

N-S-N Rivers Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council

MINUTES OF OCTOBER 21, 2021 MEETING

By Zoom Video Conference

Voting Member Entities Present:

Towns: Bolton: Rebecca Longvall; Groton: Stacey Chilcoat; Harvard: Lucy Wallace; Pepperell: Paula Terrasi; Shirley: Heidi Ricci; Townsend: Joan Wotkowicz
NRWA: Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell, Al Futterman, Martha Morgan
NPS: Emma Lord
MA F&W: Anne Gagnon, Pat Huckery, District Supervisor, NE District Office
DEC: Neil Angus

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 PM by the Chair, Lucy Wallace. Due to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic the meeting was held virtually by Zoom.

Administrative

The minutes of the September 16, 2021 meeting were approved as presented.

NPS Update

Emma Lord reported on the following items:

River Currents: This NPS publication is looking for articles for its annual issue of *River Currents* which will come out in January 2022. Emma offered to work with Al Futterman in drafting an article on the Forest Legacy Program application. Paula Terrasi suggested the culvert replacement and dam removal project on Sucker Brook in Pepperell might also be worth noting. It was agreed that if space allowed both topics would be covered in our submission to the NPS. The deadline for submission is November 15, 2021.

Partnership Wild & Scenic Rivers (PWSR): Emma gave a brief report on three topics covered at yesterday's Zoom quarterly meeting of the PWSR councils, which she and Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell attended.

First, Emma noted that all 16 PWSR councils were represented, a benefit of Zoom meetings as the designated rivers are all along the eastern seaboard. She reported that there are hearings on the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) before the Senate which includes designation of the York River in Maine as a Wild & Scenic River. Lucy mentioned that she would return to this topic later in the meeting.

Second, the NPS is working on finalizing the details for tracking council members' hours for credit in the Volunteers-in-Parks program. The NPS intention is to build the visibility of volunteers and programs, particularly with respect to PWSRs which are locally managed in partnership with the NPS.

Third, the NPS will be offering another annual Fellowship position this year to replace last year's Fellow, starting in January 2022. The hope is to have the Fellow focus on communications.

Emma will share the links for additional topics raised at the meeting, as well as the notes that will be generated. Elizabeth commented that attending these quarterly meetings is a useful way to learn what other Wild & Scenic River councils are doing,

Council Projects

Forest Legacy Program Project: Al Futterman reported that the Forest Legacy Program (FLP) application was submitted by MA DCR to the Forest Service on October 18th. In November a National Review Panel will review the application, along with those submitted by other states. We may know the ranking of all the projects by February which will give us some sense of the possibility of being awarded an FLP grant. Actual grant awards (this is for FY23 funding) will not be announced until the end of 2022, at the very earliest. He added that ours is the first FLP application to be submitted by the state in the last two years. He noted that 65 letters of support were submitted with our application, ranging from municipalities (combined Boards of Selectmen and Conservation Commissions), land trusts and other conservation organizations, and our state and federal legislators. Rebecca Longvall thanked Al for all his hard work on this project.

Invasives Project: Al reported that Michele Girard is working with Laura Bianco and Bernadette McQuilkin on an Invasives Plant project, which may result in developing a brochure providing guidance to landowners on their removal. Bernadette is a member of the Hollis Conservation Commission and is expected to be appointed as Hollis' alternate representative to the Council, replacing LeeAnn Wolff.

