

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

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

March 18, 2025
1:15 PM

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE & FORESTRY
MANAGEMENT AND FINANCE CONFERENCE ROOM
5825 FLORIDA BOULEVARD
BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA

MEETING MINUTES

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Garber called the regular monthly Soil & Water Conservation Commission Meeting to order at 1:15 P.M.

ROLL CALL

The roll was called by Ms. "Clay" Alexander.

Members and Alternate Members present:

Mr. Earl Garber, Chairman, Area IV Member
Mr. Steve Horvath, Vice Chairman, Area V Member
Mr. Reggie Skains, Secretary-Treasurer, Area I Member
Mr. Brad Spicer, LDAF Alternate Member
Mr. Price Gay, LACD President
Dr. Michael Salassi, LSU AgCenter Alternate Member
Mr. Ed Yerger, Area II Member

Members Absent:

Southern University Agricultural Center Representative
Mr. Ed Giering, Area III Member

A quorum was present.

Others Present:

Mr. Joshua Anderson, Acting LA NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Partnerships and Initiatives
Mr. Doug Daigle, LA Hypoxia Workgroup
Mr. Joey Breaux, SWCC Exec. Director
Ms. "Clay" Alexander, LDAF-OSWC
Ms. Amy McInnis, LDAF General Counsel
Mr. Theron Phillips, LDAF-OSWC

Public Comments

Chairman Garber introduced Mr. Doug Daigle from the LA Hypoxia Workgroup. Mr. Daigle wanted to update the Commission about the Hypoxia Workgroup. The comment period on the LA Hypoxia Nutrient Reduction strategy recently closed. The consensus was that the document needed improvement as well as the comment process. Mr. Daigle said he also believed that the strategy needed more funding. The Governor's Office of Coastal Activities represented Louisiana on the taskforce during that time. During a meeting last Summer, The Governor's Office of Coastal Activities was removed as Louisiana's representative on the taskforce and replaced by the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA). Mr. Daigle said he wants to create a resolution to present legislators during the upcoming session suggest putting the Governor's Office of Coastal Activities back as Louisiana's representative on the Hypoxia task force with nutrient team being co-chaired by OSWC with contributions from Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries.

Approval of the March 18, 2025 agenda

Chairman Garber called for a motion to approve the March 18, 2025 SWCC agenda.

Motion by: Mr. Reggie Skains

Seconded by: Mr. Price Gay

Motion passed unanimously.

Approval of February 25, 2025 minutes

Chairman Garber called for a motion to approve the February 25, 2025 SWCC meeting minutes.

Motion by: Mr. Brad Spicer

Seconded by: Mr. Steve Horvath

Motion passed unanimously.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

NRCS/OSWC Farm Bill Cooperative Agreement

Mr. Anderson said all LDAF agreement claims through December have been paid as of yesterday. After last month's SWCC meeting, he and Mr. Adams were able to release some of the remaining non-IRA funding. Mr. Garber asked Mr. Breaux about moving forward with notifying the districts on this matter. Mr. Breaux said agreement funds are being held because of certain key terms in agreements are being flagged by IRA. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) agreements that included IRA funding were recently released. Being that the BIL agreement was not flagged due to DEI and climate change references, he believes there is hope that LDAF agreements will be able to use IRA funding soon. Each district will have to review their budgets and discuss contingency plans due to the reduced funding. Mr. Gay said that we have asked districts to reach out to their local legislators for state funding as well as their congressional delegates for release of the NRCS Agreement funding and now is the time to get their assistance toward funding restoration efforts. The Commission members discussed more details and Mr. Breaux asked the Commission to allow him to draft some information to send to districts regarding the district funding pause.

Chairman Garber said if there was no comment, he would call for a motion to approve Mr. Breaux sending information out regarding the upcoming funding reduction and to begin creating a contingency plan.

Motion by: Mr. Ed Yerger

Seconded by: Mr. Price Gay

Motion passed unanimously.

Out of State Travel

Chairman Garber said we received one out of state travel request:

- D'Arbonne SWCD is asking permission for Reggie Skains to attend the NACD Spring Fly-In on March 26, 2025 in Washington, DC.

Chairman Garber said if there were no comments, he would call for a motion to approve the out of state travel request for:

- D'Arbonne SWCD is asking permission for Reggie Skains to attend the NACD Spring Fly-In on March 26, 2025 in Washington, DC.

Motion by: Mr. Price Gay

Seconded by: Mr. Steve Horvath

Motion passed unanimously.

NEW BUSINESS

NRCS State Conservationist Report- Mr. Joshua Anderson, Acting LA NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Partnerships and Initiative

Mr. Anderson said he and Mr. Adams have been reviewing all the executive orders and presidential memorandums pausing all federal IRA funding. The documents included details that put the agency heads in charge of reviewing each agreement. LA NRCS has participated in several data calls that included answering different questions about different agreements and have not received the results of those data calls. They are also reviewing the district's Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) documents as well as the Unfunded Cooperative Agreement documents.

NRCS is still under a hiring freeze. However, Mr. Anderson mentioned that there has been a review on probationary employees that were separated. These employees now have the chance to be placed back on NRCS payroll until further review but there hasn't been a decision made to have those employees return to the office. Chairman Garber said Secretary Rollins was able to release funding when she first came into office. Funds were then paused and a lot of NRCS employees lost their positions. He asked Mr. Anderson how producers would receive the assistance needed once the funding was released again. Mr. Anderson said LA NRCS currently has about the same number of employees as it did in 2016 when they had heavy EQIP, CSP, and ACEP funding. Mr. Anderson said it was a lot of hard work, but they were able to get everything completed. Chairman Garber said he hopes that the members attending the NACD Fly-In spread the word regarding the decrease in employees and how much they are needed to assist the producers.

