



Lake Champlain Steering Committee

FINAL Meeting Minutes

December 16, 2025 9:30AM – 3:45PM

West Side Ballroom, 253 New York Road, Plattsburgh, NY 12901

ATTENDANCE:

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS: Joe Zalewski (Chair, NYS DEC), Stefanos Bitzakidis (Quebec MELCCFP), Julie Moore (VTANR), Karina Dailey (Chair, VT CAC), Buzz Hoerr (Chair, E&O Committee), Susan Evans McClure (Chair, HAPAC), Neil Kamman (Chair, TAC), Susan Sullivan (NEIWPC), Laurie Earley (USFWS), Anne Jefferson (Lake Champlain Sea Grant), Travis Thomason (NRCS VT), Brian Steinmuller (NYS Dept. Ag & Markets), Brandon Olsen (NYS Empire State Trade Development), Phil Giltner (NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation), Laura DiPietro (VT AAFM for Alyson Eastman), Laura Trieschmann (VT ACCD), Antony Tseng (EPA R2), Mark Sanborn (EPA R1 Regional Administrator)

STAFF: LCBP: Eric Howe, Mae Kate Campbell, Kerry Crowningshield, Lauren Jenness, Elizabeth Lee, Ryan Mitchell, Meg Modley Gilbertson, Matthew Vaughan, Sonya Vogel, Erin Vennie-Vollrath (LCBP NY Coordinator NYS DEC), Sarah Coleman (VT ANR), Sarita Croce (NEIWPC), Jim Brangan, Beth Whitmore-Stolar (NEIWPC/LCBP), Fiona Bishop, Anna Vold, Emma Dannenberg, Emma Janson, Ali Jackson; Michele Fafette (EPA R2), Theresa Vander Woude (EPA R1), Karyn Hanson (NYSDEC), Regina Lyons (EPA R1), Bryan Dore (EPA R1), Sophie Moffatt-Bergeron (MELCCFP), Daniel Tremblay (MELCCFP)

GUESTS: Tom Berry (GLFC), Rebecca Ellis (Sen. Welch's Office), Madi Brothers for Ethan Hinch (Sen. Sanders' office), Ahren Von Schnell (Cong. Stefanik's Office), Owen Doherty (Cong. Balint's Office), Todd Chaudhry (USGS), Karyn Hanson (NYSDEC), Guy Parenteau (MELCCFP), Maya Dehner (USACE), Edo Jakupovic (QC MELCCFP), Janelle Hangen (GLFC), Mark Naud, Evan Nelson (USACE), Breck Bowden (VT CAC member), Mark Naud (VT CAC member), Lori Fisher (VT CAC member)

MEETING BEGINS

9:45 AM

INTRODUCTIONS: Joe Zalewski, NYS DEC, Chaired the meeting. He introduced EPA Region 1 Regional Administrator, Mark Sanborn. Joe then led the group in a round of introductions.

Remarks from EPA Region 1 Administrator, Mark Sanborn

Approval of Summary of previous meeting

ACTION ITEM: Approve Meeting Minutes from **September 15, 2025** Steering Committee Meeting

- Motion By: Laurie Earley
- Second by: Julie Moore
- Discussion on the motion: none
- Vote: all in favor
- Abstentions: **none**

PUBLIC COMMENT

10:15 AM

- Lori Fisher, a longtime member of the VT CAC with decades of involvement in Lake Champlain governance, emphasized that citizen input has always been central to LCBP success. Her experience with the Lake Champlain Committee and the Lake Champlain Management Conference gives her both historical and operational perspective.
- She clarified her comments are not a criticism of NEIWPC, which has played an important administrative and fiscal oversight role. She stressed that the current legislative structure was intentionally designed to ensure legitimacy, funding, and balanced oversight. She expressed concern that the proposed MOU could shift administrative oversight toward program control, potentially altering that balance.
- Lori also raised concerns about the rushed timeline and limited public engagement, especially given disruptions like the government shutdown and holidays.
- Lori recommended the Lake Champlain Steering Committee pause the MOU process, allow for more thorough review and stakeholder input, and delay decisions until at least early 2026.

