

**North Carolina State Disaster Recovery Task Force
Environmental Preservation Recovery Support Function (RSF 7) Meeting**

WebEx Teleconference

April 23, 2020

2:00pm – 4:00pm

[Meeting Minutes](#)

[In attendance](#)

Lead: Toby Vinson, Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)

Staff: Marlena Byrne and Ruseena Johnson, North Carolina Office of Recovery and Resiliency (NCORR)

Tom Anderson, NC League of Municipalities

Mike Burchell, NC Cooperative Extension

Chris Canfield, Conservation Trust for North Carolina

Kacy Cook, NC Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC)

Chris Crew, NC Emergency Management (NCEM)

Shannon Deaton, NCWRC

Kelly Dobroski, NC Coastal Federation

Bill Holman, The Conservation Fund

Jim Kjelgaard, US Department of Agriculture (USDA), Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)

Keith Larick, NC Farm Bureau

Michelle Lovejoy, NC Foundation for Soil and Water Conservation

Grady McCallie, NC Conservation Network

Will McDow, Environmental Defense Fund (EDF)

Bridget Munger, NCORR

Haley Pfeiffer-Haynes, NCORR

Will Robinson, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), North Carolina

Rick Savage, Carolina Wetlands Association

Katherine Skinner, TNC

Will Summer, NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (NCDNCR)

Sandy Sweitzer, North Carolina Land Trust Federation

Mary Waligora, University of North Carolina (UNC)

Jess Whitehead, NCORR

Meredith Wojcik, NCDNCR, Natural Heritage Program

Michael Yoder, NC Cooperative Extension

[Welcome, Introductions, and Overview of Agenda](#)

T. Vinson and M. Byrne provided a brief introduction and agenda overview. Meeting to provide update on each organization's response to covid19 and a presentation by Jim Kjelgaard, USDA NRCS, regarding the NRCS's Emergency Watershed Protection Program.

Group Discussion: Impact of Pandemic on Recovery and Resiliency Work Related to Environmental Preservation

B. Holman, The Conservation Fund: They have transitioned from in person site visits to virtual site visits. A few additional challenges for his organization have included not being able to show maps to clients, obtaining surveys, and determining how to get documents notarized virtually. A member of the RSF recommended that they seek out electronic notaries through North Carolina's electronic notarization program.

G. McCallie, NC Conservation Network: They have implemented teleworking and shared a few concerns. They are concerned about maintenance of infrastructure, physical impact on water systems, how to prepare for a hurricane during this pandemic, and racial disparities in the outcomes from covid19. Are there any policies in place to reduce the impact of a hurricane to citizens?

H. Pfeiffer Haynes, NCORR: NCORR has been able to maintain progress on the plans post Florence funding launch. Reconstruction and rebuilding has stayed steady with the use of physical distancing. They have also been able to maintain team interaction through daily team check-ins. One challenge is a slow-down in approval of forms due to superiors having covid19 priorities. She shares the concern that people that have not recovered from the storm two years ago may not be able to endure the impact of any storms during this hurricane season. How do you prepare for hurricane season in the middle of covid19?

C. Crew, NCEM: The transition to public meetings as teleconferences has slowed down planning efforts. The organization will need to consider approaches to safe sheltering as we approach hurricane season. He pointed out that due to the challenge to maintain physical distancing more sheltering facilities and personnel will need to be engaged.

J. Whitehead, NCORR: The Resilience Team has written and recently released a Quick Start Guide that will aid local governments with setting up recovery and resilience teams and performing risk assessment analyses. NCORR is in the due diligence phase of an EDA resiliency grant application process.

T. Vinson, DEQ: The EO80 phase 1 deadline is now June 1, 2020 due to covid 19.

J. Kjelgaard, USDA NRCS: They have addressed physical distancing by reducing office occupancy. They were able to make use of the essential travel exemption for whenever they need to travel. They are trying to advance agency programs and products as much as they can. However, fieldwork has slowed down in areas in which physical distancing is not possible. The areas that are more isolated have not been effected.

