

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

OFFICE OF SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION
STATE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION

August 24, 2021

1:15 PM

ZOOM VIRTUAL FORMAT

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE & FORESTRY
VETERANS MEMORIAL AUDITORIUM
5825 FLORIDA BOULEVARD
BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA

PROCEEDINGS/MINUTES

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Girouard called the regular monthly Soil & Water Conservation Commission Meeting to order at 1:15 P.M. Mr. Steve Horvath gave the invocation and Mr. Alan Williams lead the Pledge of Allegiance.

ROLL CALL

The roll was called by Ms. LaClasha Alexander.

Members and Alternate Members present:

Dr. Ernest Girouard – Chairman, Area IV
Mr. Steve Horvath-Vice Chairman, Area V
Mr. Larry Sayes- Secretary-Treasurer, Area III
Mr. John Alan Williams- LACD President
Mr. Reggie Skains- Area I Member
Mr. Ed Yerger- Area II Member
Mr. Brad Spicer- LDAF Alternate Member
Dr. Mike Salassi, LSU AgCenter, Alternate Member

Members absent:

Southern University Agricultural Center
Representative

A quorum was present.

Others Present:

Mr. Chad Kacir, NRCS State Conservationist
Mr. Ralph Libersat, President, Chenier Plain Coastal Protection & Restoration Authority
Mr. Joey Breaux, LDAF-OSWC/ Director SSWCC
Mr. Theron Phillips, LDAF-OSWC
Ms. Wendy Gibson, LDAF-OSWC
Ms. LaClasha “Clay” Alexander, LDAF-OSWC

Public Comments

Chairman Girouard asked if there were any comments from the public and there were none.

Approval of the Agenda

Chairman Girouard called for a motion to approve the August 24, 2021 SSWCC agenda. Mr. Breaux requested that the Commission consider revising the agenda to include an update from Mr. Ralph Libersat from the Chenier Plain Coastal Protection & Restoration Authority.

Chairman Girouard said if there were no comments, he would call for a motion to approve the agenda as revised.

Motion by: Mr. Brad Spicer

Seconded by: Mr. Steve Horvath

Motion passed unanimously.

Mr. Ralph Libersat, President, Chenier Plain Coastal Protection & Restoration Authority

Mr. Libersat said he appreciated the opportunity to speak to the Commission members. He said he began his career working with Soil and Water districts and remembers working with Mr. Spicer and Chairman Girouard. He said Mr. Breaux started just as he was moving into his next career move. Mr. Libersat went on to work for the Department of Natural Resources for 31 years where he worked on coastal zoning and served on the Coastal Commission where he retired. He later worked for a consulting engineering firm for a few years and went on to work with different boards. Mr. Libersat said he was once an employee of the SWCC prior to working for CPRA, and currently sits on the Teche-Vermillion Fresh Water District where he serves as Secretary-Treasurer as well as The Chenier Plain Coastal Protection & Restoration Authority where he serves as the President.

Mr. Libersat briefed the Commission on a constitutional amendment that will be voted on October 9th, and that, if passed, will advance the efforts of the Chenier Board. Mr. Libersat said it will be difficult to spread the word about the constitutional amendment with the tight timeframe but wants the Commission and the conservation districts to know that this will be a benefit in their favor as well. Passing the amendment will give districts opportunities to work with the Chenier Board at getting funds to assist with drainage projects in their area.

Mr. Breaux said all districts have been keen on watershed management and have been paying attention to the Louisiana Watershed Initiative. PL-566 is something that districts understand when it comes to watershed and water management and how that interfaces with The Watershed Initiative. Mr. Breaux asked if other partner entities such as NRCS and The Watershed Initiative familiar with the Chenier Board and its approach. Mr. Libersat said yes the organizations mentioned are familiar with the Chenier Board and its approach. Mr. Libersat said soil and water conservation districts should always have a seat at the table in discussing anything watershed management. Mr. Spicer asked was there anything that Mr. Libersat could think of that the Commission could do to assist in promoting this constitutional amendment to the districts. Mr. Libersat suggested the Commission consider composing a resolution to be sent to the districts. He said he is also working with the Regional Police Jurors and the Commission could submit a resolution to them. He said he would be willing to work with Mr. Breaux to prepare the resolution to be submitted. Chairman Girouard thanked Mr. Libersat for the information.

