

2023 Southeast VAWQP Final Report

On February 23, 2023 we hosted our final regional meeting of the Southeast VAWQP field level partners. In attendance were staff from the following VAWQP partner organizations:

- Conservation Districts
- VT Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets
- VT Department of Environmental Conservation
- USDA Farm Service Agency
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
- University of Vermont Extension

Staff from the following partner organizations were not in attendance:

- VT Housing and Conservation Board
- US Fish & Wildlife Service

Our agenda included general introductions, a discussion of tools for coordination, and revisiting the [report from our 2021 and 2022 VAWQP regional meetings](#). We utilized breakout rooms and Google Jamboard to discuss the previous year’s successes, issues, and priority actions for the future. This report is a summary of the group discussion, also captured on this [Jamboard](#).

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2022 Partnership Successes

Overall, the partnership has achieved several successes, witnessed growth, and engaged in fruitful collaborations, but acknowledges that there is still work to be done. Below are the successes highlighted by attendees of the SE Regional meeting:

- District growth: The Conservation Districts have experienced growth and expansion.
- Partnership: The partnership has developed strong relationships with producers, actively listening to their needs.
- Basecamp: The use of Basecamp, a collaboration and communication tool, has been beneficial for the Conservation Districts.
- RCPP collaboration: The Conservation Districts and DEC have worked closely with the NRCS through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), resulting in a large number of applications and successful collaboration.
- Local fund pools: Through the Local Working Group, the Conservation Districts have been involved in establishing local fund pools, recognizing that successful collaboration directly impacts conservation efforts.
- Equine grazing series: The Conservation Districts and UVM hosted a series on equine grazing.
- Project focus and success: The partners have successfully collaborated on projects, particularly focusing on those that could otherwise slip through the cracks.
- Collaboration on policy improvements: VAAFMs have been working closely with NRCS on regulatory lens analysis of the 590 nutrient management planning standard, which is used for regulation purposes.
- LISFF project: DEC and the Windham Conservation District are involved in a regional LISFF project.
- Collaboration with engineers: The Conservation Districts and VAAFMs inspectors have partnered with engineers to address on-farm issues identified during inspections.
- Agriculture programs: The Conservation Districts, NRCS, and VAAFMs have built upon their agriculture programs to increase grants and add staff.
- Engineers working with districts: Engineers have been working with the districts to ensure project completion.
- Collaboration with NRCS service centers: The Conservation Districts have collaborated with NRCS

service centers to increase access to conservation planner training.

- RCPP impact: RCPP has helped fill gaps and push projects to completion, especially smaller projects that may not have received funding otherwise.
- Funding for conservation equipment: Funding has been secured for the CRWFA (Connecticut River Watershed Farmers Alliance) equipment rental program, aimed at supporting conservation equipment.
- Act 64 and water quality investments: Act 64, which involves Vermont investments in water quality, has been utilized to support a partner database for tracking and reporting. Farmer-funded practices have contributed to a 16% reduction in water quality issues.

Which issues are still present?

- Relationship-building: Emphasizing the importance of building strong relationships with stakeholders and partners.
- Streamlined interpretation of program information: The need for clearer and more accessible information on available program resources, such as by utilizing the Farm Team.
- Workload overload: Dealing with an excessive workload that may be overwhelming.
- Improved mapping for natural resource conflict: Suggesting that improving DEC mapping of protected resources, such as wetlands and corridors, could assist in planning best management practices by AAFM/NRCS.
- Need for Farm Teams and organizational chart: Requesting the establishment of Farm Teams and an organizational chart/contact flow chart to help farmers know who to contact for various needs.
- Engineering bottleneck: Identifying an ongoing issue with delays and inefficiencies in engineering-related tasks.
- Repetitive workload for trails and walkways: Highlighting a high volume of repetitive work associated with trails and walkways that does not get prioritized.
- Bottleneck in processing NRCS applications: A persistent problem in processing applications submitted to the NRCS.
- Technical assistance for grant applications: Requesting specific assistance with filling out grant applications.

