

N-S-N Rivers Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council

MINUTES OF NOVEMBER 18, 2021 MEETING

By Zoom Video Conference

Voting Member Entities Present:

Towns: Ayer: Beth Suedmeyer; Bolton: Rona Balco; Harvard: Michele Girard and Lucy Wallace; Hollis: Bernadette McQuilkin; Pepperell: Paula Terrasi; Shirley: Heidi Ricci; Townsend: Joan Wotkowicz

NRWA: Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell, Al Futterman

NPS: Emma Lord

MA F&W: Anne Gagnon, Pat Huckery, District Supervisor, NE District Office

DEC: Neil Angus

Guests:

Brian Hawthorne, MassWildlife Habitat Program Manager

Tom Wansleben, MassWildlife Wildlife Biologist

Chris Buelow, MassWildlife Senior Restoration Ecologist

Ralph Baker, NRWA Vice President (for presentation by MassWildlife)

Warren Kimball, former NRWA Director and former MA DEP

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.

Introductions Lucy asked Bernadette McQuilkin, a new Council member from Hollis, to introduce herself to the Council. Bernadette explained she had recently been appointed to the Hollis Conservation Commission and that prior to moving to Hollis she had lived in Pepperell. Before retiring she was a science teacher in the Littleton schools. The Council members were then asked to introduce themselves to Bernadette.

Administrative

The minutes of the October 21, 2021 meeting were approved as presented.

NPS Update

Emma Lord reported that the article on the Council's Forest Legacy Program (FLP) application, which she and Al had prepared, had been submitted to *River Currents* for inclusion in its annual issue due out in January 2022.

Finances

Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell reported on the October finances, noting the final payment of \$2,000 to the Town of Pepperell due upon completion of its grant supporting the first year's activities of the town's Invasive Plant Advisory Committee and payment of \$3,825.22 to the Nashua River Watershed Association for staff support on the FLP application and services rendered as the Council's fiscal agent. She shared several tables showing the status and current balance of the NPS funds (~\$155,400 as of

10/31/21) and non-NPS funds the Council had received in connection with the FLP project (\$15,000 from Fields Pond Foundation, \$31,036 from MA DCR, and \$2,500 for the Townsend Conservation Land Trust) which, along with \$3,264 in Council funds, had been expended to cover the cost of restricted appraisals of lands to be included in the FLP application.

Elizabeth noted the receipt of an invoice from Janet Morrison for services rendered in connection with the FLP project. She added that the contract the Council approved was for 200 hours for a maximum cost of \$15,000, although the invoice showed that Janet had put in additional hours above the 200 contracted for in assisting on completion of the application. Lucy noted that Janet's service had been invaluable in seeing this project through to submission of an application in mid-October. On motion made and seconded the Council unanimously approved allowing services rendered to exceed those set out in the contract and paying Janet for these additional hours, bringing the total amount due to \$15,881.25. Heidi requested that the minutes reflect that this motion was a reversal of the motion made at the July 22, 2021 Council meeting which had approved a contract with Janet Morrison not to exceed \$15,000.

Council Projects

Before giving his report, Al Futterman advised the Council that his hours with the NRWA had been reduced from 32 hours/week to 20 hours/week, at his request, effective November 1st. This reduction in hours could lead to a reduction in time supporting Council projects.

Stratton Hill Development, Ayer: Al suggested that that town representative, Beth Suedmeyer, should take the lead in representing the Council at the Ayer boards' meetings, should the Council take a position on this project. He added that he had spoken at the last Ayer Conservation Commission meeting on behalf of the NRWA and its concerns with the impact on the site's resources.

Beth reported that at the developer's request both the Planning Board and Conservation Commission hearings continue to be postponed. She added that the Conservation Commission was meeting this evening and was expected to ask the developer to fund an outside consultant's peer review of the applicant's conservation plan. In particular, there was concern the plan was inadequate in designating areas to be protected and areas appropriate for development.

Beth also reported that the town and developer are working with Natural Heritage on a review and, hopefully, renewal of the expired state-issued conservation permit. The hope in renewing the expired permit is that the acreage required to be protected will remain the same as under the original permit. Natural Heritage will probably add more conditions as well. Finally, Beth noted that most of the proposed development is sufficiently beyond the wetlands to limit the Conservation Commission's jurisdiction, which means that the Planning Board will have a greater role through its permitting to define the final development.

Conservation Networking Breakfasts: The next event will be on December 7th. The featured speaker will be Betsy Colburn, a Shirley resident, on the resurgence of agriculture throughout the watershed.

