

**Vermont Citizens Advisory Committee (VTAC) on
Lake Champlain's Future**

Monday, September 9, 2019, 5:00 pm – 7:00 pm

**Lake Champlain Community Sailing Center, Big Ed Classroom
505 Lake St., Burlington, VT 05401**

APPROVED MEETING SUMMARY

Committee Members Present: Sen. Randy Brock, Eric Clifford, Lori Fisher, Bill Howland (Vice Chair), Senator Ginny Lyons, David Mears, Rep. Leland Morgan, Mark Naud (Chair), Hilary Solomon

Committee Members Absent: Wayne Elliott, Bob Fischer, Rep. Carol Ode, Jeff Wennberg

Public Guests: Kent Henderson (Friends of Northern Lake Champlain), James Maroney (Leicester)

Meeting summary by Bethany Sargent, Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC).

1. Welcome and Introductions

Meeting began at 5:23 pm. VTAC Chair Mark Naud welcomed everyone. Introductions were made around the room.

2. Public Comments

James Maroney commented that he feels we have not made progress on the issue of agriculture and water quality. He went on to say that he felt conventional farming is damaging to the environment and that the State of Vermont does not recognize this or admitted to a systemic problem. The 2017 Water Quality Standards give an accommodation to conventional farming to continue business as usual. Moreover, the State does not regulate the importation of grain, importation of fertilizer, overstocking of animals. The ultimate responsibility for this issue is really with the legislature.

3. Review and vote on Draft July 22nd VTAC Annual Retreat Summary

Bethany to add Hilary Solomon and Rep. Leland Morgan to attendees.

Sen. Ginny Lyons expressed that the retreat was more of a quasi-business meeting, with some elements of a retreat. She suggested that it should either be a retreat, with a facilitator to lead a discussion on the role of the committee and no action outcomes, or an annual business meeting.

Mark Naud responded that we could have spent more time on the committee's role and how it's to be most effective.

Lori Fisher moved to accept the meeting summary with changes noted; Eric Clifford seconded; No abstentions. Motion carried.

4. Agriculture public forum planning sessions: Define a date, place, participants, framework, agenda, and co-sponsors

Mark Naud mentioned that because of Bob, Wayne and Jeff's absence, we would focus the discussion on agriculture tonight.

David Mears described the Vermont Dairy and Water Collaborative, which included Gil Livingston, David Marvin, and Roger Albee and brought together experts in the field, including representatives from co-ops, the Gund Institute, small and large farms, the High Meadows Fund. They produced a series of reports that were combined into seven or eight recommendations, which he summarized. The group is continuing, bringing in more diverse perspectives with the idea that if they could reach an agreement, they could provide more useful input. But it's been a more challenging conversation. They've had three additional meetings, with one more scheduled. They hope to continue the discussion driven by a shared vision.

In parallel, a different organization, chaired by the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board (VHCB) and UVM Extension, fielded a broader conversation about agriculture and the environment.

James Maroney commented that we need to determine whether we are trying to protect water quality or resurrect dairy. The State of Vermont has a duty to uphold the State Water Quality Standards. The state has no duty to shield any industry. The state must attain the standards, then dairy must accommodate them. Conventional dairy relies on the importation of nutrients and externalization of impacts.

David Mears replied that the fundamental premise of the group is the opposite – that we can have a farming future and clean water.

Sen. Ginny Lyons agreed that you can have clean water and dairy farming. The discussion needs that approach and must begin with science. Where is there clean water where there is also farming and dairy? We shouldn't start with the assumption that one thing is good and the other is bad.

Bill Howland agreed that there are systemic problems, that many are hurting from this current situation. The Agency of Natural Resources is focused on water quality, and the Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (AAFM) is focused on agriculture. In the ag world, water quality has been secondary to farm viability. What David described is refreshing and it can only be done by an integrated approach. He mentioned that he is dubious about the water quality value of many agricultural best management practices.