CONGRESSIONAL UPDATES

10:20 AM

- Ahren von Schnell (Rep. Stefanik): Congresswoman Stefanik's request to the appropriations committee included language that directed EPA to do an assessment of the Lake Champlain Basin Program and NEIWPC. EPA will have 180 days after the bill is passed to complete this report.
- Rebecca Ellis (Sen. Welch): The first piece of news is that Ethan Hinch (Sen. Sanders staff) is on paternity leave. The rest of the news is that the FY26 federal budget requires 12 bills, with only 3 passed so far. A recent government shutdown ended Nov 3, followed by a continuing resolution (CR) funding the government through Jan 30. Senator Welch's office is tracking 6 budget lines across 4 key bills:
 - Interior bill: includes major funding (e.g., EPA S120, sea lamprey); part of a 5-bill "minibus" expected to pass before the CR deadline.
 - Energy & Water bill (H.R. 3293): includes strong funding for USACE, but is currently stalled due to controversy.
 - State Department bill: includes funding for the Great Lakes Fishery Commission (GLFC).
 - The 5-bill minibuss includes: Commerce, Defense, Interior, Labor, and Transportation bills, which are all separate from the defense reauthorization bills.

- Owen Doherty (Rep. Balint): Earlier last month the Congresswoman introduced new bill to support federal resilience and recovery to help communities prepare for and respond to climate change. Owen's door is always open to anyone in the delegation, happy to chat.

FFY2026 Budget Process

10:30 AM

- FY2026 Budget process and schedule (Eric Howe)
 - Eric outlined LCBP's annual budget development process, noting expectations for level or near-level funding.
 - Key funding sources total ~\$35M, including:
 - \$25M (Section 120)
 - \$8M EPA IIJA funding (final year)
 - \$500K from NPS for CVNHP work
 - \$1.8M from GLFC (managed directly by GLFC staff)
 - The Steering Committee (SC) approves the full budget each April.
 - The process began in summer 2025, with development of research and Education & Outreach priorities, continuing through the fall.
 - Current focus for today:
 - Staff presentations on core, high-priority projects funded annually
 - State of Vermont presents line items
 - TAC reviews research proposals for advancement to full proposals.
- FY2026 Core Projects:
 - Clean Water and Healthy Ecosystems: Matthew Vaughan, Meg Modley, and Erin Vennie-Vollrath reviewed core projects. Clean Water and Healthy Ecosystem core projects are the flagship programs funded by the Steering Committee each year. Clean Water and Healthy Ecosystems core projects include:
 - Overview of LCBP implementation and planning grant programs, with examples including:
 - Vermont River Conservancy (Lamoille River watershed planning)
 - Trinity Rock Stormwater Abatement (Lake George)
 - Lake Champlain Committee's CHAMP invasive species monitoring
 - Intervale Center's riparian forest stewardship project
 - Additional core programs highlighted:
 - Lake Champlain Long-Term Monitoring Program
 - Cyanobacteria Monitoring
 - NY Agronomy Support
 - Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) Rapid Response
 - Boat Launch Steward Program
 - Water Chestnut Management
 - Discussion highlights:
 - AIS Rapid Response operates as a replenished fund, currently using ~\$150K annually (largely for grass carp monitoring), with potential need for annual replenishment.

- NY agronomy support is well-coordinated with NRCS and local conservation partners (SWCDs) to align funding and implementation for producers.
 - Travis Thomason (NRCS-VT) Noted there is an opportunity to leverage new NRCS soil health and conservation funding.
- Education and Outreach
 - Ryan Mitchell reviewed LCBP's Education & Outreach (E&O) core projects, which support the "informed and involved public" goal in the Opportunities for Action (OFA).
 - Key E&O programs include:
 - Small Grants (e.g., Boots and Bugs)
 - Large Grants
 - CBEI (teacher professional development, Watershed Education Conference, World Water Day, Youth Clean Water Summit)
 - E&O Stewards
 - Video Production (Diving In, Meet the Scientist, Summit to Shore)
 - Artist in Residence
 - Property Assessment Programs (Stream Wise, Lake Wise, Stormwater)
 - Discussion highlights:
 - Susan Evans McClure shared that past E&O funding had lasting impact, inspiring a new arts initiative modeled after a previous project and helping generate ongoing support and funding.
- CVNHP
 - Jim presented CVNHP core projects under the Thriving Communities goal of the OFA. CVNHP work is guided by three interpretive themes: *Making of Nations*, *Corridor of Commerce*, and *Conservation & Community*, with related initiatives like America 250 and other historical/environmental commemorations. The CVNHP is unique nationally as the only heritage area with an international partnership in its title.
 - Program impact:
 - 257 grants awarded
 - \$2.4M in funding, leveraging \$3.2M in match
 - FY25 grants will support CY26 projects, many tied to America 250.
 - Five grant programs: Internships, Collections, Interpretive Themes, Local Heritage, and Special Programs.
 - Core budget items include:
 - Wayside Exhibit Program
 - Annual Summit
 - CABN coordination and outreach
 - Conservation & Community grants
- Discussion highlights:
 - Biosphere grants support partners (not staff)

