



Minutes of the Regular Meeting –June 20, 2024
ZOOM MEETING <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/9557521162>
Meeting ID: ID: 955 752 1162 +1 929 205 6099

1. Call to order: 10:05 a.m. by Denise Savageau, Chair
Attendance: Members: Chris Martin (DEEP), Amelia Magistrali (UConn Extension), Amy Harder (UConn Extension), Cheryl Cappiali (SWCD), Annette Lott (NWCD), Daniel Mullins (ECCD), Denise Savageau (CRCCD Board). Ex-officio members: Tom Morgart (NRCS), Leigh Whittinghill (CAES), Christian Swanson (CT RC&D), Cadie Pruss (NRCS), Joanna Shapiro (NCCD). Staff: Lilian Ruiz, Executive Director.
2. INTRODUCTION
Savageau opened the meeting, did a round of introductions and confirmed the quorum.
 - A. Minutes - Minutes of 03/21/24 were approved as presented as per Robert's Rule and placed on file.
 - B. Treasurer's Report
Savageau and Ruiz reported. The Financial Report for June 10, 2024, was reviewed. Motion to approve by J. Shapiro, C. Cappiali second. Unanimously approved and placed on file.
 - C. Chairman's Report.
Savageau reported that the board is currently working to fill a vacancy for Governor's appointee. Latha Swamy is awaiting approval so elections might only happen in September. Latha is affiliated with the Working Lands Alliance, an NGO, and also works in urban agriculture for the City of New Haven.
3. NEW BUSINESS
 - A. Operations Plan and 2025 Budget
Savageau reviewed the draft Operations Plan, which had been sent out a month prior for feedback. Savageau suggested approving the plan with the option to make further revisions in September if needed. She highlighted the significant role of districts in watershed planning and water protection. She emphasized that the plan also includes extensive outreach and education efforts, reflecting the broad scope of the council's work. Lilian confirmed that only minor corrections were made, primarily on dates, with one notable addition requested by DEEP. Savageau explained that DEEP requested the inclusion of language related to supporting climate change actions, education, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in environmental justice areas.

Amy Harder suggested that a clear and cohesive bullet point should be added to the outreach and education goal to reflect UConn Extension's contributions, similar to the existing action items that promote and support conservation district activities. Savageau invited any additional comments from the group. Hearing none, a motion by A. Harder to accept the plan as amended by DEEP and UCONN Extension was seconded by J. Shapiro and approved unanimously.

Savageau explained that the 2025 budget is quite straightforward, though it can be somewhat complex

due to the nature of grant funding. Savageau noted a few additions to the budget. Savageau pointed out that on the expense side, there's an increase in the budget for the executive director's salary due to handling a large workload and managing many grants. Additionally, Savageau highlighted that last year, they spent approximately \$3,000 on internships, but this year they want to ensure they have sufficient funding for \$5,000. Budget for office expenses has been updated. Originally, they planned to spend \$2,500, but they increased that amount to \$3,000. Motion to approve the FY25 budget by A. Harder, seconded by, D. Mullins. The budget passed unanimously.

D. Source Water Collaborative

Savageau explained that it is modeled after the national Source Water Collaborative and includes key stakeholders such as the Department of Public Health, DEEP, water utilities, the Council on Soil and Water Conservation, Cooperative Extension, and NRCS. This collaborative effort is designed to enhance source water protection, as defined by the Safe Drinking Water Act, and involves protecting public drinking water supply watersheds, including aquifer protection areas. Savageau highlighted that despite significant work on source water protection, the collaborative had not met for some time due to COVID-19, but recent meetings have resumed. Denise mentioned plans to meet with UConn CLEAR to further discuss these topics. She emphasized the need to focus on education and outreach on source water protection. She invited T. Morgart to share any comments or thoughts on the Source Water Collaborative, given his presence at the meeting.

Savageau mentioned that the Water Planning Council Advisory Group has a work group drafting a white paper on source water protection, expected to be released by the end of the year. The white paper will outline current efforts, identify gaps, and provide recommendations. Savageau assured that the Council will be involved in this process and encouraged everyone to stay tuned for its release and opportunities to review it.