Eric Clifford described the dairy economy as cyclical, that we thought the shifts were a lot faster, but we've had four years of suppressed milk prices. Farmers want good water quality as much as anybody does. We need to have a clearer understanding of the progress we've made thus far. The Department of Environmental Conservation doesn't have a full understanding of all the practices being put into place.

Hilary Solomon described the work their organization is doing with farms in Bennington and Rutland Counties. A lot of farmers are turning to hemp, but the plants seem smaller than what might be expected. She mentioned that the Ag Partner Database has been helpful in better capturing the projects that receive state funding, but no one is keeping track of what the farmers are doing on their own, although AAFM is encouraging use of the Ag Partner Database for those practices.

Kent Henderson said he went to the dairy summit, was excited to hear the outcomes, but disappointed that it was ending. Many land grant universities are focused on this work. It's a time for change in agriculture, this is when a real turnaround can happen. Vermont is number one in the country for cover crops, as measured by the United State Department of Agriculture (USDA). One example of underreporting is in the Rock River Watershed. What has been reported to the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and USDA only covered about a quarter of the land that was cover cropped. With extreme weather conditions, land with conservation tillage or no-tillage is excelling.

Mark Naud asked, what can the VTCAC do? What would a forum look like? What is Vermont's role in this transition of agriculture? Will hemp be part of the transition? What will be the climate impacts be over the next 10 years?

Sen. Randy Brock asked if we would plan a conference, a day-long or half-day event? We want to have the discussion with not just one or two people, but a variety. The approach we've talked about here, focusing on agricultural viability and water quality, is the right approach. You have an army of advocates on both sides.

Lori Fisher commented that we need to think about this as outcome driven. What we can do as the VTCAC? We are focused on Lake Champlain and water quality must remain central.

Sen. Ginny Lyons mentioned inviting Chuck Ross and UVM Extension to be a partner in a broader symposium.

David Mears mentioned it could be a series of listening sessions to raise public awareness.

Bill Howland expressed his concern about the committee having time to put together a three-day session. The state needs to take a leadership role in the effort to support farming in that transition. This committee could put some basic design elements together for a conference on this and request LCBP funds to support it. Does it matter how many best management practices have been installed if water quality is not improving? Nowhere was there any real discussion of monitoring in Act 76 presentation.

Lori Fisher asked if we see this as a Lake Champlain initiative, rather than focused on Vermont? We lose the opportunity for progress in some other areas if we limit it to Vermont. There is potential to collaborate with New York and Quebec Citizen Advisory Committees.

David Mears described the effort as translating public opinion for the legislature and leadership. The meeting could have two components: (1) the information session, and (2) facilitated break-out sessions. What are the opportunities, challenges and impacts of a transition in agriculture? We could elevate the issue in communities where we meet, advance the level of discourse, and have a product we could share with public officials.

Sen. Randy Brock suggested inviting experts from academia to learn about the latest research first before having public discussions and forums.

Sen. Ginny Lyons mentioned the need to ensure the Clean Water Fund is being used effectively and appropriately.

Bill Howland concurred that we must develop our own knowledge base from experts first. We should be there asking the questions, receiving the results so our own knowledge base is improved.

David Mears summarized a three-phase process: (1) committee education, (2) public conversation, (3) report to public officials.

Bill Howland suggested having an outside facilitator.

Bethany to schedule a working group meeting before the next full committee meeting in October.

5. Full committee working session: 2020 Lake Champlain Action Plan

- a. Review production timeline**
- b. Determine tone, length, format**
- c. Draft outline, priorities**

Due to the federal holiday on October 14th, the next VTCAC meeting will be October 21st, 5:00 – 7:00 pm, location to be determined.

Mark Naud and Bill Howland will to begin to frame action plan, with a first draft prepared for the next meeting.

The committee discussed the production timeline and pros and cons for preparing the action plan earlier, prior to the start of the legislative session.

David Mears suggested an action plan can be prepared in the first year of a biennium, with a report on the action plan during the second year.

David Mears moved to adjourn; Lori Fisher seconded. Motion carried.