

## **N-S-N Rivers Wild & Scenic Stewardship Council**

### **MINUTES OF DECEMBER 15, 2022 MEETING**

By Zoom Video Conference

#### Voting Member Entities Present:

*Towns:* Ayer: Beth Suedmeyer; Brookline: Drew Kellner; Dunstable: Marijan Andacic; Harvard: Lucy Wallace and Michele Girard; Pepperell: Paula Terrasi; Shirley: Heidi Ricci; Townsend: Joan Wotkowicz

*NRWA*: Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell and Al Futterman

*NPS*: Emma Lord

*MAF&W*: Anne Gagnon

*Guests*: Jackie Dias, NPS Communications Fellow

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. As there was not a quorum at 7:00, Lucy altered the agenda to begin with a review of the Community and Land Protection Grants Programs.

#### 2023 Community Grants

Based on input at the November meeting, Joan Wotkowicz had amended the Announcement, Request for Proposals (RFP) and Application, all of which had been sent to Council members prior to this meeting. Lucy pointed out the refinement of the budget on the Application, noting that volunteer hours would be calculated at \$30/hr. Joan explained that while the state allows a rate of \$29.95/hr., federal agencies use \$30/hr. Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell asked if this was an appropriate rate for professionals (such as engineers or attorneys) who donate their services to a project and whose going rate would be higher than \$30/hr. As this has not been an issue in the past, it can be considered next year should it be an issue with grants this year. The Council then approved the most recent revision of all three documents. Al Futterman will post them on the Council's website.

#### 2023 Land Protection Grants

Lucy explained that this program was not called out specifically in our 2023 Budget and Work Plan as the Community Grant Program is, but rather incorporated as a possible activity covered in the Contractual category. She reminded the Council that this program was initiated last spring as we had funds available in Contractual. She suggested we postpone considering this program until our March or April meeting when we should have a better sense of available funds. There followed a discussion about use of funds by the end of the calendar year (12/31/2023) given funds would not be awarded until May. Drew Kellner advocated for flexibility in this requirement as land protection activities (and hence use of funds) can be delayed by the very nature of these projects being complicated. Emma confirmed that funds can be carried forward for another year, but that the National Park Service (NPS) preferred they be spent in the year they were appropriated. Given our current 5-year Cooperative Agreement with the NPS will end in 2025, we will have to have spent all funds by June 30, 2025.

[A quorum was now present]

#### Administrative

On motion made and seconded, the minutes of November 17, 2022 were approved as amended.

## NPS Update

Emma Lord had several items to report.

First, she gave a brief update on the recent Partnership Wild & Scenic Rivers (PWSR) meeting held last week in Florida which she attended along with Anne Gagnon and Jackie Dias. She noted that 14 of the 16 PWSRs were present and the 2-day gathering was organized around meetings on Thursday and Friday, and a field trip on Thursday afternoon. Jackie shared some photographs taken at the meeting.

Second, she announced that the NPS regional Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance and PWSR program have created a communications specialist position to provide graphics support and develop templates for signage and other public outreach materials for the NPS and to be used by NPS partners. She hopes some of this person's time will be made available to PWSR councils. Al asked if this new person could develop a "Unigrd" brochure, which is used by National Parks and some Wild & Scenic Rivers, for us. Emma thought it would be possible, depending on other assignments.

Third, the PWSR program is seeking to fill 3 Fellow positions, 2 of which will be funded through by Hispanic Access Foundation and 1 by Conservation Legacy, a non-profit organization supporting development of future conservation leaders. The Concord, NH, Philadelphia, PA, and Springfield, MA offices will each have a Fellow; the Concord office will have the Conservation Legacy Fellow.

## Finances

Elizabeth Ainsley Campbell gave a brief report on the status of the Council's finances as follows:

- Total expenditures in November were minimal as there were no Contractual disbursements (to grantees) and less use of NRWA staff. Total for the month was \$1,510.45 to NRWA (for staff support and NRWA fiduciary and indirect charges).
- A summary of Council funds as of November 30, 2022, showing a balance of \$225,704, some of which are funds obligated for existing grants.

## Community Grants

*2022 Harvard Grant:* The Harvard Conservation Commission had submitted its Final Report for "Harvard Waterways and Watershed Awareness." With the Council's acceptance of the Report, the remaining grant funds owed to the grantee can be paid.

*2022 Lancaster Land Trust:* Al reported that Bob Lidstone will be contacting Justin Smith to give him an update on this project. Hopefully some progress can be made on this stalled project. Lucy noted that problems in finalizing the budget (determining the value of in-kind services) for this first phase of a 2-phase project had kept her from issuing a Grant Agreement.

## Squannacook River WMA (SRWMA)

*Proposed Oak Woodland Project:* Lucy opened with her assessment of the tone of the discussion on this topic at last month's meeting, apologizing for possible discomfort Council members may have felt

and the options she had considered as next steps she could take, including discussions with MassWildlife about the meeting. She reached out to Pat Huckery and has arranged for a meeting with Pat, Elizabeth, and herself at Pat's office on December 29<sup>th</sup> (the earliest date available to all three). She intends to encourage MassWildlife to be more open and transparent with its plans for the SRWMA with the Council and general public, perhaps by holding a public meeting. She also hopes the meeting will improve communication between MassWildlife and the Council. Elizabeth added that this would be an opportunity to share our concern with Pat's comments at the last Council meeting, particularly her implication that some Council members were participating in activities they may not have been involved in. Lucy and Elizabeth hope this meeting will help "reset" and improve our relationship with MassWildlife going forward.