K. Cook, NCWRC: Their biggest challenge has been not being able to do in person training for local government due to physical distancing requirements. Planning projects are still going ahead and she anticipates that development will increase. Speaking of hurricane shelters: wonder if hotels can be paid by state so that people can shelter in those since people are not using those right now.

K. Skinner, TNC: They are coapplicants with DEQ in awarded National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) coastal resilience grant. They will work with DEQ and J. Whitehead to put a game plan in place to get going on this project.

K. Larick, NC Farm Bureau: They are still checking in with several work groups on resilience, broader landscape working with farmers going through market disruptions; monitoring other supply chain issues; want to keep farmers working and help them keep their farm workers safe. Avian flu in a couple of our counties.

K. Dobroski, NC Coastal Federation: no updates.

M. Wojcik, NCDNCR Natural Heritage Program: They are having a challenge with the non-essential travel ban as their biologists are usually out at this time. But they have been able to maintain data even though they have not been able to collect new data.

S. Sweitzer, North Carolina Land Trust Federation and Triangle Land Conservancy: advised that her team has been able to continue conservation work in the field because they are practicing social distancing.

K. Dobroski, NC Coastal Federation: advised that her team also carries an essential worker letter.

T. Vinson, DEQ: advised as a final alternative, since some of the work is calendar oriented; they may consider re-addressing who is considered an essential employee.

W. Summer, NCDNCR: Department has drafted a written protocol for field work and is in the process of getting it approved. Hoping to be back in the field using safe social distancing practices in May. Like other cabinet agencies, we are very cognizant of the need to get critical work done while ensuring compliance with the letter and spirit of the Governor's orders.

S. Deaton, NCWRC: Her teams drive separately and avoid interacting with each other in the field. Due to these measures, they did not need to ask for permissions or reclassify as essential workers. There has not been a slowdown in permit applications and they certainly do not want to be the entity that slows down that progress. They have made many adaptations for things such as public hearings. They have postponed many public hearings while working to ensure available technology will meet communication needs. The public has been using the park access areas. However, there have been concerns about people not observing social distancing. She has seen photos on social media about how wildlife has adapted to this change and has noted that it did not take long for them to adapt. QUESTION to S. Deaton: Are there any studies about whether there has been a change in the amount of foot traffic on the trails due to covid19?

G. McCallie, NC Conservation Network: Question to the group: Has there been an analysis about what part of the federal funding that the state has received for covid 19 can or should be used for resilience?

T. Vinson is not aware of anything happening right now. J. Whitehead stated that we do not have a connection into those discussions. The Governor's office would need to answer this. However, Pew Charitable Trusts is looking at this issue. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) act to date does not really include any discussions about potential inclusion of infrastructure. Lots of discussion from the Democratic Party but not very much from congressional leadership. The thought is that they expect everything to be heavily related to job metrics so whatever priorities you are considering make sure they convert to jobs created, jobs saved.

M. Byrne, NCORR: FEMA Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program is open for comments. The program does not currently include any nature-based solutions. However, the program may allow additional funding for existing programs. The key for this RSF would be focusing on what programs we would want to see get additional funding.

M. Yoder, NC Cooperative Extension: Expressed concern about preparing for a hurricane in the midst of covid19 as well as how to get the state to pay attention to something like this when they have things that are more pressing on their mind.

M. Lovejoy, NC Foundation for Soil and Water Conservation: Their organization has a heavy emphasis on education programs. As such, they are in discussion with Roanoke center about constructing different programs that may work better in the current environment. If the Governor allows assembly of groups of ten we may be able to do more traditional meetings, perhaps through various satellite groups. Unfortunately, many in the agricultural community do not have stable enough internet access to allow for a smooth transition to teleconferencing. If you see any other states that have created a work around for this that you think may work in NC please share with M. Lovejoy.

M. Burchell, NC Cooperative Extension: They are focused on safely closing out the current semester. From environmental standpoint, all workshops have been postponed until we get some more guidelines on how to move forward. In regards to research, they have been granted some exemptions but want to proceed in abundance of caution. Making plans for when they can start opening up things based on what they hear from the university and the government.

