

Summary of the Orleans County NRCD Locally Led Community Meeting

February 10, 2025, in Irasburg, Vermont

The primary goal of the meeting was to gather community input on natural resource concerns to guide the local distribution of funds from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Purpose: The meeting aimed to collect local perspectives on conservation priorities related to water quality, forests, wildlife, climate, croplands, soils, and other natural resources. This input is intended to inform OCNRCDs work and the allocation of NRCS funds at the county level, shifting away from a statewide ranking system.

Participants: 40 Attendees included a diverse group of community members, landowners, farmers, board members of the Conservation District, and representatives from various organizations such as FPAC-NRCS and the Department of Forest Parks and Recreation.

Presentations: Several speakers provided insights and updates:

- **Introduction to the Conservation District:** This segment explained the district's history (formed in 1946) and its role as a non-regulatory local voice connecting federal agencies like NRCS with the community. It highlighted various programs and services offered, such as water sampling, tree sales, and riparian restoration.
- **Farmer's Perspective:** A local dairy farmer and CONRCD board chair shared "three big wins" for agriculture, including the dissemination of information about Required Agricultural Practices (RAPs), the increase in cover crop planting, and effective outreach by the Conservation District. Challenges such as maintaining water quality, keeping up with regulations, and the economics of local dairy farming were also discussed.
- **Water Quality Update:** This presentation focused on the elevated phosphorus levels in Lake Memphremagog and Missisquoi Bay, both considered impaired. Progress in reducing phosphorus was noted (17% for Lake Memphremagog watershed and 24% for Missisquoi Bay watershed), and challenges like the time it takes to see improvements in large water bodies and the impact of increased runoff from extreme weather events were highlighted.
- **Forest-related Challenges and Advances:** The Orleans County county forester and OCNRCD board member discussed major concerns, including the impacts of a changing climate (e.g., severe stresses on trees from insect outbreaks and weather extremes, difficulties in forest operations due to un-frozen soils), and challenges with tree regeneration due to deer populations and invasive species. Positive developments included increased public awareness and discussion about forests, a decrease in logging violations, and a growing interest from landowners in resilient forest management practices and available funding for such initiatives.
- **Community Input Sessions:** Participants broke into smaller groups for discussions.
- **First Discussion (Conservation Issues):** Key themes that emerged were land pressure due to changing ownership, climate change impacts and adaptation strategies, agricultural consolidation and its effect on small farms, soil degradation (especially in floodplains), and the need for more targeted government funding and better education on available programs. Other points included water management, floodplain enhancement, managing deer populations, supporting wildlife corridors, and the need for more education and outreach to landowners.

- **Second Discussion (Funding Priorities):** Building on a graph of past NRCS funding and frequently scheduled practices, groups discussed what might be "missing" in past funding and where money should be allocated. Ideas included more emphasis on managing invasive species, incentivizing organic matter building in soils, supporting sustainable fertilizers, consumer education (especially on authentic certifications), and directing NRCS funds more locally, potentially for equipment purchases. There was also a strong emphasis on more comprehensive, regional, or statewide planning for conservation efforts, and better utilization of existing resources like town conservation commissions.

Next Steps: The collected information from the discussions and surveys will be summarized and used to develop a conservation action plan. This plan will then be reviewed by a smaller group of partners and technical experts before being presented to the State Technical Committee for decisions on local funding pools.

Call to Action: Attendees were encouraged to complete the ongoing survey (with a chance to win a gift certificate) and stay engaged with the Conservation District for future updates and opportunities.