Lake Champlain Executive Committee

Meeting Summary

November 19, 2024   9:30AM – 12:30PM
(Via Microsoft Teams)

ATTENDANCE:

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS: Daniel Tremblay for Nathalie Provost (Quebec MELCCFP), Joe Zalewski (NYS DEC), Pete Laflamme for Julie Moore (Meeting Chair, VTANR), Walt Lender (Chair, NY CAC), Pierre Leduc (Chair, Quebec CAC), Denise Smith (Chair, VT CAC), Buzz Hoerr (Chair, E&O Committee), John Krueger (Chair, HAPAC), Neil Kamman (Chair, TAC), Antony Tseng for Richard Balla (EPA R2), MaryJo Feuerbach (EPA R1)

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS: Jennifer Curran (USACE), Brian Steinmuller (NYS Dept. Ag & Markets), Laura DiPietro (VT AAFM for Alyson Eastman), Sarita Croce (NEIWPCC for Susan Sullivan)

STAFF: LCBP: Eric Howe, Mae Kate Campbell, Kerry Crowningshield, Katie Darr, Colleen Hickey, Lauren Jenness, Elizabeth Lee, Corrie Miller, Ryan Mitchell, Grace Palmer, Meg Modley Gilbertson, Matthew Vaughan, Sonya Vogel, Erin Vennie-Vollrath (LCBP NY Coordinator NYS DEC), Sarah Coleman (LCBP VT Coordinator, VT ANR), Jim Brangan, Beth Whitmore-Stolar (NEIWPCC/LCBP), Emma Dannenberg, Viv Shields; Bryan Dore (EPA R1), Michele Fafette (EPA R2), Theresa Vander Woude (EPA R1); Karyn Hanson (NYSDEC), Karen Stainbrook (NYS DEC)

GUESTS: Tom Berry (GLFC), Rebecca Ellis (Sen. Welch's Office), Maya Dehner (USACE), Haley Pero (Sen. Sanders office)

Teleconference and webinar open, networking **9:30 AM**

MEETING BEGINS **9:45 AM**

INTRODUCTIONS: Pete Laflamme, Vermont ANR, Chaired this meeting.

Pete began the meeting with a round of introductions.

Approval of Summary of previous meeting

ACTION ITEM: Approve Meeting Minutes from October 29, 2024 Executive Committee Meeting

- Motion By: Buzz Hoerr
- Second by: Neil Kamman

- Discussion on the motion: Eric said that Neil shared some suggested changes to the notes and shared those edits with the group to consider.
- Vote: All in favor
- Abstentions: Joe Zalewski

PUBLIC COMMENT **9:55 AM**

None

CONGRESSIONAL UPDATES **10:00 AM**

Rebecca Ellis (Sen. Welch's office) shared that she did not have much news for the upcoming FY 25 and F26 other than a lot of uncertainty for the regular budget, and whether some of the BIL funding $$ will be pulled back. She reiterated there were a lot of unknowns. She also noted that Ahren von Schnell was not on the call but believes Rep. Stefanik has already stepped down from her position on the House of Representatives to accept her appointment as UN Ambassador, noting that the loss was not great for the LCBP.

Haley Pero (Sen. Sanders' office): The government is funded through December 20th. She anticipates a potential resolution to extend short-term funding through January or February. The appropriations bill was passed in in the Senate in July for $25M which will continue to be tracked.

Rebecca invited anyone to reach out with questions.

EPA Preliminary review of Staff workload **10:15 AM**

Pete shared that Sophie, the third-party consultant, continues to hold interviews. Given this continued work, Eric suggested a change to the agenda to discuss LCBP staff workload assessment instead, via an update by MaryJo. The discussion was informed by the NEIWPCC response to EPA's request for information regarding LCBP/NEIWPCC contracting timelines and a workload assessment of LCBP staff grant responsibilities conducted by Sarita Croce.

1. Award Timeliness and Process Review

- **Current Performance:**
  - MaryJo presented data on contract processing times for awards completed between October 1st and September 4th. The average time to finalize contracts was 274 days (approximately 8 months), with a maximum of 590 days and a minimum of 67 days.
  - EPA has raised concerns about the length of time from Steering Committee approval to contract issuance, which exceeds their expectations.
- **Follow-Up Actions:**
  - Bryan will share a summary letter from Susan outlining additional results and recommendations.
  - MaryJo proposed a deeper review of award timelines at the December Steering Committee meeting.

2. Staff Workload Concerns

- **Staffing Challenges:**
  - MaryJo highlighted the significant workload for key staff, including Matt (27 awards) and Meg (36 awards), in addition to their primary responsibilities.
  - The total number of contracts (285) exceeds EPA's recommended workload capacity per staff member.
- **Workload Analysis:**
  - Complex and diverse awards require varying levels of effort. Small grants can be as labor-intensive as larger ones due to partner interactions and compliance requirements.
  - LCBP staff roles often blur technical and administrative responsibilities, adding to stress and increasing the risk of errors.
- **Peer Comparisons:**
  - Neil noted that Vermont's grant management approach separates technical and financial responsibilities for efficiency.
  - Sarita estimated that each project requires a minimum of 4 hours per month of staff time for tasks like workplan development, invoicing, and partner interactions.