- Some funding has historically supported staff capacity, future approach undecided
- Request for a one-page summary of all programs, to be developed by Eric.

Updates from the Strategic Advisory Committee, summary of comments, and discussion on the proposed MOU between the Lake Champlain Steering Committee and NEIWPCC **11:15 AM**

- Julie Moore summarized ~18 months of work (since June 2024) leading to the draft MOU, prompted by concerns about staffing, morale, administrative challenges, and grant/payment delays. This led to a program review with external consultants, who identified issues in communication, decision-making, reporting, and HR, alongside broader changes (e.g., funding increases, leadership shifts, political context).
- An Ad Hoc Committee met over 10 months to evaluate options and ultimately formed the Strategic Advisory Committee (SAC), which focused on improving—not dissolving—the LCBP/NEIWPCC relationship. A draft MOU was shared in October 2025.
- Governance concerns were raised:
 - No formal Steering Committee (SC) vote occurred to select the path forward.
 - Some members felt alternatives (e.g., new 501(c)(3)) were not fully considered or were dismissed.
 - Limited transparency and sharing of materials (e.g., consultant and Ad Hoc outputs).
 - Questions about who made key decisions to pursue the current approach.
- Rationale for maintaining the partnership:
 - Dissolving or restructuring would be complex and risky, potentially requiring parallel organizations and creating uncertainty for staff (who are all NEIWPCC employees).
 - Longstanding partnership and existing contracts favored trying to improve the current structure.
- NEIWPCC role clarification (Susan Sullivan):
 - Congress funds the program, the Steering Committee sets priorities and budgets, and NEIWPCC provides administrative, fiscal, and compliance oversight.
 - NEIWPCC executes contracts, manages federal agreements, ensures compliance, and supports implementation.
 - Susan emphasized NEIWPCC's role in safeguarding public funds and enabling Steering Committee decisions.
- Key issues identified in the discussion:
 - Unclear governance structure and lack of a formal agreement between SC and NEIWPCC.
 - Confusion over whether NEIWPCC is a fiscal agent vs. program operator.
 - Staffing challenges and accountability gaps, including unclear responsibility for hiring decisions.
 - Evolving perception of NEIWPCC from back-office role to more active operational involvement in recent years.
- Overall takeaway:

- Broad agreement that the current structure is unclear and strained, with the MOU intended to clarify roles and improve coordination—but concerns remain about process, transparency, and decision-making authority.

Edo Jakupovic summarized feedback from 6 organizations on the draft MOU, noting concerns fell into two main categories:

- 1) MOU Development Process concerns:
 - a. Perception that the timeline was rushed and the Steering Committee (SC) was not sufficiently involved
 - b. Calls for additional revisions and indication the MOU is not acceptable in its current form
- 2) MOU Content concerns:
 - a. Unclear purpose and added value of the MOU, especially where it duplicates existing documents (e.g., OFA)
 - b. Concern it could create confusion or conflict with existing guidance
 - c. Perceived shift in governance, with expanded NEIWPCC authority and reduced role for LCBP/SC and Program Director
 - d. Host Advisory Committee (HOC) seen as unclear, with questions about its purpose, membership (notably exclusion of key roles), and overlap with existing bodies
 - e. Gaps and inconsistencies in roles/responsibilities across partners
 - f. Recommendations to explicitly include CACs
- 3) Discussion highlights:
 - a. Requests to share the compiled comments for transparency
 - b. General agreement that further review and discussion are needed
 - c. EPA perspective (Mark Sanborn):
 - i. Acknowledged strong program accomplishments and appreciation for stakeholder input
 - ii. Emphasized that concerns raised are valid and taken seriously
 - iii. Stated it would be premature to move forward with the MOU at this time
 - iv. Noted need for additional input, continued engagement, and guidance from Congress and EPA leadership (FY26 funding decisions)
 - v. Reaffirmed EPA's commitment to transparency, collaboration, and responsible stewardship of public funds
 - vi. Expressed intent to continue listening and meeting with partners before next steps
- 4) Overall takeaway:
 - a. Broad consensus that the MOU requires more clarity, engagement, and revision, and that moving forward now would be premature.