Mr. Spicer made a motion to have the Commission with assistance from Mr. Libersat compose a resolution to send out to districts regarding the constitutional amendment being vote on October 9, 2021. Mr. Horvath seconded the motion and it passed unanimously.

Approval of the minutes

Chairman Girouard called for a motion to approve the July 21, 2021 SSWCC minutes.

Motion by: Mr. Reggie Skains

Seconded by: Mr. Alan Williams

Motion passed unanimously.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

NRCS/OSWC Farm Bill Cooperative Agreement- Mr. Joey Breaux, LDAF-OSWC/ Director SSWCC

The Farm Bill reporting system closed on August 10th for the July reporting period. July's Farm Bill total is \$33,243. The districts have \$72,222 to earn over the next 2 months. Also, Mr. Breaux said OSWC has worked with LDAF IT to allow districts to view their board supervisor's information within the LDAF intranet supported reporting system. OSWC will request that the secretaries review the information and contact us if we need to make changes.

District Funding- Mr. Joey Breaux, LDAF-OSWC/ Director SSWCC

Mr. Breaux said normally this would be the meeting to discuss the new fiscal year budget. He spoke to the head of Management and Finance and was affirmed that Soil and Water's budget would be about the same as last fiscal year. He was also able to speak to the OSWC accountant who stated that there are plans to schedule an upcoming budget meeting and further follow up will be sent to the Commission as it is received.

LACD Annual Mid-Year Meeting- Mr. Joey Breaux, LDAF-OSWC/ Director SSWCC

Mr. Breaux said our LACD Mid-Year Meeting was scheduled to be held at the pavilion at Indian Creek but the State tighten COVID restrictions once again, leading to cancellation of the reservation and it was decided that LACD would go virtual. An informational packet was emailed out to everyone last Friday. It has been requested that each committee have their own virtual meeting between September 1, 2021-October 25, 2021. After the committees have their virtual meetings, the chairmen will email Mr. Williams their committee summaries that will include their committee's priority issues, resolution topics or drafts, necessary actions and prospective January 2022 LACD topics.

Area 3 and 4 State Convention- Mr. Joey Breaux, LDAF-OSWC/ Director SSWCC

Mr. Breaux said this year's convention will be a virtual meeting. There is hope that we can use Zoom to successful set up rooms for each area to have their election as well as a main room that everyone can be brought in to discuss the results.

2021 Sexual Harassment Policy and Training for Board/Commission Member- Mr. Joey Breaux, LDAF-OSWC/ Director SSWCC

Mr. Breaux said in January, it was announced to Commission members that it would be required that the Commission members take Sexual Harassment training. There was a link of the Sexual Harassment video sent to Commission members after the prior Commission meeting but the link did not work. District supervisors who have already completed the LEO based Sexual Harassment training in compliance with other board or commission memberships only must show proof of completion to accommodate this LDAF-SWCC requirement policy. Mr. Breaux said previously it was stated that if you had proof of the completed LEO based Sexual Harassment training, members would be able to submit the proof along with the signed LDAF policy statement and this would cover the current calendar year. OSWC recently sent out an updated link with information to the Commission members. The deadline for the training is December 31st.

New Business

Field Office COVID Mitigation Measures- Mr. Joey Breaux, LDAF-OSWC/ Director SSWCC

Mr. Breaux said he wanted to discuss the email that was sent to districts from Mr. Chad Kacir, NRCS State Conservationist. Guidance from FPAC states that visitors (Visitors includes Soil and Water Conservation District Employees and Board Members, Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, Quail Forever, ACES, etc.) have a vaccination verification form completed. Mr. Breaux asked Mr. Kacir if he had any comments or clarification on this. Mr. Kacir said NRCS employees have to log into a portal to answer the same 4 questions on the vaccination verification form:

1. Are you vaccinated?
2. Are you partially vaccinated?
3. Are you not vaccinated?
4. Are you refusing to answer?

Mr. Kacir asked if the Commission members they have their own personal feedback regarding his email or have they heard any other feedback from board supervisors.

