



Otsego County Soil & Water Conservation District

967 CO HWY 33 – RIVER ROAD – COOPERSTOWN, NEW YORK 13326-9222 – PHONE (607) 547-8337 ext. 4

OTSEGO COUNTY SWCD BOARD MEETING MINUTES

Friday, April 16, 2021

Held remotely on GoToMeeting.com

United States (Toll Free): [1 866 899 4679](tel:18668994679)

United States: [+1 \(571\) 317-3116](tel:+15713173116)

Access Code: 492-177-813

Members Present:

Les Rathbun, Chair, Grange Rep.
Meg Kennedy, Vice Chair, Cty. Rep
Ed Lentz, Member at Large
Doris Moennich, Treasurer/Landowner
Helene Kraham, Ag Landowner (Late)

Staff Present:

Jordan Clements, District Manger
Jessica Miller, Secretary/Assistant Treasurer

Members Absent:

Helene Kraham, Ag Landowner
Michele Farwell, County Legislator

Guests Present:

Kathryn Hemstreet, Farm Service Agency, County Executive Director
Brian Steinmuller, Assistant Director, NYS Ag & Markets
Scott Fickbohm, Regional Associate Environmental Analyst, NYS Ag & Markets

I. Call to order: Board Chairman, **Les Rathbun** called the online meeting to order at 10:00 a.m.

II. Approval of minutes:

- Motion was made by **Lentz**, seconded by **Kennedy** to approve March's board meeting minutes.
Roll Call Vote: Rathbun – Aye, Kennedy – Aye, Lentz – Aye, Moennich – Aye, Roseboom - Aye. The motion carried.

III. Approval of Treasurer's Report & Bills to be paid

A list of February's bills to be paid were provided to the Board in advance of the meeting.

- Motion was made by **Lentz**, seconded by **Kennedy** to approve treasurer's report.
Roll Call Vote: Rathbun – Aye, Kennedy – Aye, Lentz – Aye, Moennich – Aye, Roseboom - Aye. The motion carried.



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- Motion was made to approve bills paid was made by **Lentz**, seconded by **Kennedy**. Roll Call Vote: Rathbun – Aye, Kennedy – Aye, Lentz – Aye, Moennich – Aye, Roseboom – Aye. The motion carried.

IV. Partner Reports

FSA- Kathryn Hemestreet, County Executive Director reports on the FSA side the best news is the service center is now open for in office appointments, one person at a time, no people are allowed in the lobby, and we are keeping a log. Mask policy is in place and general Covid screening questions are asked before entering. Staff are wearing masks. New administration took a pause on CFAP and general signup for CRP to review, but currently have a general signup for annual rental payments for retired land, and several coronavirus assistance program signups. CFAP 2 signup has begun again, 2019 sales for crops, 2020 milk production, 2020 animal inventories. Annual assistance to traditionally underserved communities is included, and there is a form to complete.

NRCS- no report

NYS Ag & Markets, Scott Fickbohm, Regional Associate Environmental Analyst reports highlights on April SWCC report. Report was emailed to Board prior to meeting. The State expanded virtual meetings, in person meetings will happen soon safely. 2021-2022 EPF funded all environmental programs. Direct Aid to Soil and Water Districts increased ½ million dollars. Strong numbers for remaining programs as well. Aldo Leopold award submissions has ben extended until May 1st. This is a nationwide award for farms with strong conservation ethic. American Farmland Trust is offering money to help transition dairy farms.

Brian Steinmuller, Assistant Director, NYS Ag & Markets reports that he would like to acknowledge how hard this last year has been, and knows it hasn't been easy. Otsego SWCD has been successful at receiving numerous grants. He is here today to stress that fact that grant projects need to get done in the field and office properly. Informing the Board that on March 12 he emailed Jordan expressing concern about past due closeouts, 19 months overdue, and that he will be pulling in another coordinator, PJ Emerick, NYS Ag & Markets, Associate Environmental Analyst. On March 25, 2021 Scott and PJ agreed to meet to review 3 most past due closeouts. It was agreed upon prior that all 3 must be closed out by the end of the meeting, but they were not. Auditors at the State will be getting involved. Progress has been made between the District and NRCS to review grants, but the State wanted to make everyone aware of the financial liability of the District if farms were overpaid. Ed Lentz sent



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out an email to Jordan and Les asking the question of how do we know if there are other grants with this problem. Les noted he didn't have knowledge of such email. Ag and Markets requested a board member be present for the March 25 meeting, the reason for that was to be sure the Board understands the circumstances of the overpayments. Ed Lentz thanked Ag and Markets for attending the Board meeting and coming to the Board directly. Notes there has been overpayment discussion with DeGlee grant. Some of us for the first time are learning there have been other overpayments. Asks if NYS Ag & Markets has a checklist for closeouts, or training program. Brain Steinmuller answers with the short answer is yes there is a checklist. Meg Kennedy asks of ways to maximize our opportunities to learn more about the programs with Jessica Miller in place because this is going to help Jordan because he has a lot going on. Jessica Miller comments that Scott Fickbolm has worked on grant trainings with her prior. Brian Steinmuller replies that they can match us up with help. Stresses the point that the administration of the grant is just as important as the field component of the grant. There are two grants with overpayments, 2 other grants that are past due, and 4 other grants in contract need to be completed this year. At this point NYS Ag and Markets could deem Otsego SWCD as an irresponsible vendor for State programs. Every step the District takes to get these projects done will make sure they can continue to provide services to the farmers.

