Lake Champlain Executive Committee

Meeting Summary

Tuesday, May 20, 2025 9:30AM – 12:30PM
(Via Microsoft Teams)

ATTENDANCE:

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS: Julie Moore (Chair, VTANR), Yuan Zeng for Joe Zalewski (NYS DEC), 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), Laurie Earley (USFWS), Brandon Olsen (NYS Empire State Trade Development), Daniel Tremblay (Quebec MELCC for Stefanos Bitzakidis), Bryan Dore (EPA R1), Antony Tseng (EPA R2)

STAFF: LCBP: Eric Howe, Kerry Crowningshield, Colleen Hickey, Lauren Jenness, Corrie Miller, Ryan Mitchell, Meg Modley Gilbertson, Emma Dannenberg, Sonya Vogel, Anna Vold, Meg Modley Gilbertson, Mae Kate Campbell, Erin Vennie-Vollrath (LCBP NY Coordinator NYS DEC), Sarah Coleman (LCBP VT Coordinator, VT ANR), Sarita Croce (NEIWPCC), Jim Brangan, Michele Fafette (EPA R2), Theresa Vander Woude (EPA R1), Karyn Hanson (NYSDEC), Guy Parenteau (QC MELCC)

GUESTS: Tom Berry (GLFC), Rebecca Ellis (Sen. Welch's Office)

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

MEETING BEGINS **9:45AM**

INTRODUCTIONS: Julie Moore, VT ANR Chaired the meeting. She began the meeting with a round of introductions.

Approval of Summary of previous meeting

ACTION ITEM: Approve Meeting Minutes from **March 18, 2025** Executive Committee Meeting

- Motion by: John Krueger
- Second by: Buzz Hoerr
- Discussion on the motion: None
- Vote: All in favor
- Abstentions: None

PUBLIC COMMENT **9:55 AM**

- None

CONGRESSIONAL UPDATES 10:00 AM

FY2025 BUDGET REVIEW 10:15 AM

Eric provided an update on the budget process since the last Steering Committee meeting. All funding streams have been confirmed. To fully support priority research projects, reductions were made to implementation grant programs, specifically the Thriving Communities Support grants and Informed and Involved Public programs, bringing funding down to levels seen 3–4 years ago.

Key Discussion Points

- **Budget Transparency**:
  - Michelle requested that the revised budget be shared with changes clearly marked.
  - Neil raised concerns about the $100,000 reduction to organizational capacity and asked to review some of the research projects more closely.
- **Funding Structure and Overhead**:
  - Tom noted unresolved issues related to GLFC funding and NEIWPCC overhead. He and Eric are working on how funds are allocated in the budget spreadsheet.
  - The discussion highlighted that while single projects are generally not funded from multiple streams (EPA and GLFC) due to complexity, there may be flexibility in supporting NEIWPCC/LCBP staff costs across streams. Tom emphasized the importance of continuing staff support, with final commitments subject to approval by Susan and formalized through an MOU between NEIWPCC and GLFC.
  - The group agreed to bring the revised budget spreadsheet back to the Steering Committee for guidance and approval.
- **Timeline and Decision-Making**:
  - Eric noted that the FY25 funding applications must be submitted to EPA in early July, requiring Steering Committee approval in advance. Julie suggested delaying a vote until the end of the meeting today to allow more time for review. Neil agreed additional time was needed to check calculations.
- The Chair tabled further discussion on this topic until the end of the meeting to allow time for other topics on the days' agenda.

BLOCK GRANTS DISCUSSION 10:30 AM

The group explored the potential use of a "block grant" style funding model for LCBP programs, with presentations from Vermont DEC and NYDEC staff, and discussion on applicability to LCBP funding.