3. Potential Solutions and Recommendations

- **Staffing Adjustments:**
  - MaryJo emphasized the need for a comprehensive review of staffing levels and roles. Antony supported adding staff with both technical and financial expertise.
  - Pete recommended increasing staff capacity and exploring process improvements to enhance efficiency.
- **Process Improvements:**
  - Joe suggested bundling smaller grants to reduce administrative overhead.
  - Tom stressed the importance of addressing systemic inefficiencies before adding more staff.
- **Strategic Considerations:**
  - Antony highlighted the need to remain open to new sub-awardees and to plan for additional capacity.
  - Sarah proposed pairing senior and junior project managers to balance workloads and provide mentorship.
- **Data and Historical Context:**
  - Pierre requested historical data (2020-2021) for comparison, noting the need to evaluate changes post-budget expansion. Sarita indicated that obtaining robust pre-expansion data might take time due to less advanced monitoring systems.

Action Items

1. **December Review:**
   - Prepare a detailed report on award timelines and staff workload for the December Steering Committee meeting.
2. **Historical Analysis:**
   - Eric will compile historical data on staff workloads and number of contracts managed.

3. **Staffing Plan:**
    - Conduct a comprehensive review of staff roles, capacity, and workload distribution.
4. **Process Optimization:**
    - Evaluate current grant management processes to identify inefficiencies and potential improvements.
5. **Strategic Grant Bundling:**
    - Explore opportunities to consolidate smaller grants to streamline administrative tasks.

Grant Awards **10:30 AM**

ACTION ITEM: Motion to enter into Executive Session to consider grant awards

- Motion By: Antony Tseng
- Second by: Joe Zalewski
- Discussion on the motion: None
- Vote: All in favor
- Abstentions: None

EXECUTIVE SESSION.

Exit Executive Session.

GRANT AWARD DECISIONS:

ACTION ITEM: **Conditionally APPROVE** NY Agronomy ROD as presented and discussed in Executive Session

- Motion By: John Krueger
- Second by: Walt Lender
- Discussion on the motion: None
- Vote: All in favor
- Abstentions: None

ACTION ITEM: **Conditionally APPROVE** Healthy Ecosystems – Habitat and Native Species Conservation Grants (Small and Large) ROD as presented and discussed in Executive Session

- Motion By: Neil Kamman
- Second by: Denise Smith
- Discussion on the motion: None
- Vote: All in favor
- Abstentions: None

ACTION ITEM: **Conditionally APPROVE** the list of projects recommended by the review committee for the CVNHP FY2025 Pre-Proposals to advance to full proposals, as presented and discussed in Executive Session

- Motion By: John Krueger
- Second by: MaryJo Feuerbach
- Discussion on the motion: None
- Vote: All in favor
- Abstentions: None

Eric requested clarity on the staffing discussion planned for the December SC meeting, including specific topics and time allocation. Pete recommended dedicating at least one hour for a robust conversation on staffing challenges and solutions.

Proposal for a Second Ad Hoc Committee:

- MaryJo proposed establishing a second ad hoc committee focused on staffing issues, noting the complexity of the topic and the need to address both award management and expertise mix.
- Pete agreed with using the SC meeting as the next logical step and suggested revisiting staffing recommendations after hearing updates from the existing roles and responsibilities ad hoc committee.

Ad Hoc Committee Coordination:

- Antony emphasized the overlap between workload concerns and the roles/responsibilities review being conducted by the current ad hoc committee. He suggested aligning these discussions for more cohesive recommendations.
- Neil supported this approach, highlighting the value of awaiting outcomes from the current ad hoc committee's evaluation, including 3rd-party reviews and data from NEIWPCC and LCBP, before deciding on a second committee.
- Buzz underscored the importance of addressing staffing concerns to ensure the organization remains functional, responsive, and a positive workplace.
- The group agreed to prioritize staffing discussions at the December SC meeting and determine next steps, including potentially forming a second ad hoc committee.

Golden Clam Discovery: Meg reported the detection of the invasive golden clam (*Corbicula fluminea)* at the Whitehall, NY boat launch during routine monitoring by a Lake Champlain Committee volunteer. The finding was confirmed by NYSDEC after additional sampling.

The presence of the golden clam in Lake Champlain is linked to known populations in the Champlain Canal, Lake George, and Lake Bomoseen. The exact pathway into the lake remains unknown.
Next Steps:

- NYSDEC and VTDEC are conducting presence/absence evaluations at key sites.
- The Lake Champlain AIS Rapid Response Task Force has activated partnerships to develop recommendations for managing the spread of the species.

Eric reminded the group that there was one more Executive Committee meeting on the schedule as part of an approach for spreading out grant awards for both staff and EC members. The next meeting is scheduled for 12/10 and that agenda will focus largely on grant award decisions.

ADJOURN **12:30 PM**

Anticipated Outputs for this meeting include:

1. Approval of Meeting Summary from October 29, 2024 meeting
2. Grant Award decisions for:
    - New York Agronomy program
    - Healthy Ecosystems – Aquatic Habitat and Native Species Conservation (Large and Small)
3. Approval of CVNHP FY2025 Pre-Proposals to advance to Full Proposal stage.