



70 East Madison Road, Skowhegan ME 04976
Phone (207) 474-8323
info@somersetswcd.org www.somersetswcd.org

Somerset County Soil and Water Conservation District 2024 Local Working Group (LWG) Meeting Minutes

Thursday, January 18, 2024, from 1:40 –3:43 PM held in-person as well as via Zoom Video Call

Attendees:

Jennifer Hebert, Executive Director – – Somerset County Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD); **Alexis Clune**, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Skowhegan Service Center District Conservationist; **Maddy Crutchley**, NRCS Skowhegan Service Center Program Assistant; **Brenna Gibbons**, NRCS Skowhegan Service Center Resource Conservationist; **Joe Dembeck**, landowner, Somerset County SWCD Board Supervisor - Skowhegan; **Jon Doty**, Private Consulting Forester, Somerset County SWCD Board Supervisor – Madison; **Gwen Hilton**, landowner, Somerset County SWCD Board Supervisor – Starks; **Colin Hoffman**, landowner, Somerset County SWCD Board Supervisor – Madison; **Peter Belloff**, NRCS Maine State Office, Acting State Conservationist; **Carol Weymouth**, Maine Association of Conservation Districts (MACD), Executive Director; **Tim Hewitt**, Hay, Corn and Cattle Farmer – Skowhegan; **Brad Santy**, Dairy Farmer – Skowhegan; **Joseph Roy**, Private Lands Biologist – Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (IF & W); **Ben Koehler**, Maine Street Skowhegan, Outdoors Coordinator; **David Bernard**, Adjunct Professor in School of Environment and Sustainability at Royal Roads University; **Jim Ferrante**, District Forester - Maine Forest Service (MFS) (virtual); **Holli Cederholm**, Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) - Embden (virtual); **Daren Turner**, Private Consulting Forester – Norridgewock (virtual).

Jenn Hebert, Somerset SWCD Executive Director, called the meeting to order and thanked attendees for their participation. Jenn asked attendees to introduce themselves, stating their name and organization/department/town of residence or land ownership. All participants were emailed on January 4th and reminded on January 16th or immediately upon their registration if after this date, with a packet that included: meeting agenda, 2023 LWG Meeting Minutes, summary sheets on NRCS programs, 2024 NRCS State Funding Allocations and a Zoom virtual meeting link.

Jenn discussed what the Local Working Group (LWG) is, the role of the group in this meeting, and how participants can ask questions to the presenter or group. Jenn asked the group if anyone had any questions or comments regarding the 2023 LWG Meeting Minutes. David Bernard requested that the minutes be revised to define acronyms contained within the document. *Motion made by Joe Dembeck to revise 2023 minutes to define all acronyms in the document. Seconded by Ben Koehler. Motion passed.* Once Jenn makes the approved revisions the meeting minutes from the 2023 LWG will be finalized.



Alexis Clune (NRCS District Conservationist)

- Reviewed the historical funding levels and category allocations (both local and state funding pools) and explained the FY2024 fund allocations (state pools) in detail to the group.
- Explained the new funding initiative “ACT NOW” which allows NRCS to immediately approve and obligate a ranked application in a designated ranking pool when an eligible application meets or exceeds a State determined minimum ranking score will apply to all planning applications. She shared the stats on current sign up for FY24 in Somerset.
- Aquatic Restoration projects in addition to standard Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) will now also be available in Somerset to be funded through a Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) component of EQIP.
- New this year is the Beginning Farmer initiative will switch focus from Soil Health to Ag Waste.
- Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) provided additional funding for conservation practices. Maine NRCS received \$904,000 for CSP and \$12,321,000 for EQIP for FY24 under IRA
- A copy of Alexis’ slide presentation is available upon request.

A lively discussion regarding the recent excessive rainfall events and other climate change impacts ensued. It was noted by Peter Belloff that the US Secretary of Agriculture is aware that priorities are changing, and things will evolve as the climate science progresses.

Alexis then turned the groups focus on soliciting comments for FY 2025 allocation.

After reviewing a snapshot of FY23 applications received and funded. Discussion followed, including:

Joe Dembeck asked if Alexis knows how much funding the county will receive. To date, it is still unknown.

Joe Roy asked if IRA funding will include forestry practices this year. Last year it was disappointing how few were funded. Alexis indicated that the funding is greatly increased this year. A second application period is likely to occur once the current round closes in March.