Trucking Terminals: Al gave a brief overview of the three proposed trucking terminals, two of which could impact the cold water fisheries resources (CFR) of Bow Brook which flows into the Catacoonamug Brook, and the third which could impact sensitive habitat along the North Nashua River in Lancaster. As the proposed terminals are in two separate towns (Lancaster north and south of Rt 2, and Lunenburg), there is little consideration of the cumulative impact of trucking on area roads, particularly Rt 2. Together, these terminals will add approximately 1.272 million square feet of terminal warehousing to this area. Heidi Ricci noted that one of the proposed terminals, which is in Lancaster on the Shirley town line, is seeking a connection to Shirley's water and sewer. It is uncertain whether the Shirley Selectmen will agree to this.

In closing, Al reported that one of the projects proposed in Lancaster (the larger of the two and located on Rt 70 south of Rt 2) will require a rezoning of the property to 40R (high density mixed use with access to transportation network) which members of various boards in Lancaster have been negotiating with the owner, Capital Group, for over a year. Al wondered if the Council would like to invite one of the 40R negotiators, Victoria Petracca, to speak at our next meeting.

Presentation on the Squannacook River WMA (SRWMA) Proposed Barrens Restoration Project

Lucy provided a brief overview of the topic, noting that the Council's and NRWA's engagement in this project began with a site visit organized by Al and led by Tom Wansleben in mid-August for members of the Council, Shirley boards, and neighbors. Following the site walk a series of questions and answers were shared between MassWildlife and Council members. This led to inviting members of the MassWildlife team responsible for this project to come to this meeting to give a presentation on the program in general and this project in particular. Lucy then turned the meeting over to MassWildlife.

Overview: Brian Hawthorne, MassWildlife Habitat Program Manager, began with his presentation, "Working for Wildlife – Habitat Management and Restoration." (His PowerPoint and accompanying notes were sent to the Council members following the meeting.) He explained that the role of MassWildlife in this area is to assure all species (flora and fauna) throughout the Commonwealth have sufficient habitat for not only surviving but also thriving, especially as the climate changes. Of particular concern is the need for habitat for species in decline which may be dependent on specific soil types and vegetation. Examples of declining species requiring a barrens habitat include Whip-poor-will, Prairie Warbler, various species of butterflies and pollinators. However, the porous and well-drained soils associated with barrens are readily developable and, therefore, such undeveloped sites are rare – and those owned by the Commonwealth even rarer. As a result, his team seeks sites on MassWildlife lands that fit the profile of a site suitable for barrens restoration.

Brian provided an overview of the mix of lands under state management, noting only 20-25% could be considered open habitat and a 15% of that was considered young forests. He added that 50% of the trees in the state-owned Forest Reserves were considered "mature," being at least 75 years old. This diversity of habitats enables the state to support a diversity of wildlife and plants, in some ways the greatest diversity in New England considering the size of the Commonwealth.

He cited the success of the Montague Plains barren restoration. Five years after its restoration they are finding not only significant return of various declining bird species, but also a proliferation of bee species – perhaps the greatest in the state. The site boasts greater recreational opportunities, especially for birders. Brian acknowledged the loss of carbon storage (on average less than 7% of new carbon added to storage by tree growth) due to the removal of trees and controlled burns as part of restoration and management, adding it is balanced by the need to provide habitat for declining species.

Following Brian's presentation Lucy asked for questions or comments. Heidi asked if this program was part of the state's Conservation Action Plan and, particularly, Division of Fish and Wildlife's plan for the forest lands it controls. Brian responded that there is no single plan for forest lands and all habitats, rather individual plans for specific tracts, communities, and species. He added that work on BioMap 3, which should be completed in 2022, will have a restoration and management component which will serve to prioritize lands to protect, especially those adjacent to MassWildlife lands.

Heidi commented that the public needs good, science-based information and asked how that would be made available as decisions are being made by the state. Brian pointed her to mass.gov/habitat to find an overview of all habitat-related programs.

Rona Balco expressed concern about keeping controlled burns under control and from becoming larger conflagrations, given the level of debris and litter on forest floors. Brian acknowledged that there may be substantial fuel in these forests, but that the first burn removes substantial debris and litter, as well as trees (particularly pine) and vegetation so that future periodic burns have less fuel. He added that the teams are well trained and often work in coordination with local fire departments and that the burn plans include the parameters under which a control burn can occur.

The SRWMA Proposal: Tom Wansleben, MassWildlife Habitat Biologist, then gave his presentation, "The Squannacook River Wildlife Management Area Oak Woodland Restoration," a copy of which was also sent to Council members following the meeting. Tom began by explaining there is an 8-person team overseeing this project, led by Chris Buelow, MassWildlife Senior Restoration Ecologist, serving as the chief planner. The goal is to restore approximately 200 acres as Oak Woodland, a mix of several "fire-influenced natural communities" that could be supported on this site. He explained that a fire-influenced community supports vegetation that needs to be subject to periodic burns to thrive. He added that this site was considered to be of high ecological significance due to its ability to provide habitat for highly specialized plants and animals categorized as being endangered or of conservation concern.