E. Grant Opportunities

Savageau briefly discussed various grant opportunities, including the Long Island Sound Futures Fund and grants from the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD). She mentioned that grant opportunities are coming in rapidly and encouraged everyone to stay alert for new funding sources. Savageau asked the group to show their interest in applying for a Long Island Sound Futures Fund Grant and noted that more details about NACD grants would be discussed later. She also highlighted that NACD is receiving significant federal funds and is looking for partnerships with other entities such as farmers, NGOs, or extensions. Savageau emphasized the importance of staying informed about these opportunities and promised to pass along relevant information. She invited the group to share any major grants they know of that might align with their work, acknowledging that there are many grant opportunities available.

Chris Martin provided an update: the U.S. Forest Service will soon release a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for competitive stewardship grants related to the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). This announcement is expected later this summer, with more specifics anticipated from the Forest Service next week during a regional meeting in New Hampshire. He also mentioned that CT DEEP has applied for its state allocation of \$500,000, which should be received shortly. Martin also mentioned that there is some confusion about cost-sharing, as different states have varying capabilities for conducting cost-share programs. CT DEEP does not currently have the capacity to manage such programs directly, so they are exploring the possibility of working with a third party to handle cost-sharing. Details on this are still being worked out, but they are actively monitoring the situation.

4. OLD BUSINESS

A. Legislative Updates.

Savageau provided an update on the recent legislative session, highlighting both positives and challenges. The good news is that funding for the Council remains intact, which is a major priority. However, there are concerns about the Passports to the Park program, which funds the Council, districts, and Connecticut RC&D. The Passports to the Park program, which is supported by fees collected through car registrations, allows free access to all state parks. With increasing park usage, there are growing concerns about overcrowding, such as full parking lots at places like Rocky Neck State Park. There is debate over whether the current funding model will be sustainable, and adjustments to the program are anticipated. Savageau noted that the program will undergo a thorough review, and it is essential for the Council, districts, and RC&D to have solid data on how effectively they are leveraging these funds. In response, efforts will be made to gather detailed information on fund utilization and leverage. Fact sheets detailing these aspects will likely be developed in the fall. Savageau emphasized the need to stay informed and engaged with the upcoming discussions and developments.

J. Shapiro raised a concern about the need for a legislative liaison. Savageau acknowledged that it might be necessary. She mentioned that there are funds in the Council's budget for this purpose, but they have not requested those funds recently as they have been able to manage legislative matters effectively. Savageau also highlighted that they have established strong partnerships, such as with Connecticut Forest and Parks, which help monitor these issues closely. She indicated that the decision on whether to hire a liaison will depend on the outcomes of the upcoming legislative session and the ability to handle the workload collectively.

Savageau briefly addressed the legislative outcomes. She noted that while there were some successes from an environmental perspective, the major environmental bill, the Climate Change Bill, did not pass. Although the bill passed in the House, the Senate chose not to bring it up for a vote, and there are ongoing efforts to include it in a special session. However, Savageau expressed skepticism about its chances of passing, given the focus of the special session on just one or two items. The Climate Change Bill was significant because it included a section on nature-based solutions, which is crucial for securing funding for these approaches. This section was important for addressing climate change, community resiliency, and adaptation. Savageau emphasized the role of nature-based solutions in climate action, including their impact on forest and water management, soil health, and climate change mitigation. She highlighted the work of the coalition she collaborates with, including the Connecticut Land Conservation Coalition, Audubon Connecticut, Connecticut Rivers Alliance, and the Connecticut League of Conservation Voters, which are all advocating for this aspect of climate legislation.

B. Training for Conservation and Inland Wetland Commissions.

T.Morgart highlighted a critical issue regarding disaster preparedness funding. He noted that while the NRCS's Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program provides essential support for towns recovering from emergencies like Hurricane Sandy, it requires a cost-share from municipalities, typically a 75-25 split, with potential for a 90-10 split for disadvantaged communities. However, municipalities often lack budget allocations for disaster preparedness, which complicates their ability to access these funds quickly. Ordinances require towns to discuss any unexpected expenditures at two separate meetings, leading to delays of at least 30 days, often extending to 60 days or more—timeframes that are not conducive to rapid response during emergencies.