Chairman Girouard said he has heard some remarks from someone who isn't planning to get vaccinated and will attend board meetings. Mr. Kacir said Chairman Girouard's board would have to discuss options. NRCS may soon require visitors who aren't vaccinated to show a negative COVID test taken within the last 3 days when entering the NRCS offices. There hasn't been any further guidance from the Secretary of Agriculture or the President regarding how the COVID testing will work for federal employees. Mr. Kacir said district boards

should evaluate if they will be compensating employees to go get tested while working which would include their driving time. Mr. Skains said he has some concerns regarding employees who have COVID symptoms but have tested negative for COVID. Mr. Breaux said those scenarios have been going on since COVID started. OSWC has sent instructions to secretaries regarding timesheets to make sure they were explaining details more when they used "Admin Leave-COVID". Mr. Breaux agreed that there should be some coding instructions put in place if NRCS mandates COVID testing every 3 days for district employees. Mr. Kacir said that he expects NRCS to release the details and give the offices enough time to prepare. Mr. Breaux suggested preparing some guidance to SWCDs regarding future COVID testing leave to be reviewed and Chairman Girouard he agreed.

NRCS State Conservationist Report- Mr. Chad Kacir, State Conservationist

Mr. Kacir said all Louisiana and Mississippi NRCS offices were set back to 25% staffing level. There is hope that COVID numbers will decrease so that NRCS could get back to at least 50% staffing level soon. NRCS does have mask mandates in place and would greatly appreciate any encouragement given to employees. The Secretary of Agriculture and NRCS headquarters did discuss a reopening plan but the idea has been pushed back. Mr. Kacir said due to the COVID numbers across the Southeast, field offices may not get a reopening plan started until late December or early January.

NRCS has hit their goal of hiring 80% of the 1,525 vacancies nationwide. Louisiana had 58 vacancies and has sent 50 job offers to applicants. Louisiana is competing with other states to get some of the same top candidates. Mr. Kacir hopes the new candidates will be able to start in October. He said NRCS will also continue efforts to recruit mentors to teach employees some basic customer needs as well as some things that take place in their personal operation.

Mr. Kacir said NRCS is about 30 days from the end of their fiscal year. NRCS has obligated about 95% of EQIP funds. They are about 30% obligated of the Stewardship program funds. There are about 500 applicants for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) which has an \$11 million dollar maximum. NRCS only expects to approve 100-120 of those applicants. Mr. Kacir said NRCS hopes to discuss more funding opportunities for the CSP with national leadership soon.

Mr. Kacir wanted to also discuss NRCS attendance for the Annual LACD meeting in January. He said in order for NRCS employees to get approved requests for room and meals at the LACD meeting, there must be some breakout sessions scheduled that can be considered training for the employees. Mr. Breaux said different topics and ideas are usually discussed during the LACD Mid-Year meeting. Mr. Spicer said each committee has NRCS Advisors. These advisors could discuss with Mr. Kacir the topics that he would suggest for specific committees. Mr. Spicer said usually on Friday during the LACD Convention, NRCS usually has its own a session. Mr. Kacir said that breakout session is more of an operational meeting to discuss what will take place during the rest of the fiscal year. The new 13 LARU DC's would be the ones to attend that operational meeting.

LSU AgCenter Center Report- Dr. Michael Salassi

Dates to Remember:

- August 24, 2021- Peanut Field Day-Northeast Field Office
- September 2, 2021- On Farm Sweet Potato Field Day- Larry Fontenot Farms

Dr. Salassi said he wanted to mention that Dr. Bill Richardson did resign as Vice President for Agriculture but will still serve on the LSU faculty. President Tate named Mr. Luke Laborde as Interim LSU Vice President while the university forms a committee to select the permanent replacement for Dr. Richardson.