It is important to the group that forestry practices are funded in this county. Joe Dembeck, Joe Roy both indicated that it has been discouraging in the past that so many applications have not been funded.

Joe Dembeck commented that a statewide pool of funds for Ag Waste may help more contracts get approved. Ag Waste projects are extremely expensive.

Joe Dembeck suggested that the percentages stay the same as last year:

Ag Waste – 70%

Forestry – 23%

Crop – 6%

Pasture – 1%

Discussion ensued. Alexis Clune then asked the entire group about their support for this proposal. All were in favor, but it was noted that the applications for cropland should be monitored to ensure that 6% is enough in the future.

Ag Waste Category Local Questions

No comments or discussion.

Forestry Category Local Questions

A discussion about forest access roads and erosion/water quality problems ensued. Joe Roy indicated that Timber Stand Improvement needs to continue to be a priority. Tim Hewitt commented that the economics of the timber industry is top priority for landowners. Ultimately the group reached consensus to change the local ranking questions to:

- 1) Does this plan include Forest Stand Improvement (666)?
 - Yes → 100 points
- 2) Will the practices in this application be used to treat non-native invasive species?
 - Yes → 25 points
- 3) If the applicant has had an NRCS contract previously awarded, did the contract fall behind schedule for reasons within the applicant's control? Answer No if no previous contracts.
 - Yes → negative 25 points
- 4) * Will the practices in this application include timber stand improvement in forest stands with average diameter of less than 5 inches?
 - Yes → 25 points
- 5) * Will this application address erosion in the forestland?
 - Yes → 25 points

** Denotes a change from the previous local ranking questionnaire*

Crop Category Local Questions

No comments or discussion.



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Pasture Category Local Questions

No comments or discussion.

Jenn Hebert informed all attendees that they had until Friday, January 26, 2024, to provide any additional feedback about the meeting.

The meeting adjourned at 3:43 pm.

Note: By 5:00pm on Friday January 26, 2024, Jenn Hebert received comments from meeting attendee David Bernard complimenting the high quality of Alexis Clune's presentation.

Respectfully submitted:

*Jennifer Hebert, Executive Director – Somerset County SWCD
February 1, 2024/Finalized January 16, 2025*

Resource Concern	% of Local Allocated Funding	Previous Year 2024	Previous Year 2023	Previous Year 2022	Previous Year 2021	Previous Year 2020	Previous Year 2019
Animal Waste	70 %	70%	70 %	74 %	70%	74 %	74 %
Forestry	23 %	23%	19 %	15 %	20%	15 %	15 %
Pasture	1 %	1%	1%	0%	10%	11 %	11 %
Cropland/Hayland	6 %	6%	10%	11%			
Soil Health	0 %	0%	0%	0%	0 %	0 %	0 %
Water Quality	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %
Local Fund Pool	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %
Seasonal High Tunnels	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %
Irrigation	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %
Wildlife	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	0 %
TOTAL	100 %	100%	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %



Meeting/Project Name	Somerset County Soil and Water Conservation District LOCAL WORKING GROUP MEETING		
Date of Meeting:	01/18/2024	Time	1:40 pm to 3:43 pm
Minutes prepared by: J Hebert		Conducted In-person and via Zoom (Virtual)	
Attendance at Meeting			
Name	Department / Division	Name	Department/Division
Jennifer Hebert	Somerset - SWCD	Joseph Roy	Maine DIFW
Joe Dembeck	Somerset SWCD	Jim Ferrante	Maine Forest Service
Jon Doty	Somerset SWCD	Carol Weymouth	MACD
Gwen Hilton	Somerset SWCD	Tim Hewitt	Cattle/Crop Farmer
Colin Hoffman	Somerset SWCD	Brad Santy	Dairy Farmer
Jon Doty	Somerset SWCD	Holli Cederholm	MOFGA
Alexis Clune	NRCS – Skowhegan DC	Daren Turner	Consulting Forester
Brenna Gibbons	NRCS – Skowhegan RC	David Bernard	Landowner
Maddy Crutchley	NRCS – Skowhegan PA	Ben Koehler	Maine Street Skowhegan
Peter Belloff	NRCS – Acting State Con		

Local Working Group Meeting Minutes, Somerset County SWCD
 February 1, 2024