He pointed out that, budget cuts seven years ago have removed DEEP support for disaster preparedness. With the increasing frequency of disasters, this lack of funding places towns in a difficult position, as they struggle to access federal funds in a timely manner.

Savageau suggested that this need should be included in DEEP's budget request and emphasized the importance of educating and advocating with the governor's office to ensure it is included in the budget. She also proposed forming a coalition to advocate for these matching funds, involving organizations such as the Connecticut Land Conservation Coalition (CLCC), Audubon Connecticut, and others focused on nature-based solutions. This coalition could help push for necessary changes and support the conservation work being done.

C. LISS Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan Update.

Savageau provided an update on the Long Island Sound Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan. Savageau discussed that the plan was considering a name change from the "Long Island Sound Study" to the "Long Island Sound Estuary Program" or possibly "Long Island Sound Estuary Initiative." The term "estuary" is being included to clarify the program's focus, as there has been confusion over the term "study." Savageau also mentioned that a significant change in the updated plan was the expansion of the boundary to include watersheds. Previously, the focus was primarily on the coastal boundary, which was appropriate for Long Island but less so for Connecticut and the northern shore. Now, the plan will encompass entire watersheds such as the Connecticut River and Housatonic basins. This approach will consider metrics related to overall watershed health, including impervious cover, tree cover, and natural vegetation, rather than just nutrient management.

The draft plan is expected to be available for public comment in late August.

J. Shapiro noted that calling it an "estuary program" might inadvertently suggest a focus limited to coastal areas, which could be misleading given the program's broader watershed implications.

D. Soil Health Committee

L. Ruiz provided an update on the Soil Health Committee's efforts. She explained that they have put out a call for an intern to assist with finalizing the soil health plan. Due to the heavy workloads of the current team members, an intern is crucial to move the plan forward. The intern would work over the summer, receive a stipend, and help complete the first consistent draft of the plan. Lilian added that they are considering inviting Amelia Magistrali (UConn Extension) to join the Soil Health Committee, which would be a valuable addition. The goal is to have the plan substantially completed by the end of the year, with the summer focused on significant progress and subsequent public input and final edits.

E. ENVIROTHON

J. Shapiro highlighted that the local team achieved a significant milestone by winning their first competition and qualifying for the International Competition in New York State, presenting an opportunity for Connecticut participants to volunteer at the event, given its proximity. Joanna also mentioned that the annual picnic meeting is tentatively scheduled for next month. C. Cappiali added that despite weather issues, most teams were able to complete their stations, and the grading and award ceremonies were managed well. Savageau praised the program and encouraged everyone to pay attention to the Environmental Program and expressed her appreciation for everyone involved in supporting the Environmental Fund, acknowledging the contributions from the Council, districts, and NRCS.

F. Stormwater and E&S Guideline Updates

Savageau provided an update on stormwater and erosion control guidelines. She noted that, while the Stormwater Management Manual has been updated and is being promoted through outreach by DEEP and UConn, the updated Erosion and Sediment Control Guidelines have not been as prominently highlighted. She urged everyone to make sure that when discussing stormwater management, they also

mention the updated erosion and sediment control guidelines to ensure comprehensive awareness and compliance.

G. Grant Updates

- US Forest Service Landscape Scale Restoration

During a recent virtual meeting with the districts, the focus was on securing match funding for these grants. Savageau mentioned that while they had hoped to secure match funding through the IRA funding from the Department of Agriculture, those funds were allocated elsewhere, and they did not qualify. As a result, she is exploring other sources for the match, including legislative discussions and private donors. The goal is to finalize the match funding so that work can commence. She outlined that the conservation districts are evaluating potential project sites and may need a workshop on Source Water Protection to utilize the available tools effectively. The primary focus now is on securing the match funding at a larger scale, rather than relying on local partners, to ensure the project can proceed smoothly.

- NACD Technical Assistance Grants:

Currently, there are three active grants, including the latest one from 2023, which is now being funded to the Council. The districts continue to benefit from these grants, and the personnel hired under these grants are actively working. However, there are variations in the pace of work among the districts, which may affect billing and progress. Despite these challenges, the grants have been invaluable to the districts, and it is crucial that they continue to receive funding to avoid significant issues in the future.