- **Key Discussion Points**
  - **Terminology and Statutory Considerations**

        - Michele emphasized caution in using the term “block grant,” as Section 120 does not authorize federal block grants. If pursued, alternative terminology or adjusted language would be needed.
        - Neil asked about the definition of “block grant”; Michele confirmed it has a specific legal meaning.
        - Eric clarified the session was intended as a learning exercise rather than for formal decision-making.
        - Antony suggested using a different term while adapting the concept.
- **Presentations from State Partners**
    - **Sarah (VT DEC)** reviewed Vermont’s formula and block grant-style programs, including regional planning commissions, Watersheds United Vermont, and the Green Schools Initiative. She noted varied partner capacity and ongoing refinement of the model.
    - **Erin (NYDEC)** shared New York’s experience with block grants, highlighting both benefits and hesitations due to limited expertise and concerns about future rounds.
- **Perspectives on Implementation**
    - Karyn asked about the background and capacity of Vermont’s implementing partners. Sarah explained the range of organizations involved, from statutory watershed planning partners to competitive initiatives, with capacity expected to grow as the model matures.
    - Neil noted that statutory watershed planning partners already play key roles in watershed activities, and this model would further integrate them into implementation.
    - Yuan asked about administrative costs; Sarah clarified Vermont applies a 15% administrative rate, while New York applies ~10%. Neil explained these are not indirect costs but program delivery costs incorporated into grants.
- **Administrative Costs and Engagement**
    - Eric asked how these structures interact with organizations holding negotiated indirect cost rates (NICRAs). Neil explained formula grants account for this.
    - Eric also raised concern that adopting this model might reduce direct engagement with grantees, which supports project quality and future planning. Sarah suggested design features—such as review committees and staff synthesis of themes—can maintain ground-level engagement.
    - Julie acknowledged this tradeoff, noting the balance between relationship-based engagement and administrative efficiency.
- **Potential Applicability to LCBP**
    - Yuan asked if LCBP has programs suited to this model. Eric suggested the LCBP organizational support program as a logical first step into this new model. Neil also highlighted local implementation and aquatic invasive species as potential fits. John suggested piloting with CVNHP programs given existing strong relationships; Jim agreed, noting the potential to free staff time while recognizing some partners still require intensive support.
    - Sarita observed that many LCBP contracts are under $50K and suggested reviewing approaches used by other programs such as the Long Island Sound program. She

raised questions about scalability if more awards exceed $100K, and noted the need to confirm implications with NEIWPCC.

- **Next Steps and Pilot Exploration**
  - Julie proposed creating a subcommittee to further explore this model, with potential piloting through CVNHP. Eric supported this approach, noting the value of testing with a discrete program.
  - Jim asked if such a pilot could align with upcoming NPS agreement development; Eric agreed this should be considered.
  - Sarah offered to serve as a resource, and several participants volunteered to join the working group: Sarah, Erin, Bryan Dore, Michele Fafette, and John Krueger.
- **Conflict of Interest Considerations**
  - John asked if a recipient organization could also serve as the overall administrator. Neil and Sarah cautioned against this due to procurement rules and conflict risks, though Sarah noted mechanisms exist to mitigate conflicts. Antony emphasized careful attention to conflict of interest issues in any design.
- **Action Items / Next Steps**
  - Form a subcommittee to evaluate feasibility and design a pilot block grant-style model, potentially within CVNHP.
  - Eric to follow up with interested volunteers (Sarah, Erin, Bryan, Michele, John) in the coming weeks.
  - Further consultation with NEIWPCC and the National Park Service as needed regarding administrative structure and agreements.
  - Explore alternative terminology to “block grant” to avoid statutory conflicts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST GUIDELINES 11:15 AM

Eric introduced draft updates to the LCBP Conflict of Interest (COI) guidelines, last revised in 2017. The revisions are being developed in consultation with EPA Regions 1 and 2 and will cover advisory committee members, confidential reviewers, and Steering Committee members.

Discussion Highlights

- **Purpose of Guidelines**
  - Michele clarified that COI concerns are not limited to personal or financial gain but can include other incentives, such as ensuring a project receives additional funding.
  - The revised COI form is intended as a documentation tool, not a mechanism to exclude reviewers. Waivers would allow individuals to participate if they can remain impartial.
- **Committee Involvement & Scope**
  - Julie raised concerns that “committee members” was too broad a term, especially in small states like VT and NY where most participants have professional connections.
  - Bryan suggested specifying types of relationships to be disclosed.
  - Sarita proposed refined language: *A conflict of interest involving a personal relationship occurs when a person's personal interests or relationships interfere with their ability to make impartial decisions or act in the best interest of the program.*

- **Reviewer Pool & Practicality**
  - Neil and Julie cautioned against rules that are overly restrictive, noting limited pools of qualified reviewers and the frequency of professional overlaps.
  - John highlighted existing challenges in recruiting reviewers. Julie expressed concern that new requirements could overcomplicate an already functioning process.
  - Michele provided an example where an applicant on a panel reviewed his own organization's application, underscoring the need for stronger documentation.
- **State Agency Considerations**
  - Karyn and Neil discussed cases where reviewers may have indirect links (e.g., letters of support from another division). They agreed such connections should not automatically disqualify reviewers.
  - Neil raised the example of stacked funding (e.g., Conservation District projects), questioning whether board affiliations would require recusal. Michele confirmed a waiver process would apply.

Next Steps

- Eric will integrate feedback—particularly around clarifying language, emphasizing the waiver process, and tailoring guidelines for different reviewer types.
- Participants are asked to provide additional feedback by June 6 so revisions can be prepared for SC consideration at the June meeting.
- The revised guidelines and waiver form will be in place ahead of the next grant round (expected late August).

