

# Vermont Payment for Ecosystem Services and Soil Health Working Group

Summary of Meeting #31: Tuesday, November 1, 2022

More detailed information, including any presentation slides and the meeting recording can be found at <https://agriculture.vermont.gov/pes>.

## Introduction

The Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) and Soil Health Working Group held its thirty-first meeting on Tuesday, November 1, 2022, at VAAFMs Williston office. The objectives of the meeting were 1) to review funding opportunities around technical assistance, navigation, and coordination; 2) to discuss the CSP enhancement option; and 3) to finalize the pilot approach recommendation from the Working Group.

## Summary of discussion

Mary Montour, VAAFMs Agricultural Water Quality Specialist, gave an overview of the Agriculture Clean Water Investment Program (AgCWIP) which provides funding across the state to support agriculture stakeholders in meeting water quality standards. The services funded include support for grant applications, project management for farms, nutrient management planning, and conservation practice surveys. Though there is a stipulation that funding must be connected to water quality improvements, AgCWIP would overlap significantly with the Working Groups efforts.

Afterward, the Working Group reviewed the [“USDA-NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program \(CSP\) With a Vermont State Enhancement \(VSE\)”](#) pilot design option. CSP is the largest conservation program in the US but has traditionally been a smaller program in Vermont. The program uses the Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) to assign a unitless stewardship score. The threshold of 50 represents sustainable production; if clients are short of 50, planners would suggest practices to get to the threshold. These practices include conservation practices which help get farmers to planning thresholds or other criteria (such as cover crops) and enhancements which are add-ons to conservation practices (such as additional species of cover crops).

The states ability to increase CSP enrollment could lead to increased funding for other NRCS programs overall in the state (including EQIP), especially given forthcoming Inflation Reduction Act funding. There may also be opportunities in the future for the state or another entity to develop an NRCS Resource Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) grant to develop a Vermont-specific version of CSP.

Key considerations on the option from the Working Group were:

- Would there be a way to pay for more measurable outcomes (e.g., stewardship scores for each resource concern), rather than just incentivizing enrollment in CSP?
- Could some of the funds be devoted to measurement or monitoring to determine if the pilot is successful in meeting the Working Groups goals?
- In what ways can the pilot help build capacity in advance of a future program?
- Could the pilot include paying farmers to be CSP ambassadors?
- Is there a better name for the pilot?

- Could CSP practice bundles be highlighted/created to respond to Vermont's needs (e.g., bundles for small farmers)?

Given the above considerations, the Working Group agreed to move forward with the CSP-State Enhancement option. A subgroup (including VAAF, DEC, NRCS, and the Conservation Districts) will develop the pilot program over the next couple months and provide updates to the broader Working Group. CBI will also begin drafting the Working Group's 2023 report to the Legislature and will provide regular opportunities for Working Group members to provide input.

Working Group members also recognized the work of Mario Machado, UVM Gund postdoc, who co-authored a report which surveyed 1300 working lands ecosystem services programs across the northeastern US.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:05 PM.

#### Links shared

1. [Meeting recording](#)
2. [USDA-NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program \(CSP\) With a Vermont State Enhancement \(VSE\), VAAF](#)
3. [Ecosystem Services in Working Lands Practice and Policy of the U.S. Northeast](#), Coleman & Machado
4. [Growing a Revolution: Bringing our Soil Back to Life](#), Montgomery (book)
5. [Growing a Revolution: Bringing our Soil Back to Life – David Montgomery](#) (talk)
6. [Restoring Soil with Diversity – Gabe Brown](#) (talk)