L. Ruiz mentioned that the technical assistance grants are essential for the districts, as they enable the hiring of technical assistants who perform critical work. Without ongoing funding, it would be challenging for districts to maintain their progress and effectiveness.

Savageau added that the NACD provides funds to support conservation planners, who are trained with NRCS to develop conservation plans. While the training is beneficial, it also highlights the need for continued support to ensure that these planners can continue their important work effectively.

- NRCS Conservation Planning Support Grant

Savageau addressed the ongoing challenge of retaining trained conservation planners. While many are trained and then transition to other roles, there are still several conservation planners moving into the sector to become certified and able to certify plans. The goal is to continually improve technical assistance provided by the districts in collaboration with NRCS. Discussions are also underway with the Department of Agriculture regarding conservation planning for farmland preservation, emphasizing the need for robust outreach and technical assistance for farmers.

Ruiz provided an update on the Conservation Planning Support Grant. The Council issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) to hire five project assistants. However, complications have arisen due to the need to navigate the different policies and benefits of the five conservation districts, each being a separate nonprofit entity. The challenge is compounded by high costs for health insurance and the complexity of HR compliance across multiple organizations. An HR contractor has been brought on to help with these issues, but the process remains complex and time-consuming. The hope is to have these positions posted by the end of July.

Savageau noted the unique challenges of this contract, particularly the HR requirements for small nonprofits compared to those under the Affordable Care Act. The positions will be housed with NRCS but employed by the districts, adding complexity to the process. The team is working diligently to resolve these issues and will keep everyone updated.

- LISS Watershed Operations Grant – Council/DEEP

Savageau provided an update on the Long Island Sound Watershed Operations Grant. This initiative, modeled after the Cape Cod Restoration Program, aims to enhance stormwater management and improve coastal habitats in the Long Island Sound region. The focus areas include:

- Stormwater management improvements affecting shellfish beds
- Tidal marsh restoration efforts
- Enhancing tidal flushing to benefit tidal marshes

Recent activities include two meetings held to discuss these goals. This session would solicit project ideas from local stakeholders, including shellfish commissions, harbor management commissions, and planning and zoning commissions. An Advisory Board, featuring representatives from the Connecticut Department of Aquaculture, NRCS, and local shellfish commissions, was also involved in guiding this effort.

To facilitate data collection and project site identification, the project was utilizing an app that would allow users to geolocate and submit data accurately, enhancing the effectiveness of field data collection. The Cape Cod model, which started with \$4-5 million in funding and grew to \$42 million, demonstrates the potential for expanding funding and projects over time. The Long Island Sound initiative is set to be only the second NRCS program of its kind used for coastal resources, marking a significant advancement for the region.

AGENCY REPORTS

A. DEEP: Chris Martin and Melissa Mostowy reported.

- Christopher Martin from CT DEEP Forestry shared that the response to an urban forestry grant focused on environmental justice communities in Connecticut has been impressive, with over \$4 million in proposals and \$1 million allocated this year, with another \$1 million set for next year. New hires include Christopher Teeter, who began in April to support urban forestry efforts, and Beth Bernard, the first outreach specialist for the Forestry Division. Additionally, Brian James is exploring community wildfire defense plans in Connecticut, despite the state's limited wildfire, as part of broader climate resiliency efforts. The department is also working closely with the Ag Station and anticipating further federal funding.

B. UConn Extension: Amy Harder reported

- Amy Harder from UConn Extension provided no new updates beyond what has already been shared. However, she plans to provide a more comprehensive inventory of ongoing efforts and new hires at the September meeting. Her goal is to enhance connections between UConn Extension and partners in soil and water conservation, ensuring effective collaboration and avoiding duplication of efforts.

C. NRCS: Tom Morgart reported.

- Thomas Morgart shared that there is a significant opportunity with the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), with substantial funding available due to a climate focus from the Inflation Reduction Act. They are currently engaging with partners interested in submitting proposals, either this year or in the next cycle. Additionally, the team is working to obligate financial assistance funds, aiming to complete this process within the next three months to avoid losing the funds by September 30th. Staff are diligently working to ensure all funds are committed on time.