Cold Water Survey: Al is working with Ken Hartlage to identify coldwater fishery resource (CFR) streams that are tributaries of the Squannacook and Nissitissit Rivers for assessment of possible degradation. Of particular interest is the state of their shorelines which could impact the integrity of the streams. As mentioned at the last meeting, they are using EagleView, geospatial aerial imagery with extremely high resolution that enables them to get very detailed information on the current state of the streams and shoreline conditions without doing a site visit. It also provides access to historic imagery of these sites. Al shared a map showing the CFR streams they are interested in assessing, including Sucker and Gulf Brooks where they have already conducted a pilot survey, and asked for suggestions of other brooks to investigate. Pat Huckery noted that the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (MassWildlife) is doing a similar assessment of CFRs on Sucker and Gulf Brooks and suggested Al contact Rebecca Quinones. Heidi Ricci suggested several brooks in Shirley that feed into the Squannacook and Nashua Rivers, such as Mulpus, Walker, Bow, and Catacoonamug. Martha Morgan reported that she has placed temperature data loggers in many of these CFR streams and that she has been working with Rebecca on several common water monitoring efforts, including the use of temperature data loggers to locate coldwater species refugia. Heidi asked if data loggers could be left in the Squannacook River where it flows along the Squannacook River WMA. Martha noted that stretch of the river is considered warm water and, therefore, not part of her cold water project. Martha added that she is also working through UMass Amherst on a grant to assess every culvert in the Squannacook sub-basin (in addition to those assessed under a previous grant).

Squannacook River WMA (SRWMA) Proposed Barrens Restoration Project: Al recapped the history of our involvement in this proposed project, beginning with his being contacted by Tom Wansleben, MassWildlife Habitat Biologist, last July, followed by a site walk on August 9th led by Tom for members of the W&S Stewardship Council, Shirley Town Boards, and neighbors. Following the site walk, participants suggested a series of questions be developed and sent to Tom. Brian Hawthorne, MassWildlife Habitat Program Manager, responded to our questions in an email which resulted in additional follow-up questions being sent to Tom and Brian. With forest cutting expected to begin this

fall, Al asked if Tom could attend our October meeting. Tom agreed, but unfortunately, a scheduling conflict had arisen and, therefore, the visit will be postponed to the November Council meeting. Al suggested to Tom that he be joined at this meeting by Brian and Chris Buelow, MassWildlife Senior Restoration Ecologist, the “plan architects” and “habitat experts.”

Al had asked Tom if Pat Huckery was aware of this proposed restoration project and Pat confirmed that she was but had not been included in all of the email exchanges between Al, Tom and Brian. Al offered to send her the email thread. Pat suggested that Chalis Bird, Wildlife Biologist in the NE District Field Office, also be included in the email, especially as Chalis will be applying for the necessary permits.

Elizabeth suggested that a major portion of the November Council meeting may be needed in order to have a full discussion on this project and wondered if we should set a separate meeting. Lucy will see how full the next meeting’s agenda is and offered an earlier start time to make sure there was sufficient time for this topic.

Heidi acknowledged the need for ecological restoration and support of such projects. However, her concern is very specific to this site: how carefully has it been evaluated? It is quite large and connected to other conserved areas, providing an important wildlife corridor. She is also concerned about long-term invasives management which will be needed following the level of proposed cutting, as well as increased use of the area by mountain bikers and ATVs. Finally, she asked if the project could be phased, to enable better management and assessment of outcome.

Pat suggested that the entire MassWildlife team involved in this project be invited to our November meeting, including Tom, Brian, Chris from the Westborough office, and Pat, Chalis, and Travis Drudi, Stewardship Biologist, from the NE District Office. She felt her staff, in particular, was well aware of the richness of this area. She acknowledged that invasives management will be an issue. She added that “barrens” is a troubling word, for it implies emptiness and devoid of life. Rather, these areas sustain abundant vegetation and provide particular species’ habitat. Pat appreciated Heidi’s concern about invasives management and reported that the state is seeking additional funding for habitat management.

Lucy asked that any information on the proposed plan and management of the site be sent to the Council before the November meeting so members could review it ahead of time. Al offered to reach out to those who attended the August site walk with an invitation to the Council’s November meeting.

Stratton Hill Development: Al reported that three previously scheduled and then postponed Conservation Commission hearings on this project had been rescheduled for October 28th. In addition, the two previously postponed Planning Board hearings had been rescheduled for November 18th. A revised Conservation Analysis of the environmental impacts of the proposed subdivision was prepared and released today which, according to some early reviews, contained minimal revision to the earlier Analysis released last June. Al noted the report is available on the Ayer website. Al has prepared a statement and intends to present at the Conservation Commission’s hearing on October 28th.