Joe thanked Regional Administrator Sanborn for sharing his perspective.

Karina shared that following lunch, she would like to make a motion for the Committee to move into Executive Session to consider comments on the draft MOU and invite those who submitted

comments to stay as guests during the Executive Session. Karina clarified that this would exclude representatives from NEIWPC.

ACTION ITEM: To move to into Executive Session to consider comments on the draft MOU and invite those who submitted comments to stay as guests during executive session.

Motion By: Karina Dailey

Second: Laurie Earley

Discussion: The exclusion includes NEIWPC representatives and staff. Staff representing the Congressional delegation and GLFC are invited to participate.

Vote: All in favor

Abstentions: None

NEIWPC Updates

1:15 PM

Susan Sullivan provided an update on FY25 operational improvements at NEIWPC to address past challenges:

- Expanded staffing (4 new hires, plus an additional combined position planned)
- Completed performance reviews, updated job descriptions, added pay transparency, and provided COLA/pay increases
- Increased training and conference opportunities and improved staff integration (e.g., cross-office engagement)
- Ongoing office upgrades (furniture, cleaning, infrastructure improvements)
- Program delivery and efficiency:
 - Since FY21, over 450 projects implemented under Section 120 and IJA
 - Current workload includes 25 no-cost extensions (NCEs) and 59 amendments, with efforts underway to streamline processes
 - In CY2025, 227 contracts issued, with only 2 significant delays
 - Contract execution time improved by 17% from SC approval to NEIWPC execution
 - Indirect cost rate is 18.5%, but actual charge to LCBP is 8.75%
- Discussion highlights:
 - Interest in staff satisfaction surveys (not currently conducted due to capacity limits)
 - Request for clearer organizational chart and reporting structure
 - Interest in better understanding the grant lifecycle and coordination within NEIWPC, especially from the grantee perspective
 - Noted that federal funding delays (~6 months) impact overall timelines
 - Cost of alternative structure for the LCBP:
 - Estimated \$3M–\$5M annually to operate LCBP as a standalone entity, including staffing (~28 FTE), office costs, and administrative functions, highlighting the scale and complexity of operations currently managed by NEIWPC.

FY2026 Line-item requests

- Tabled to January LCBP Executive Committee meeting.

FY2026 Clean Water Healthy Ecosystems Research Proposals

Matt outlined the multi-month research proposal process:

- Began in June 2025 with identification of knowledge gaps
- Ideas refined in September
- RFP released in October
- Pre-proposals reviewed in mid-November, with a December 3 meeting to recommend which advance to full proposals
- Eric then proposed a process change:
 - Instead of the Executive Committee reviewing full proposals in March, shift review to the full Steering Committee in April
 - Goal is to reduce redundancy and give TAC members more time for thorough review
- Discussion outcome:
 - Support from TAC Chair (Neil), citing a high volume of proposals and need for adequate review time
 - No objections raised.

ACTION ITEM: Motion to enter into Executive Session to review the FY26 Clean Water and Healthy Ecosystems Research Pre-proposal TAC recommendation, and to consider new member appointments to the Technical Advisory Committee

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

EXECUTIVE SESSION:

12:30 PM

Exit Executive Session.

Open Session:

ACTION ITEM: Approval of FY26 Clean Water and Healthy Ecosystems Research Pre-Proposals to advance to Full Proposal stage.

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

ACTION ITEM: Appointment of Benjamin Luskins to a three-year membership of the Technical Advisory Committee.

- Motion By: Neil Kamman
- Second by: Julie Moore
- Discussion on the motion: None
- Vote: All in favor
- Abstentions: Brian Steinmuller

ACTION ITEM: Appointment of Quinn Rufa to a three-year membership of the Technical Advisory Committee.