- Staff placement challenges: Not having staff in the right positions, resulting in contracts remaining stagnant.
- Turnover and confusion among new staff: High turnover and new staff members feeling uncertain about who to reach out to for guidance and support.
- Inspection workload due to complaints: The workload related to inspections is often triggered by complaints, prioritizing problems instead of being proactive.
- Reactive programs: Programs being reactive rather than proactive in addressing issues and challenges.
- Communication challenges due to organizational changes: Communication difficulties resulting from the removal of personnel from the county office, making it harder to access information and support.
- Training and retention of technical specialists: Training technical specialists takes a long time, but they tend to move on quickly, leading to a continuous need for training and knowledge transfer. Experienced staff are incentivized to leave the field, leaving huge knowledge gaps.
- Lack of job transition and on-the-job learning: Expressing the desire for smoother transitions into jobs and opportunities to apply skills while learning on the job.
- Inadequate state onboarding process: Critiquing the state onboarding process, which is perceived as lacking and needing improvement for internal staff.
- Contract management challenges at NRCS: Highlighting the need for better contract management at NRCS, as new staff members often lack the time for proper onboarding, leading to delays.
- Disconnect between conservation planning and business/viability planning: Noting a disconnection between conservation planning and the consideration of business and viability aspects.
- Lack of farmer awareness: Farmers facing difficulty in understanding the differences between programs and the roles of various organizations involved, leading to confusion and potential challenges in accessing appropriate support.
- Managing multiple programs and collaborations: The need to navigate and coordinate numerous programs and collaborations with various partners, requiring efforts to align goals, objectives, and needs among stakeholders.
- Privacy restrictions on accessing NRCS information: Privacy rules impeding the process of obtaining necessary information from the NRCS, potentially hindering effective decision-making and partnerships.

What issues have improved over the past year?

- Increased support for farmers: There has been an improvement in supporting farmers in accessing state and federal programs, as well as providing assistance with accessing programs through the implementation of Farm Teams.
- Centralized resource guide: The Franklin County Resource Guide has significantly improved the lack of a centralized source for program information, making it easier for stakeholders to access the necessary information.
- Local Funding Pools: The establishment of Local Funding Pools has begun to resolve the issue of prioritizing local conservation efforts, ensuring that funding is allocated appropriately.
- Training for "lite" engineering practices: NRCS engineering team has released a document with basic design practices, addressing the need for training in designing trails, spring development, and livestock pipelines.
- Improved funding for Conservation Districts: While supporting Conservation Districts to act as liaisons between farmers and relevant entities is still an issue, there has been an improvement in funding, enabling Districts to better fulfill this role.
- Integration of Conservation in Farm Viability programs: There is recognition that conservation should be more strongly integrated into Farm Viability programs, indicating progress in this area.
- Customer experience disparity: Efforts have been made to address the disparity in customer experience, ensuring that all individuals receive assistance in filling out paperwork and accessing programs.
- AFT RCPP enrollment: The AFT RCPP has allowed for the enrollment of land on both sides of the river, indicating improved flexibility and inclusiveness.
- NRCS Outreach Coordinator: The addition of an NRCS Outreach Coordinator has proven beneficial in addressing issues related to accessing programs and improving communication.
- Growth of Conservation District outreach staff: The expansion of outreach staff within Conservation Districts has contributed to improved outreach and engagement efforts.
- Online application forms: VAAFAM has made progress by making their application forms available online, simplifying the application process for farmers.
- Improved collective understanding: The continued meetings have resulted in an improved collective understanding of partner roles and contacts, enhancing collaboration and cooperation among stakeholders.