Heidi noted that this project and the Robin Hill development on abutting land in Groton were approved about 15 years ago. An environmental assessment done at that time noted turtle nesting sites which were to be replaced by three new sites: two on the adjoining MassAudubon Rocky Hill Sanctuary and one on a site in Ayer. As far as she knows, this was never done, which was confirmed in an email to Al from Nick Rossi, MassAudubon Land Protection Specialist. Heidi added that the current Conservation Management permit, issued at the time the developments were approved, expired in 2012 and is now

being reviewed by Jesse Leddick, MassWildlife Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Office. She suggested AI contact Jesse.

Conservation Networking Breakfasts: The last event was held on September 21st and had as its featured speaker Paul Somers, a retired MA state botanist who is an expert in invasives. As there are no other breakfast speakers planned, no future breakfasts are currently scheduled. AI would welcome any suggested speakers and topics.

Finances

September Expenses: Elizabeth reported that the NRWA had invoiced the Council and Lucy had approved payment of \$9,303.72 for services provided to the Council in September. These include staff time associated with the Forest Legacy Program project and NRWA's role as fiscal agent.

NPS Budget Tracking: Elizabeth shared several charts itemizing and illustrating the expenditure of NPS FY21 and FY22 funds. She noted the carry-over of approximately \$20,000 in FY21 funds to FY22, explaining that \$10,000 of those funds were obligated for the 2021 Community Grants. Combining the FY21 and FY22 accounts, the Council has a balance of roughly \$161,000.

Outside Funds: As part of the FLP effort, the Council had sought and received grants from the Fields Pond Foundation (\$15,000) and MA DCR (\$31,036) as well as a reimbursement from the Townsend Conservation Land Trust (\$2,500) for a total of \$48,536 to cover the cost of the required restricted appraisals. Given the total cost for these appraisals was \$51,800, Elizabeth reminded the Council that it had previously authorized the reimbursement to the NRWA of the \$3,264 shortfall it had covered.

Council Business

Officer Nomination Process: As promised at the last meeting, the Bylaws and Policies Committee (Lucy, Emma, Neil Angus and Anne Gagnon) had met and drafted a policy to cover the Officer Nomination Process. As there were no questions or suggested revisions, Lucy requested a motion to adopt. On such motion made and seconded, the policy was unanimously approved and adopted.

2022 Community Grants Program: Lucy noted the three documents to be considered and approved: the Request for Proposals, Grant Application, and Grant Agreement which Joan Wotkowicz had reviewed and revised based on comments received last year from applicants and grantees. The changes were mostly minor, the most significant being the acceptance of electronic signatures on the Grant Agreement. Lucy added that once approved, the RFP and associated documents would be posted on the Council's and NRWA's websites. Applications would be due by February 1, 2022, with awards to be announced in March. The intent is to give the grantees more time to complete their projects by the end of 2022. On motion made and seconded all three documents were approved.

Pepperell Invasive Plant Advisory Committee: The final report due under the 2021 Community Grant to the Town of Pepperell (\$4,000) to support its newly formed Invasive Plant Advisory Committee has been submitted along with a final accounting showing the expenditure of \$3,989.99. Paula commented that the Committee had done a remarkable job this first year raising awareness of the extent of invasive plants, especially with outreach to residents. AI reported that Michele Girard is working on raising awareness on the problem of invasives and had indicated to him that she would like to see a similar committee in every town. Lucy noted that there is a balance of \$10.01 in unspent grant funds. It was suggested these funds could be used to purchase additional supplies, such as gloves or anti-poison ivy

soap. Lucy agreed to contact Deb Fountain, the grantee. On motion made and approved, the final report was accepted.

