patch

**Public Guests:** No public guests

Meeting summary by Katie Darr, Lake Champlain Basin Program (LCBP)

### 5:00 – 5:20 pm

#### **Welcome and Introductions – Mark Naud**

Mark welcomed everyone in attendance. Members requested an update on the International Joint Commission (IJC) Lake Champlain-Richelieu River study, citing the tension between structural and non-structural, nature-based solutions and the potential influence of social and cultural pressures.

#### **Public Comments**

No public comments were made.

#### **Review and vote on Draft March 8<sup>th</sup> VTCAC Meeting Summary – Mark Naud**

There was not a quorum, the vote will be held at the next meeting.

### 5:15 – 5:45 pm

#### **Payment for Ecosystem Services Update – Ryan Patch, Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets**

Ryan provided an update on the Payment for Ecosystem Services and Soil Health Working Group. The Working Group expanded membership from 11 categories to 16. Working Group meeting schedules, materials, recordings, and a list of current members can be found here <https://agriculture.vermont.gov/PES>. The meetings are open to the public.

**Legislative Updates:** H.420 contains a provision at the request of VTAAFM and PES Working Group to extend the deadline of the final report until Jan 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023. This one-year extension has been requested due to the impact of COVID-19 on VTAAFM's resources and the group's ability to meet. The extension would allow the group to lay out the research work plan, engage in that work, and make a recommendation to the Legislature on the 8 specific areas of inquiry they are charged to look into. H.420 passed in the House and now on the Senate side.

**Review of Year 1:** The Working Group has focused its attention on healthy soils. In 2019/2020, the Working Group left off looking at (1) measurement versus modeling, (2) the pricing question of how to provide incentives for farmers to adopt these practices and maintain them, and (3) programmatic construction. The final report that the Working Group is tasked with is a proposal for how to answer those questions. The report will deliver recommendations to the Legislature on a

program that would provide a few defined ecosystem services correlated to healthy soils, a mechanism and price by which to value and demonstrate additionality beyond existing State programs that would compensate farmers for delivering the identified ecosystem services, how much that would cost for the State to administer, and proposals for funding mechanisms.

**Work Planning:** There will be two more meetings this spring which will focus on three main areas of inquiry: measurement and modeling, administration, and economic questions to work on developing research topics that can hopefully be addressed through ongoing research and programs or the individual work of the membership organizations. Throughout the summer work will be undertaken by respective organizations to address the research topics. There will be three meetings in the fall, culminating in a report to the Legislature. Ryan reviewed three complimentary ongoing research initiatives that will inform the working group.

- Mark Naud asked how many participants are expected to take part in the pay for phosphorus program this summer.
  - Ryan noted that thirteen farms are currently signed up to participate in the pilot program that is being funded by a Conservation Innovation Grant. The Agency of Ag is hoping to have 50 farms apply and 40 farms enroll when the pay for phosphorus plan is rolled out in the winter.
- Hilary Solomon shared that the most recent Soil Health and Policy Work Group meeting discussed the research studies and multiple groups offering farmers compensation for soil health tests on their farms and emphasized the need to compile information about all the groups offering these services.
  - Ryan agreed a lot is going on in this space. The Agency is doing its best to coordinate with as many groups as possible to get farms enrolled in these different programs on a timeline that meets the goals of farm groups and the State to reach these soil health benchmarks.
- David Mears asked Ryan to discuss the intersection between the work of the PES group and the Climate Council.
  - Ryan shared that the vision of the PES Work Group is more broadly focused on the co-benefits that can be derived from the good management of agricultural soils. In addition to greenhouse gas mitigation, the PES Work Group also looks at other opportunities for resilience and adaptation and broader water quality benefits. The Climate Council is focused on holistic accounting of many of the considerations that come out of the agriculture and ecosystems subcommittee. Soil is key for both groups. One of the most cost-effective ways to look at adaptations and resilience benefits, including mitigating agricultural emissions, is by focusing on how to improve soil health and organic matter levels, how to measure those changes, and how that can be scaled up to other efforts for the State to engage in to build resilience and protect downstream infrastructure. There are many tools out there to inform the recommendations of both groups.
  - David commented on the difference between two climate strategies: one that is more technical and one that is more ecologically focused on soil health and ecological resilience. If we are thinking about how to invest public resources or what kind of regulatory decisions to make, there is value in the CAC being knowledgeable about what those options are. There may be opportunities to weigh in with policymakers in a way that optimizes the mutual benefits of greenhouse gas mitigation and clean water.
- Mark Naud asked if carbon sequestration is part of any soil health monitoring.
  - Ryan noted that the State does not currently have a way to model soil carbon levels. The State inventory does not account for the flux and storage of carbon on agricultural lands and how different management actions impact that. Soil management can have a profound impact on the amount of carbon released or stored. There is a real opportunity to start quantifying some of the agricultural practices that benefit clean water to see what farmers are already delivering in terms of contributions to carbon sequestration. Heather Darby has shared some of the research she has been doing on organic matter levels in soils in Vermont compared to other places. A soil carbon inventory is important to understand what is beneath the ground on agricultural and forested lands followed by the development of a protocol to catalog management practices as an avenue to understand what the current level of implementation is producing and what else farmers need to do to get to target levels of 90% by 2050.

