

**PACD Conservation Committee
Videoconference Minutes
January 5, 2024**

Welcome and Roll Call

Chairman Josh Longmore welcomed everyone and called the meeting to order at 10:01 AM.

In attendance: John Akers, Bedford; Molly Burns, PACD; Bill Clouser, Clearfield; Rachel DiRosato, Lancaster; Dean Druckenmiller, Berks; John Dryzal, Cambria; Justin Dula, PA DEP; Holly Laird, Armstrong; Matthew Long, Lycoming; Josh Longmore, Luzerne; Wendy McRoberts, Northampton; Daryl Miller, Bradford; Dan Miloser, Chester; Tara Mlodzienski, Pike; Brenda Shambaugh, PACD; Piper Sherburne, Berks; Adam Stern, Lancaster; David Stoner, Franklin; Shannon Wehinger, PACD; Doug Wolfgang, SCC

Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were provided for review.

It was moved by Bill Clouser and seconded by Dave Stoner to approve the minutes of the previous meeting on June 29, 2023. Motion carried.

PACD Program Update

Executive Director Brenda Shambaugh presented an overview of PACD's mini-grant and sub-grant programs, as well as the new Certified Conservation Planner Program.

Report on Agricultural Conservation Assistance Program (ACAP)

State Conservation Commission (SCC) Executive Secretary Doug Wolfgang provided the following report:

- Doug invited everyone to visit the SCC booth at the PA Farm Show and noted the Leopold Conservation Award will be presented to Joel Myers during a special luncheon.
- ACAP was allotted \$154 million from the Clean Streams Fund and \$22 million from the Nutrient Management Fund.
- The SCC has obligated about \$150 million through signed delegation agreements with conservation districts. They are also working with Philadelphia, with a focus on urban agricultural conservation projects, and Philadelphia has increased momentum to create their own conservation district.
- The SCC received an estimated 700 applications in the first year of ACAP, over 400 of which are signed contracts with farmers. Most ACAP projects will likely go in during 2024 and 2025. Based on this activity, PA expects to spend all allotted funds by the 2026 deadline.



- The number of applications speaks to a great need for this program. The SCC is working to develop a strong case for dedicated funding to continue ACAP once the federal funds expire. They are seeking testimonials and before and after photos to help with this effort. PA has built up significant infrastructure around ACAP, including the new Center for Agricultural Conservation Assistance Training through Penn State Extension, new engineering positions, and the new Conservation Planner Program at PACD. This infrastructure can continue to flourish with dedicated funding.
- Technical assistance capacity was, and still may be, the biggest potential barrier to completing the work on time. The state has pushed to increase capacity.
- Doug is mindful that districts struggle with turnover and retention and is interested in ways to elevate the districts and create an atmosphere that encourages long-term employment. None of this happens without the conservation districts.
- The ACAP workgroups that were kept busy developing the program and guidelines early on are quiet now that things are underway, but may have more to do in the future.
- He provided an update on the Center for Agricultural Conservation Assistance Training through Penn State Extension. Penn State hired HRG to provide engineering services alongside an NRCS engineer on-staff.
- The SCC received funds from EPA to seek public/private partnership proposals for the Conservation Excellence Grant (CEG) program, which is active in Tier 1 and 2 Chesapeake Bay counties. Leveraging private funds is key to obtaining continued state funding.
- The SCC is appointing members to the Sustainable Agricultural Board to focus on soil health. This board has been on the books, but inactive, for about thirty years. The Board's activation is designed to dovetail with the increase in climate-smart agricultural activity. The SCC hopes the Board will help lead Pennsylvania forward with regard to climate-smart agricultural initiatives and position Pennsylvania to bring in additional funds.
- The goals for the SCC over the next year or so include 1) implementing and maintaining ACAP, 2) enhanced focus on climate and sustainability, and 3) streamlining and simplifying processes and funding mechanisms while maintaining accountability.
- Throughout the report, Doug noted the importance of conservation districts to ACAP, other conservation programs, and conservation in PA.

DEP Environmental Justice Initiative

Justin Dula, DEP Director for the Office of Environmental Justice, reported on the DEP Environmental Justice Initiative.

- He shared their updated environmental justice policy and noted they plan to work much more closely with conservation districts on this initiative.
- He reviewed the environmental justice page on the DEP website and the online tools to help become more familiar with the policy, such as where it applies; the public participation process; community development and investment in inspection, compliance, and enforcement; policy updates; and more.
- The EJ Areas Viewer tool has been updated based on new science and data. Thirty-two factors go into the final score.
- Justin provided a brief live overview of tools available to help grant applicants and others determine and work with Environmental Justice Areas.

Adjournment

It was moved by Daryl Miller and seconded by Dan Miloser to adjourn the meeting. The meeting adjourned at 11:00 AM.