Supervisor Resignations/ Appointments / Reappointments

Chairman Girouard said there is one resignation this month: Saline SWCD, Mr. David Nolte, effective August 12, 2021.

Chairman Girouard said if there were no comments, he would call for a motion to approve the resignation of Saline SWCD, Mr. David Nolte, effective August 12, 2021.

Motion by: Mr. Reggie Skains
Seconded by: Mr. Alan Williams
Motion passed unanimously

Chairman Girouard said there are three appointments this month: Boeuf River, Mr. John Lowery, elected position formerly held by Mr. Elliot Colvin, effective August 24, 2021- June 30, 2024; Catahoula SWCD, Mr. H.C. Peck III, elected position formerly held by Mr. H.C. Peck Jr., effective August 24, 2021- June 30, 2023, and Red River SWCD, Mr. Stuart Shaw, elected position formerly held by Mr. Jason Anderson, effective August 24, 2021- June 30, 2024.

Chairman Girouard said if there were no comments, he would call for a motion to approve the three appointments: Boeuf River, Mr. John Lowery, elected position formerly held by Mr. Elliot Colvin, effective August 24, 2021- June 30, 2024; Catahoula SWCD, Mr. H.C. Peck III, elected position formerly held by Mr. H.C. Peck Jr., effective August 24, 2021- June 30, 2023, and Red River SWCD, Mr. Stuart Shaw, elected position formerly held by Mr. Jason Anderson, effective August 24, 2021- June 30, 2024.

Motion by: Mr. Brad Spicer
Seconded by: Mr. Alan Williams

Correspondence/Articles:

Chairman Girouard said the first correspondence item is an engagement letter from St. Martin SWCD requesting approval from the Commission to enter into agreement with Maraist & Maraist, CPA LLC to conduct the district's FYE June 30, 2021 audit at the cost of \$1,500. Chairman Girouard said if there were no comments, he would call for a motion to approve St. Martin SWCD entering into agreement with Maraist & Maraist, CPA LLC.

Motion by: Mr. Reggie Skains
Seconded by: Mr. Brad Spicer
Motion passed unanimously.

Chairman Girouard said the second correspondence item is a shared agreement contract between Catahoula SWCD and LaSalle SWCD. The employee will be paid through the Targeted Technician agreement. Catahoula will be the control district. Chairman Girouard said if there were no comments he call for a motion to approve the shared employee agreement between Catahoula SWCD and LaSalle SWCD.

Motion by: Mr. Reggie Skains
Seconded by: Mr. Brad Spicer
Motion passed unanimously.

Articles

- Email from Mr. Chad Kacir: Vaccination Verification for Visitors
- LSU AgCenter- Resignation of Dr. Bill Richardson and Appointing of Lucien P. Laborde
- Veteran turned farmer finds success on the levee
- Panel discusses agriculture role in carbon sequestration
- U.S. Army Central Review of Legislative & Regulatory Actions
- Opinion: Reducing beef consumption might not be environmental solution some think
- Why aren't more US farmers using sustainable practices
- EPA, Corps announce meetings to gather input on WOTUS

OTHER BUSINESS

Mr. Williams said he was able to be a part of this morning's NACD Executive Committee meeting. NACD is not showing much optimism for their winter meeting in Orlando. They are planning to give it another month and a half before they make any final decisions. The NACD South Central was a success but two states did not have any representation. Mr. Breaux said the NACD Summer meeting in Chicago was also a success and we had many people to attend from Louisiana.

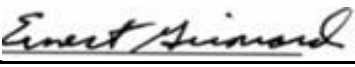
Next Meeting

Chairman Girouard said the next State Commission Meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, September 28, 2021 at 1:15 PM virtually.

Adjournment

Chairman Girouard said if there was no other business or comments from the public or Commission members, he will accept a motion to adjourn.

Motion: Mr. Brad Spicer made a motion to adjourn at 2:44 P.M. The motion was seconded by Mr. Steve Horvath and passed unanimously.

/s/ Dr. Ernest Girouard 

Dr. Ernest Girouard, Chairman State Soil and Water Conservation Commission