Reports to Town Selectmen: Joan had updated the 2021 “Update to the Town Select Boards” a draft of which had been previously distributed. Lucy noted it is slightly longer than the optimal two pages, but that both she and Joan felt that it was important to let the towns know all the Council had accomplished in the last year. In particular, Lucy felt it was important to highlight the Community Grants, both to recognize in the towns that had received grants, but also to encourage others to respond to the 2022 RFP. Heidi commented that the report had great content and suggested adding photos, where possible, for each town. Joan suggested that each town representative could modify and/or shorten the report as they deemed appropriate for their respective Select Boards. Lucy asked those present to make appointments to get on the agenda of their Select Boards before the end of this year. She will contact the representatives not at tonight’s meeting regarding this assignment. Al offered to contact Alix Turner and Victoria Petracca, the Lancaster representative and alternate.

Wild & Scenic Rivers Coalition: Lucy reported that she had been contacted by Lisa Ronald, Coordinator for the Wild & Scenic Rivers Coalition, requesting that the Stewardship Council formally join the Coalition by accepting its Policies and Procedures. Elizabeth noted she has received emails in the past from the Coalition with updates, particularly when seeking support of legislation to designate rivers as Wild & Scenic or for funding to the NPS for this program. It is, essentially, an advocacy group which, in her opinion, was worth joining. Lucy added that she had sought clarification on any obligation to provide funds to cover personnel and other costs. She was advised that at this point it is not necessary and future assessments, if any, would be subject to members’ approval. In addition, the Council could always leave the Coalition. Elizabeth noted staff and other Coalition expenses are currently covered by American Rivers and American Whitewater.

Lucy then noted that there are two hearings on a bill (the National Defense Authorization Act) before the Senate which involve designating the York River in Maine as Wild & Scenic and that we were being asked by the Coalition to sign onto letters supporting designation. As these requests often come with only a day or so to sign onto, she suggested that the Executive Committee be authorized to sign such requests. She asked for two votes by the Council. The first, to authorize her to sign on behalf of the Council the Agreement to join the Coalition and to authorize the Executive Committee to act on requests for letters of support. The second was to sign the letters in support of hearings on designating the York River a Wild & Scenic River. On motions made and seconded, both passed unanimously.

Other

Townsend Pedestrian Bridge: Joan reported on the on-going effort by Squannacook Greenways, Inc. (aka Squannacook River Rail Trail-SRRT) to install a small pedestrian bridge where there once was a vehicular bridge over the Squannacook River at the end of the section of Old Meetinghouse Road south of Rt 119 and north of the Squannacook River. The proposed pedestrian bridge would provide a safer and more direct connection to the Squannacook River Wildlife Management Area (SRWMA) and possibly the SRRT from areas of Townsend south of the river, particularly the Timberlee Park housing complex. Joan noted this was not part of the original plan for the Trail. An anonymous donor, who has retained the services of Dillis & Roy to do the engineering work and has agreed to fund the installation of the bridge, had approached the SRRT to seek the necessary permits on his/her behalf. A Notice of Intent was filed with the Townsend Conservation Commission in June and the initial hearing was held in September. The hearing has been continued pending the applicant’s addressing the issues raised by MassWildlife (Natural Heritage and Endangered Species office) as the trail abuts the SRWMA and the

bridge and trail could impact its critical habitat. Joan added that the proponent is working with MassWildlife to address its issues, including revising the bridge plans and providing alternatives. Al asked about the status of this particular section of Old Meetinghouse Road (just north of the river). Joan believed the portion between the last house on the road and the river had been abandoned by the Town in 2002 and is now dirt and impassable to cars.

Pat suggested that Joan email the letter from MassWildlife to the Council members so they could have a better understanding of the issues being raised by the state. Joan agreed to do that immediately after the meeting. Discussion followed regarding the steepness of slope at the old bridge crossing, the location of the new abutments (further up the bank than the old abutments), and the bridge design (which Joan likened to Fitch's Bridge). Pat added that a MEPA filing may be required. Emma noted that if federal funds are involved and/or federal permit required, that under Section 7 the NPS would also review the proposed new bridge.

This project is one the Council will need to follow as more information is developed. Al offered to go to the site in the next few days to take photographs so we would have a clearer understanding of the crossing. He will share his photographs with the Council.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 9:10 PM.

Next meeting: Thursday, November 18th at 7 PM by Zoom