Tom went on to describe the site in greater detail, noting the glacial soils and diversity of fire-influenced vegetation that offers an opportunity for restoration at a "community of scale." MassWildlife seeks to manage on a landscape scale as that provides the greatest benefit for biodiversity. He reported that MassWildlife currently oversaw controlled burns on six sites covering about 1,000 acres, adding these sites were all similar to the project proposed for SRWMA.

Tom outlined the major steps to be taken to restore and manage the site: 1) timber harvest to remove the white pine and maple to restore an open canopy; 2) targeted vegetation control to keep out invasives and encourage return of understory growth; and 3) periodic controlled or proscribed burns to maintain the

restored barrens and woodlands and keep the white pine and maple from returning. He briefly described the difference between woodland and forest land communities. Woodlands are more open and have less tree canopy which enables sunlight to support a healthy understory of shrubs, grasses, and sedges which, in turn, support a greater diversity of animal species. Forest lands, on the other hand, have very full canopies which keep sunlight from reaching the forest floor and, therefore, limit the understory growth.

In closing, Tom noted that this project supports many of the goals in our Stewardship Plan including sustaining and enhancing the existing biological diversity, and protecting priority natural communities and rare species habitat.

Lucy then opened the meeting up to questions and answers.

Heidi began by acknowledging that she appreciated the work MassWildlife is doing to protect and/or restore habitats, that the SRWMA is a very special place for her, and that she has often wondered about its restoration potential. That said, she had several concerns and suggestions to make to the team. First, have a public, transparent process. Permits do not afford the same level of public input as does direct outreach. Second, seek input from Nipmuk representatives as that was the local Native American tribe in this region. Third, the proposed tree cutting is being viewed at the local level as a money-making proposition and that restoration is the justification. Brian acknowledged the timber sales are an issue, but that as the trees belong to the people of the Commonwealth, their value as timber also belongs to the public. The proceeds are not considered a profit-making endeavor, but rather used to cover the cost of tree removal. Pat Huckery suggested that MassWildlife needs to get more information out to the public, and suggested Tom's presentation would be one useful way to do so.

Heidi continued, noting the challenge of invasives management and limiting use by ATVs as the site becomes more open. She questioned if there was sufficient staff to handle both. She also suggested the project be approached in phases so they could monitor their success in both restoration of the site and managing negative impacts such as invasives and increased ATV use. She recommended that the access and parking area not be enlarged as one way to keep public use down. She also suggested they look at Pumpkin Brook, a town property that underwent restoration several years ago that has become overrun with invasives.

Ralph Baker raised several concerns, the first being the extent to which the changing climate had been taken into account with respect to the expected understory's vegetation being reestablished. He also asked how they were certain this was a fire-influenced area. Brian responded that the patterns of vegetation on the site indicated that it had supported Pitch Pine, Oak and the shrubs and other understory vegetation they hope to restore. He pointed to other restored sites that saw a rapid return of a wide variety of understory growth with the opening of forested areas to woodlands. Chris added that conservation of declining species is an important part of MassWildlife's mission and that this site offered an opportunity to restore needed habitat for these species, especially those dependent on periodic burns.

A third concern raised by Ralph was the effect periodic burns would have on the soil, leading to further depletion of its nutrient value and ability to sequester carbon. Brian responded that the soils would not

be nutrient poor, but rather become more suitable for certain plant and animal species with the removal of the present overlaying forest debris. And he again reiterated that the mission of MassWildlife is to provide habitat for all species.

Rona commented that she was part of the effort with the state to protect Pine Hill, another barrens in Lancaster, and that the state has been doing an excellent job managing it. She offered to take anyone interested in viewing it on a site walk. Chris similarly offered to take members on a site walk of Muddy Brook, a more recent restoration project.

Lucy asked what MassWildlife's plans are for public outreach. Brian responded that the restoration plan is still in the process of being developed and reviewed by various departments within MassWildlife and so will not be ready for public review until it has been completed. He added there will be at least one site walk for the public before any activity begins so that the plan can be explained.

Beth Suedmeyer commented that she found the presentations very helpful, adding their passion for this work was quite evident

Lucy asked if there were any further questions and seeing none, thanked Brian, Tom, and Chris for their attending the meeting and giving us time for questions and answers. She asked who should be contacted if additional questions arose. Brian responded that Tom is the point person on this project.

As a closing comment, Heidi urged them to pay attention to the questions and comments raised tonight. She urged them to stay well back from the river as they refine the plan and the area to be restored.

Tom restated that MassWildlife's will have a "forever commitment" to properly managing this site once the restoration project has been completed.

Lucy again thanked Brian, Tom, Chris for attending.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 8:55 PM.

Next meeting: Thursday, December 16th, at 7 PM by Zoom