Meg Kennedy asks what the benchmarks are to reprove our worthiness as a responsible vendor. Is there a process to go by? Brain Steinmuller responds that would be part of the process. Auditors are coming up with a game plan, and there will be a good flow of communication. There will be steps provided. Ed Lentz comments that part of the problems seems to be the complexity with partnering with NRCS. Sure, we aren't the only ones who partner up, does Ag and Markets have guidance on this. Brain Steinmuller answers there aren't as many examples of state and federal partnering on grants but that it is done. However, doesn't feel that that's the root cause of the complexity here. We can make sure the farm did not receive more than 100% of the 75% share. Lack of communication between SWCD and NRCS have caused an issue. Jordan Clements comments that communication issues were talked about at the last meeting, and he is sorry this happening. Scott has done his efforts, and he wants to get this corrected. These are good projects my staff and I have done, and I'm embarrassed this is happening. Meg Kennedy asks what the reason is that the two projects were not closed out on March 25. Jordan Clements explains he couldn't close the two grants out due to the question of overpayment. As much as we want the State to be happy with us, the farmers would not be happy with us asking to pay that much back. A further meeting will take place on Tuesday. Ed Lentz welcomes an audit going forward. If the Board



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can assist we would be happy to. Brian Steinmuller responds at this point it is in our internal auditors' hands. We have offered a plan for repayment. It will require OSC approval, any District has gone through an OSC audit has come out better in the end.

Scott Fickbohm explains how a grant is closed out, the department has a suite of forms that reflect the process who is taking responsibility for the engineering. Show the State share and landowner share, time tracking, landowner time, District time, timesheets, summary closeout and review of the backup documentation, and AEA review. Things get played out on paper that happen overtime. Scott provided Jordan a bulleted list of missing things and questions for each grant in process of being closed out. This is now over a year old, McGrath and Tafel closeouts are missing documentation, and Tafel grant has a lengthy list of revisions. 3 other grants are passed due, one cancelled, 2 per Jordan are "ready to close" Scott does the initial review and Bethany Bzduch, Program Manager, does a further review. Will be looking at the status of other open grants as well.

Les Rathbun thanks Scott and Brain for input and attendance today. Brian Steinmuller thanks the Board, we would like to continue to provide status updates to follow up with board members going forward.

V. District Secretary/Assistant Treasurer Report

Angelica scheduled due tax payments and prepared corrected 941's for 2020. We also filed the 945's for the 1st quarter so we are back on track. I will be meeting with her virtually after this meeting to continue the 2020 audit. Worked with Karl to process the remaining tree sale orders, we ended up having to turn people away this year due to lack of inventory. We reached 95 orders to date. The District reported 61 RCPP-EQIP hours for reimbursement from USC for the 1st Quarter. Leatherstocking Envirothon will be held virtually with two schools participating with two teams each. They are excited for the event. It will be held on Wednesday, April 28, 2021. I am here to help Jordan with closeouts.

VI. District Reports

Jordan Clements, District Manager, reports the District was awarded two of the four USC RCPP-EQIP projects. As of Monday, we would like to have all the staff back in person at the office. We need to get grants done, and staff will be in next week to wrap trees for the tree sale. AEM projects are making progress, visits to the site have been made at a future spring development site that will also keep the cows out of the riparian buffer. The other project is a CSP project that needed additional funding for secondary fuel containment. Currently



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working on getting RCPP-EQIP commitment letters and plan of work completed for two CRP projects. Karl and Chris are working on outreach and education for beginning farmers to learn about programs and CNMPs. Working with Danny Lapin on Butternut Watershed Study. Working with Rich on hydro seeder, and they are using the water pump to clean bridges. This helps meet performance measures for partnership. Shower curtain will be hung, hand sanitizer will be offered, and we will be cleaning after people enter building. Ag. Assessments have continued, we will be getting someone else trained to help out. We are receiving resumes for the Part B/USC buffer steward/intern positions. Interviews will be in the next few weeks, will provide interns with PPE and will be expected to follow mask guidelines. Jordan met with Bethany, PJ and Tony last week and will be meeting again on Tuesday to work on reducing overpayment. Two years ago, when we cancelled our emails with Homestead we asked them to remove us, we were charged for service we did not use, they are refunding us for this years payment. Picking up allocation money today, meeting with Farmland Protection Plan members this afternoon. Signed letter of recommendation for USC for 2.5 million \$ buffer project. We are getting ready for tree sale pickup next weekend. We have everything for two closeouts next week. Cherry Valley grazing will be closed out, and we will send the money back. Like to have the remaining 5 grants into Ag and Markets by the end of next month.

Karl and Jeanine are working on design for spring development. Buffer grants are moving forward. Lot of large tree sale orders, Mark and Karl are currently in PA picking up trees. Staff will be back to wrap trees next week, and the virtual Leatherstocking Envirothon is the following week on April 28. Ed Lentz asks if Jordan has heard about the ability to require Covid vaccination. Jordan talked to the County, there is nothing that says we can force staff to get the vaccination. Brian Steinmuller comments the answer is no, an employer cannot force an employee to get the vaccine. Meg Kennedy asks as Jordan makes progress on closeouts that he keeps the board in the loop so they know you are hitting your closeout goals. Les Rathbun hopes the Board will be able to meet in person for the May meeting. Jordan states tables can be setup for proper social distancing in the pole barn, and for those that aren't comfortable attending we could still setup Go to Meeting.

- VII. Next Meeting:** Next meeting to be held on **Friday, May 21, 2021 at 10:00 a.m.**
- VIII. Adjournment:** Meeting adjourned at **11:24 a.m.**



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Respectfully submitted,

Jessica Miller

Jessica L. Miller

Administrative Assistant/Secretary/Assistant Treasurer

April 30, 2021