Closing Notes

- Michele emphasized the forms are simple and practical, meant to add transparency.
- Neil requested more advance notice when COI guidelines return to the Executive Committee for review.
- Antony thanked participants for the constructive discussion.

EXECUTIVE SESSION **12:00 PM**

Advisory Committee Membership nomination

- Motion: To move into Executive Session
- By: Buzz Hoerr
- Second: Neil Kamman
- Vote: All in favor
- Abstentions: None

Exit Executive Session

OPEN SESSION:

ACTION ITEM: Nominate a candidate for the Lake Champlain Steering Committee to consider appointment to the LCBP Technical Advisory Committee

- Motion By: Neil Kamman

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

Resolution to recognize Nathalie Provost, Quebec MELCCP for her service to Lake Champlain

Julie announced that Nathalie Provost, formerly of Quebec MELCCP, was recently elected to the Canadian Parliament and appointed Secretary of State for Nature. In recognition of her service to Lake Champlain, Eric presented a draft resolution for review, following a request made by the Steering Committee in April.

Eric provided an overview of the resolution's content and invited feedback.

- Buzz praised the resolution as well written and well deserved, suggesting it be presented in a framed format suitable for display.
- Eric confirmed the intention to frame the resolution and provide a French translation.
- Daniel offered to review the translation for accuracy.

The Committee expressed support for the resolution and the planned presentation.

FY2025 BUDGET REVIEW   - Continued

- **Budget Revisions**: Eric reviewed the updated document with members. Michelle reiterated difficulty in identifying where changes had been made.
- **Applications and Requests**: Julie asked for data on applications and funding requests; MKC shared proposal numbers and request totals from the last cycle.
- **Education & Outreach (E&O) Program**:
  - Neil raised concerns about the $100K+ reduction to E&O, bringing the line to $400–500K. He noted the addition of a new $550K property assessment program under NEIWPCC.
  - Eric explained that property assessments consolidate Stream Wise and related programs previously supported under E&O, in line with the unified stormwater program.
  - Neil asked about balancing the two lines to reduce the E&O impact. Eric clarified that reductions were intentional since some functions are shifting. Buzz recommended clarifying this transition in RFPs, and Eric committed to adding disclaimers to direct applicants appropriately.
- **Organizational Support and Workforce Development**:
  - Julie asked about overlap between the $300K for NY targeted organizational capacity/workforce development and general organizational support. Eric clarified that NY funds are focused on workforce development, while organizational support covers professional development and equipment.

    - Erin added that the upcoming NY support round would specifically target WWTF operator training.
    - Julie proposed shifting $25K each from VT onsite WWTF and NY org support into general organizational support, citing the importance of sustaining partner organizations.
    - Karyn, Erin, and Yuan agreed the reductions could be absorbed without compromising state program needs.
- **Next Steps**
    - Revised budget spreadsheet to be circulated with changes highlighted.
    - The Steering Committee will revisit and finalize budget approval, with the goal of submitting funding to EPA by early July.
    - Additional clarifications to be incorporated into RFPs to reflect program realignments.

ACTION ITEM: Motion to make the proposed adjustments to the Vermont Onsite Wastewater and NY Organizational Workforce Development line items in order to add $50,000 to the LCBP Organizational Support grants line item in the proposed FY2025 Budget

- Motion by: Neil Kamman
- Second by: John Krueger
- Discussion on the motion: none
- Vote: All in favor
- Abstentions: none

ACTION ITEM: Motion to approve as amended the FY2025 budget for discussion and approval by the Lake Champlain Steering Committee

- Motion by: Buzz Hoerr
- Second by: John Krueger
- Discussion on the motion: None
- Vote: All in favor
- Abstentions: None

Updates from Committee Members, as time allows

New Appointment: Yuan announced that Karyn (DEC), with over 25 years of experience in permitting and water quality, will replace Helen Polanco as New York's jurisdictional representative to the TAC. New York will also consult Karen Stainbrook (water quality, TMDLs) and Wade Bastian (wastewater) to support project workplans and serve as final project reviewers.

Eric clarified that TAC Steering Committee chairs may appoint one jurisdictional representative without requiring formal approval.

ADJOURN **12:30 PM**

Anticipated Outputs for this meeting include:

1. Approval of Meeting Summary from March 18, 2025 meeting
2. Discussion of Block Grants for consideration in LCBP grant programs
3. Discussion of updated LCBP Conflict of Interest Guidelines
4. Nomination of candidate to the LCBP Technical Advisory Committee