Quick Fixes

- Requesting recent copy of inspection report: Soil Conservationists can ask for a recent copy of the inspection report to quickly assess the compliance status of a farm.
- Defining District Role on Partner Database: Clearly defining the role of the Districts in the Partner Database to ensure effective collaboration and engagement with partners, i.e. as Farm Team facilitators.
- Paying farmers to promote conservation and host roundtables: Providing financial incentives to farmers for promoting conservation practices and hosting roundtable discussions to encourage knowledge sharing and collaboration.
- Connecting business planning programs to programs at FSA (Farm Service Agency): Establishing connections between business planning programs and programs offered by the FSA to ensure comprehensive support for farmers.
- Building conservation into farm viability program: Integrating conservation practices and considerations into the farm viability program to enhance sustainability and long-term success.
- Exploring Health Connect model for program education: Exploring the viability and sustainability of adopting a model similar to Vermont Health Connect to navigate stakeholders through relevant program opportunities.
- Applying Franklin County Resources Guide statewide: Implementing the successful Franklin County Resources Guide model statewide in an online database to provide a centralized source of information on programs and resources.
- Checking partner database as part of NRCS staff process: Incorporating the partner database into the process of NRCS staff to stay updated on partner engagements with farms.
- Summer meetings with field trips: Utilizing summer meetings that include field trips to observe and address specific issues such as stream crossings and cattle lanes.
- Providing NRCS staff access to Partner Database: Granting NRCS staff access to the Partner Database to facilitate collaboration and awareness of partner engagements.
- Cross training for partnership staff: Arranging cross-training opportunities for partnership staff to learn about the available resources and support offered by each organization.
- Training for “lite” engineering practices: Providing training specifically focused on “lite” engineering practices, particularly related to trails and walkways, and livestock pipelines.

Systemic Fixes

- Ease small farm access to funding opportunities: Implement measures to simplify and streamline the process for small farms to access funding opportunities.
- Coordinate applications: Develop a system to coordinate applications, including an initial "of interest" application that can be sent to the most appropriate funder, ensuring efficient use of resources.
- Train more planners: Increase the number of trained planners in the fields of conservation and business to enhance support and guidance for farmers.
- Address high rate of staff turnover: Implement measures to address and reduce the high rate of staff turnover, which can disrupt continuity and knowledge transfer.
- Provide funding for districts from NRCS: Allocate funding from the NRCS to support the activities and initiatives of Conservation Districts.
- Incorporate conservation planning into Farm Viability assistance: Integrate conservation planning into the assistance provided through the Farm Viability program, ensuring that conservation practices and considerations are taken into account.
- Fund conservation districts for Conservation Planning: Provide funding to Conservation Districts to write conservation plans as part of the VHCB farm viability program.
- Establish a single access point for programs: Create a centralized and easily accessible platform or system that serves as a single access point for information about various programs and resources.
- Funding for Farm Teams: Provide funding to support the operations of Farm Teams, which can help address complex problems faced by farmers.
- Consider changing trends in farming: Take into account changing trends in farming, such as the loss of Small Farm Operations (SFOs) and Mid-Size Farm Operations (MFOs), when developing long-term planning strategies.
- Support new and diverse farming systems: Develop programs and opportunities that accommodate new and diverse farming systems, and create pathways for young people to enter and establish themselves in the farming industry.

Partner Database Improvements

- Utilizing partner database for prioritization during tactical basin planning: Explore the possibility of using information from the partner database to prioritize and allocate resources more effectively during tactical basin planning processes.
- Recording farm visits and projects: Agree on guidance and standardize methods for updating the partner database with information about farm visits and ongoing projects to maintain a comprehensive record of activities and engagements. Add a Farm Team facilitator as a role on the database.
- Checking for overlapping visits: Check the partner database to see if multiple individuals or organizations have visited the same farm, allowing for better coordination and avoiding duplication of efforts.
- Identifying the most recent assistance provider: Use the partner database to determine the most recent person or organization that provided assistance to a particular farm, ensuring up-to-date information and continuity of support.
- Incorporating the partner database in VHCB funding requests: Consult the partner database to verify if a farm is actively engaged with a service provider and developing projects, which can support funding requests to the Vermont Housing & Conservation Board (VHCB).
- Tracking and reporting: Leverage the partner database for tracking and reporting purposes, facilitating the monitoring of engagements, activities, and outcomes related to partner interactions.