**5:45 – 6:15 pm**

**Legislative Update and Follow-up – Mark Naud**

The members debriefed about the presentations of the 2021 Action Plan to the Legislature. Mark shared that the presentations went well and thanked everyone who presented. A key takeaway was the forthcoming infrastructure investments from COVID-19 funding. Members made points regarding the 3-Acre Permit and the pushback it is receiving due to the expense associated with its implementation but noted it is critical that the program succeeds. The CAC was able to spend less time trying to introduce who the CAC is and what it does and more substantive time for conversation because of the introductory letter distributed in advance with the Action Plan. Virtual meetings made it logistically easier to meet with multiple committees simultaneously. Meeting with a more diverse group may be helpful as the CAC and Legislature think about bigger picture, multiyear issues. When in-person presentations resume, the CAC would like to continue to meet with committees jointly. Alternatively, the CAC could have a forum or open house to be available as a presence on lake issues for the day and allow interested committees and legislatures to drop in. In the future, the committee would prefer more time for discussion.

Some members expressed concern that the CAC was not able to influence much this year due to the late presentation and the Legislature's predominant focus on COVID-19. Members expressed interest in earlier planning and internal work to ensure clear agendas and messages to present to key committees sooner. Members suggested spending late fall talking to key legislatures including committee chairs to make sure the CAC helps structure agendas and is scheduled to provide testimony. Meeting early on with individual legislatures will help inform their priorities.

**July Retreat Planning:** The July retreat will focus on tightening up a reflection of what is in play, what has been achieved, legislative initiatives, and focusing the CAC priorities and focus for the fall. Issues related to clean water funding would be helpful to have for context at the July retreat, including the limitations on the use of federal dollars. With the influx of money from COVID relief funding, it is important to ensure that this money goes to high-quality, impactful projects that support water quality improvements. Members agreed it is important to discuss the 3-Acre Rule, where it is in implementation, if funding is flexible, and how the CAC might recommend that funding be used. Other items to discuss related to CAC membership and intent include a potential change in calendar for the VTCAC to ensure that everyone on the CAC participates fully, clarifying expectations for the CAC, and ensuring members feel mutual responsibility. Members expressed interest in receiving updates on the 3-Acre Permit financing prior to the July retreat.

### **6:15 – 6:45 pm**

#### **Committee Membership and Governance – Mark Naud, Sarah Coleman, Katie Darr**

No updates on CAC appointments. The members had a facilitated discussion about the skills and talents they would like to see on the CAC. During the brainstorming exercise, the group identified the following gaps: local perspectives from local officials, regional planning commissions, and/or watershed groups; business community including travel and tourism; voices for underserved communities; environmental justice practitioners; recreation; education; cultural heritage; and broader geographic representation including North Chittenden County, the Islands, and North Franklin County. This list is not exhaustive. **Members are invited to email Katie ([kdarr@lcbp.org](mailto:kdarr@lcbp.org)) to share other gaps and interests they would be interested in seeing represented on the CAC.** The CAC agreed that members often wear multiple hats, and it is important to cultivate membership that covers a broad range of interests, experience, and knowledge related to Lake Champlain's water quality. The CAC will continue to discuss filling membership roles and identify individuals who may be potential candidates at future meetings.

Moving forward the CAC expects to continue hosting virtual or hybrid meetings to support broader attendance by members and the public.

### **6:45 – 7:00 pm**

#### **Meeting Wrap-Up Discussion – Mark Naud**

The next meeting is on May 10<sup>th</sup> and will feature an update about the IJC Lake Champlain-Richelieu River study. The June 14<sup>th</sup> meeting will likely include a presentation on 3-Acre funding and a discussion on membership.