- Motion By: Antony Tseng
- Second by: Neil Kamman
- Discussion on the motion: none
- Vote: all in favor
- Abstentions: none

Jurisdictional Updates:

- New York (Joe Zalewski):
 - Phase 3 of Adirondack Rail Trail complete
 - DEC launched PFAS community education initiatives and “Don’t Be Salty” campaign on rock salt impacts
 - AIS remediation grant applications open; APA Smart Growth grants under review
- Vermont (Julie Moore):
 - FY27 clean water budget approved at \$47M
 - Exploring regional stormwater utilities for compliance support
 - Logging program to reduce interest rates for environmentally friendly equipment
 - Leadership updates: Pete Laflamme retired; Kevin Burke, Gianna Petito, and Emily Bird assumed new roles
- Quebec (Stefanos Bitzakidis):
 - Written updates forthcoming, focusing on AIS, particularly round goby in Richelieu River

CAC Updates:

- Vermont (Karina Dailey):
 - Public rollout of climate resilience action plan in Burlington; presentation planned at State House
 - Noted transition in Katie Darr’s former position

Advisory Committees:

- HAPAC (Susan Evans McClure):
 - Expanding membership
 - Artist in Residence program highlights (Strand project with Vermont artist)
 - Cultural programs linked to America 250th anniversary in 2026
- EO Committee and TAC updates largely referenced elsewhere in the meeting today and in written materials.

Agencies & Partners:

- USFWS (Laurie Earley):
 - Wetland acquisition at Missisquoi National WR
 - White River fish hatchery salmon spawned despite shutdown
 - Sea lamprey treatment on Bouquet River; completion of culverts, dam removal, and wetland restoration projects
 - Salmon redd surveys completed in multiple rivers
- GLFC (Janelle Hangen):
 - Invasive mussels impacting Great Lakes species; proposed \$500M bill to expand GLFC coordination
 - FY25 funding (\$1.8M) being distributed; NY resource space renovation underway
 - Invasive mussel funding not specific to Lake Champlain
- VT ACCD (Laura Trieschman):
 - Historic tower removal (lead contamination) and discovery of 17th-century windmill at Windmill Point
- LCSG (Anne Jefferson):
 - Strategic planning in H1 2026 for next award period; including listening sessions and surveys
- TAC (Neil Kamman):
 - Highlighted 3 ongoing dam removal projects; additional projects, including Lake Carmi tile drainage, to start in February
- EPA (Bryan Dore & Regina Lyons):
 - Updating TMDL accountability framework to provide holistic progress reporting toward 2036 goals
 - Staffing continuity maintained; updates to be provided as changes occur

LCBP Updates (Eric Howe):

- Written updates include many RFPs and recently awarded grants
- Advancing AIS barrier work with NYSDEC, kickoff Jan. 5
- Sec 542 informational sessions upcoming
- Lake Champlain Research Conference Jan. 26–27 (registration by Dec. 18)
- Staff Anniversaries since the last Steering Committee:
 - Grace Palmer (2 yrs), Kerry Crowningshield (3 years), Corrie Miller (3 years), Matt Vaughan (9 years), Erin Vennie-Vollrath (5 years), Myra Lawyer (12 years), Meg Modley (22 years), and Jim Brangan (23 years)

ACTION ITEM: The Steering Committee supports the Strategic Advisory Committee (SAC) efforts to revise the draft MOU with NEIWPCC before the April Steering Committee meeting and any comments are delivered for consideration no less than 15 days prior to that meeting and consistent with Secretary Moore's proposed timeline. During the revision, we ask that the SAC consider the enabling legislation, the OFA Guiding Principles, the comments and considerations from the Executive Session, and any additional comments before the 15-day period for the final draft. Additionally, the SAC and the co-chairs will invite comments from NEIWPCC staff and that these comments be shared publicly or if anonymously all comments be available to all Steering Committee membership.

Amendment to motion: Distribute the revised MOU no less than 60 days ahead of the April 2026 Steering Committee meeting. Strike out the text of the original motion following “available to all Steering Committee membership.”

- Motion By: Laurie Earley
- Second by: Anne Jefferson
- Discussion on the motion: Denise Smith (VT CAC, Vice-Chair) asked for confirmation that all comments would be shared with the full Steering Committee; Julie confirmed this would happen. Ahren von Schnell (Rep. Stefanik) noted that as congressional staffers, their job is to represent constituents. A middle-ground solution he proposed was for staff members or Steering Committee members to share feedback with them, and they would forward these comments to the Steering Committee.
- Vote: All in favor
- Abstentions: None

ADJOURN

4:00 PM