D. CAES: Leigh Whittinghill reported.

- Leigh Whittinghill from CAES shared that despite some weather-related challenges, the

Envirothon Career Day was a success with participation from several scientists, a technician, and a seasonal worker. They also recently started their Plant Health Fellowship program with ten undergraduate students involved in lab work and career development activities. Plant Science Day was scheduled for August 7th, and a flyer would be shared for broader distribution. With over 80 seasonal hires this year, including those funded by recent grants, they are experiencing a parking shortage but are pleased with the increased staffing. They are continuing to develop partnerships with local universities for student mentorship and have recently updated their station news and grant information on their website, which would be shared for those interested.

E. CACD/NACD: Denise Savageau reported.

- The Connecticut Association of Conservation Districts (CACD) is actively engaged in several key initiatives. They represent the districts on the Long Island Sound Study Citizens Advisory Group and the Water Planning Council Advisory Group, focusing on Long Island Sound and source water protection.
- CACD is also the liaison to the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), which is crucial for securing grants and funding, particularly from the upcoming Farm Bill. Recent developments indicate that a Farm Bill is likely to pass this summer, a significant shift from earlier expectations.
- Additionally, CACD would participate in the NACD Summer Board meeting and Northeast Regional meeting in Boston this August. They are working on a landscape-scale restoration grant that connects forest and water quality across a 13-state regional partnership, with a notable meeting scheduled in Connecticut this November. This event will bring together water utilities, foresters, and other stakeholders to discuss forest and water partnerships. Stay tuned for more details on these initiatives and upcoming events.

F. NCCD: Joanna Shapiro reported.

- Joanna Shapiro reported that they are currently not applying for additional Long Island Sound grants, focusing instead on the two Futures Fund grants they already hold. Recently, they conducted a successful Town Hall-style meeting in Hartford for the North Branch Park River watershed plan update and green infrastructure design project. The event featured a site walk with Fuss & O'Neill engineers and provided an opportunity for community members to review and comment on proposed projects. The next step involves narrowing down the project list and securing landowner support for permitting.
- For the Broad Brook watershed implementation project, they are working with NRCS on agricultural waste management. Recent developments include the clarification that Davis-Bacon labor standards, which could have increased project costs by 20%, do not apply to this grant. The RFP has been issued, and a pre-proposal meeting with NRCS engineers is scheduled for July 1st.
- Additionally, she mentioned that they are in the process of hiring new staff to replace a recent vacancy and support work with NRCS and municipal obligations, including serving as a wetland agent. Interviews are underway with the aim of accelerating the hiring process to address these needs.

G. Eastern Connecticut Conservation District: Daniel Mullins reported

- Daniel Mullins provided a brief update on several projects. They are advancing with large Long Island Sound Futures Fund grants for free stall barns and waste management facilities in Lebanon and North Stonington, which are currently in the early planning stages.
- Additionally, they are working on several grants, including projects in Groton's Birch Plain Creek, Thompson, and a rain garden project for pollinator habitat, which is set to conclude by the end

of August.

H. NWCD: Annette Lott reported

- The plant sale held on Earth Day was a great success with a strong turnout.
- Progress is being made on the Long Island Futures Fund Grant at Freud's Farm, with ongoing site visits to monitor developments.
- The library gardening program in Beardsley and Winsted is underway, including programs for adults, children, and teens, with the children and teen programs continuing through the summer. A similar program is set to start soon in New Milford.
- The Hemp project, discussed previously, is still in negotiations with hopes for an award.
- NWCD experienced a staff change with Lola leaving her role as program administrator, and Cynthia stepping in part-time. Despite being short-staffed, the team is managing and is enthusiastic about their summer programs.

I. SWCD: Cheryl Cappiali reported

- Plant Science Day was already mentioned by Leigh, so no additional details were needed.
- The two interns are performing well and are close to becoming employees.

5. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – no comments

6. ADJOURN –The meeting was adjourned at 12:14 PM.