R. Savage, Carolina Wetlands Association: The EPA program fieldwork has been delayed. They have been able to continue working with a local community on a wetland complex. The second community meeting for this project will be a remote meeting in order to protect their wetlands. They have a third project in South Carolina that is on hold due to the virus. They are using the AGS 3D monitoring systems to continue to communicate the value of nature based wetland solutions to the community.

T. Anderson, NC League of Municipalities: They provide a lot of training especially on the law enforcement side such as advance driving courses. This training uses a large amount of their budget and is calendar specific so cannot be rescheduled. They have moved as much to a zoom type of setting as possible. The league has always had a very robust offsite capability in regards to meeting the members' needs with resources. They are conducting accident investigations by making use of technology as much as possible, including videos and photos. Overall, they are still providing the majority of their services, just in a different ways

T. Vinson, DEQ: They are teleworking, making use of skeleton crews and redefining who is considered essential so that they can safely continue to provide an optimum level of service. Many regional offices have discontinued routine visits but are still responding to emergency complaints. Some workshops were moved to Zoom, others have been postponed to August with the hope that there can be face-to-face communication. There has been an increase in the number of applications for sediment and erosion control as well as dam safety and construction. Some work has slowed down but it has not stopped. Public hearings have been a bit of a challenge to host remotely. The Air Quality team has done a lot of online public hearings. They have received requests to postpone the hearings but are mandated by state law to hold them within a certain time in regards to the application timeline. DEQ is working to allow more time for comment by possibly having people sign up for comment in advance and posting

information in advance. Interdepartmental research such as legislature provided Emergency Management with about \$5 million to review state stripping gauges, looking at implementing that for dam monitoring, combine with overtopping studies, to help prioritize responses and determine which dams we look at first.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Emergency Watershed Protection Program Presented by Jim Kjelgaard

J. Kjelgaard explained how to apply for the Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Helping Communities Recover After Natural Disasters programs. He answered questions about some of the limitations for pre-existing conditions, sponsor responsibilities and related concerns in regards to the EWP.

Issues raised in discussion:

- B. Holman: Implementing a cost share from the state or local government would provide a greater assistance to the targeted community. Recommends that the state consider matching funds once the budget has become more stabilized so that they can be strategic in working with Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS).
- J. Kjelgaard: Durham County and Piedmont conservancy are working together on a project. They do need assistance with administering and getting all the forms together with agreements and what not. Piedmont helped Durham County with the administration. For most NRCS organizations paperwork may not be the strong point of personnel skills therefore partnering with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) may help a lot of work get done on the ground.
- K. Skinner: In rural landscapes partnerships are set up a bit differently, restoring natural habitat, NRCS has money but only working with conservation easements, have to figure out the match and underlying fees, to a lot of differential but it's still there. Maybe if they could cluster some of the communities upstream it would be very advantageous. This will help look at it more holistically.
- T. Vinson: In these types of projects, does there seem to be less bureaucratic paperwork than in suburban and urban landscape?
- K. Skinner: The paperwork has not been the bottleneck; in their experience the bottleneck is that you have to have a critical number of landowners in the same vicinity to agree to participate. Lots of manpower on the ground on the front end that you have to get to trust you and each other in order to agree to improving the land. Many are more interested in selling their land. Too much of a checkerboard right now. The scale is not there right now with the kind of manpower they need to make it work. Need 50 plus landowners to get it to work. Paperwork is not the problem. Assembling is more of the problem

Next Steps for Drafting Recommendations on Resiliency:

- Work on recommendations will resume with May 28, 2020 Meeting
- Please submit written draft recommendations to marlena.byrne@ncdps.gov for consideration by RSF by May 14, 2020 on the topic of "Increasing Effectiveness and Implementation of Nature-Based Infrastructure and Restoration."
- M. Byrne to send specifics of what she wants from the RSF in regards to language for the recommendations

Wrap Up and Next Steps:

- Potential guest speaker for next RSF meeting: Matthew Arlyn, Director of Policy for NCORR.
- Other recommended speakers/presentations: Spencer Rogers of Sea Grant, any members that would like to present, presentation of interagency projects between Emergency Management, bioengineering and the State

Next Meeting: May 28, 2020 via WebEx