Al shared the due diligence he continues to do on this woodland restoration project. First, at Pat's suggestion last month, he did watch John Scanlon's webinar in which specific mention of the proposed SRWMA is cited. Al will send the Council the link to the webinar; the relevant portion is approximately 30 minutes into the webinar. He added that per John's webinar, the SRWMA was a failing Norway Spruce plantation planted in the 1930's by the Civilian Conservation Corps. There is some question if this is, in fact, the case, given the diversity of native plants and lack of invasive species on this site.

Al shared photographs he had taken on a recent site walk of Muddy BrookWMA in Harwick, MA, a similar MassWildlife multi-phase barrens restoration project which was started approximately 8 years ago. The first phase was completed about 2 ½ years ago. In one of the photographs Al pointed out the worker cutting back sprouts on stumps, an indication of the labor-intensive nature of on-going management once a forest is cut. He was able to walk both the MassWildlife (375 acres) and New England Forestry Foundation (125 acres) portions of the site.

Lucy reported that MassWildlife has now requested that hearings on the NOIs submitted last fall to the Shirley and Townsend Conservation Commissions be postponed to September 2023. Al showed a map of the area proposed for restoration included in the first public filing, highlighting the fact a Townsend-owned parcel adjacent to the WMA is not properly identified. This oversight has since been corrected. Heidi added she has concerns about substantive issues with and completeness of the NOIs, as well as MassWildlife's process going forward. She added public information and comment on the proposed restoration will be limited due to the scope of the NOIs being restricted to compliance with the Wetlands Protection Act and hearings on them limited to the lands within each given town. Furthermore, why have the hearings been postponed for one year? In her opinion the NOIs should have been withdrawn without prejudice which would require a fresh round of notices to abutters of any future hearings on resubmitted NOIs.

Heidi also reiterated her suggestion that a landscape-scale planning effort be undertaken with MassWildlife, municipal committees, and private land trusts as together they manage thousands of acres within the sub-watershed of this Wild and Scenic River. She suggested the Council head up a sub-watershed planning effort as this type of inclusive and high-level planning could foster greater cooperation and stewardship of lands held in varying ownership being considered as part of a larger interconnected landscape.

Lucy raised the issue of the impact of a warming climate on the site if the restoration went forward. Would the oak-woodland ecosystem thrive? She suggested there should be a 10-year or longer pause in any change to the current forest management to see how it responds with these changing conditions. Al referred to a well-known and respected forest ecologist's comment along similar lines that the most prudent measure would be to "do nothing."

*NPS-MassWildlife Site Walk:* Emma reported on the November 22<sup>nd</sup> site walk for NPS staff led by MassWildlife. Participants included Jamie Fosburgh, Jim MacCartney, Jackie and Emma (NPS) and Tom Wasenblen, Pat Huckery, Chalis Bird and John Regosin (MassWildlife). The walk lasted slightly over three hours, during which both parties shared concerns and questions. MassWildlife staff expressed concern with the level of activity being directed at this project by the Council and other partners, in particular the Council's decision to consider retaining the services of consultants to review the project. NPS staff suggested the project be undertaken on a smaller scale, and encouraged more outreach to the public. They also reiterated the role the Council has in monitoring and paying attention to projects that could impact a Wild and Scenic River. MassWildlife did not elaborate on potential future phases of the proposed SRWMA restoration project.

### Other Business

*Story Map:* Emma and Jackie provided an update with Emma screen-sharing a couple of pages of the draft ArcGIS Story Map. Emma noted the Map will focus on the ORRVs which supported designation of these rivers as Wild and Scenic. They hope to complete the text in the next couple of months so they can bring it to the Council in May. She added that Al has been helping with the mapping.

*Conservation Networking Meetings:* Al presented a schedule of the next three meetings to be held jointly with the NRWA's Climate Impact Committee late afternoon, as follows:

January 18<sup>th</sup> : Andrew Ahern on "Degrowth and the Green New Deal."

February 15<sup>th</sup>: Green and Open Somerville (Renne Scott, Leigh Meunier and Candor Pricejones) on "Depaving."

March 15<sup>th</sup>: Emma Gildesgame (The Nature Conservancy, MA) on "Climate Adaptation Science."

*Stratton Hill Development, Ayer:* The preliminary subdivision plan has been approved by the Planning Board. The power line running through the property is part of a regional upgrade and replacement of towers and lines.

*Senior Housing Proposal, Brookline:* Al asked Drew Kellner about the status of the proposed zoning change to allow this project to go forward. Drew had no update to share.

*Miscellaneous Announcements:* Lucy shared two upcoming events with Council members: a webinar on Coldwater Refugia being offered by The River Management Society on January 10<sup>th</sup> and the upcoming Hill Week in Washington, DC in March. The latter is an opportunity to meet with Senators and Congressmen to seek their support of the Partnership Wild and Scenic Rivers program. She will send Council members the links to both these events. Travel to and/or participation in Hill week is not covered by NPS funds.

Al reported he continues to seek a contact with the Indigenous Peoples' tribes that would have resided in the watershed of these Wild and Scenic Rivers. We would like to engage with them as we move forward with our work.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 9:00 PM.

Next meeting: Thursday, January 19, 2023 at 7 PM by Zoom