LSU AgCenter Report- Dr. Michael Salassi, LSU AgCenter

Dr. Salassi said LSU also received news of paused funding for their approved project that is set to put field sensors around the state. LSU is continuing to track their grant awards and federal funding for the fiscal year, and they are at the same level that they were this time last year but are concerned regarding the next few months of funding. He said USDA has already pulled all RFPs from their website so there aren't any grants that LSU can apply for at this time. LSU received notice from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to review all existing federal agreements and contracts. OMB flagged all agreements with certain key terms (i.e. climate, diversity) and LSU had approximately 8-10 grants with those terms. Faculty in charge of those agreements received notice with 35-question survey to complete in less than 24 hours.

Another thing that may affect all the universities in the state is the proposed constitutional amendment #2 on March 29th's ballot. This amendment promises to give teacher pay raises and pay off teacher's debt and in return it will repeal and defund the LA Education Quality Trust Fund which has been in place for 40 years. This proposed amendment will also defund the LA Board of Regents Support Fund which is a fund that would match any contributions given for a university professorship or chair. The Regents Support Fund also funds different proposals annually based on discipline to enhance departments and research competitiveness. An LSU faculty member received \$250,000 last year to pay for a piece of equipment.

Some dates to remember:

April 22, 2025- Wheat and Oat Field Day- Macon Ridge Station, Winnsboro, LA

April 23, 2025- Audubon Sugar Factory Seminar- St. Gabriel, LA

April 24, 2025- Northwest Beef and Forage Field Day- Hill Farm Research Station- Homer, LA

OSWC Update

Mr. Breaux reported that all claims submitted to NRCS from LDAF through December were paid yesterday. However, LDAF is still waiting on an additional 2 months of unpaid claims. The Senate Finance committee meeting is currently in session.

Mr. Breaux said one of the main things needed that is a perennial issue with 319 projects as of late is dealing with having a waterbody deemed impaired due to agriculture causes, but 319-funded conservation

activity is held up until a Watershed Implementation Plan is developed by DEQ and approved by R-6 EPA, a prerequisite to expenditure of 319 conservation funds in that watershed. That process usually takes 2 to 3 years, which half of the LDAF/SWCD work period, shortening the window of opportunity for landowners' participation in the program. EPA has recently suggested LDAF request a waiver to depart from the 50/50 program funds that DEQ receives and project funds that are received by LDAF, so that LDAF and participating SWCDs may directly engage eligible consultants to have the WIPs developed in a more timely manner. Since federal law states that all project funding can only be used to implement conservation and not do watershed planning, the waiver has been submitted and if approved would allow LDAF to get these watershed implementation plans developed.

Supervisor Waivers/ Resignations/ Appointments / Reappointments

Chairman Garber said we received one waiver request:

- Mr. Jeremy Wood, Catahoula SWCD

Mr. Woods did not meet board meeting attendance requirements in the past year. He submitted a letter to his district board of supervisors and their boards submitted supporting letters suggesting the absences were justified and they are requesting the attendance requirements be waived.

Chairman Garber said if there were no comments, he would call for a motion to waive the attendance requirement for Mr. Wood, Catahoula SWCD making him eligible for re-election.

Motion by: Mr. Reggie Skains

Seconded by: Mr. Steve Horvath

Motion passed unanimously.

Chairman Garber said there was 1 resignation this month:

- Mr. Mickey Chandler, Dorcheat SWCD, elected position, effective March 7, 2025.

Chairman Garber said if there were no comments, he would call for a motion to approve the resignation request for:

- Mr. Mickey Chandler, Dorcheat SWCD, elected position, effective March 7, 2025.

Motion by: Mr. Price Gay

Seconded by: Mr. Ed Yerger

Motion passed unanimously.

Chairman Garber said there are 2 appointments this month:

- Mr. Mickey Chandler, Dorcheat SWCD, appointed position formerly held by Ms. Harol Thompson, effective March 29, 2025- March 29, 2028.
- Mr. Trenton Forrest, Tangipahoa-St. Helena SWCD, elected position formerly held by Darrell Sinagra, effective March 18, 2025- June 30, 2026.

Chairman Garber said if there were no comments, he would call for a motion to approve the SWCD supervisor appointments for:

- Mr. Mickey Chandler, Dorcheat SWCD, appointed position formerly held by Ms. Harol Thompson, effective March 29, 2025- March 29, 2028.
- Mr. Trenton Forrest, Tangipahoa-St. Helena SWCD, elected position formerly held by Darrell Sinagra, effective March 18, 2025- June 30, 2026.

Motion by: Mr. Price Gay

Seconded by: Mr. Ed Yerger

Motion passed unanimously.

Chairman Garber said the Commission received one reappointment:

- Mr. Bruce Watts, Gulf Coast SWCD, appointed position, effective June 11, 2025- June 11, 2028

Chairman Garber said if there were no comments, he would call for a motion to approve the SWCD supervisor reappointment for:

- Mr. Bruce Watts, Gulf Coast SWCD, appointed position, effective June 11, 2025- June 11, 2028

Motion by: Mr. Price Gay

Seconded by: Mr. Ed Yerger

Motion passed unanimously

SWCC Area 5 Alternate Discussion

Chairman Garber explained to Commission members that Mr. Chris Martin, Feliciana SWCD, became LACD 1st Vice President during this year's annual LACD meeting. With that position, he becomes the LACD President's alternate member (Mr. Price Gay). The Commission members discussed the matter and decided to have the alternate member chosen at the Area 5 meeting in May.

SWCC Goals

Chairman Garber asked the Commission members did they have any discussion and there were no comments.

Correspondence

- National Conservation Planning Partnership CART Forum – March 19, 2025
- Supreme Court Limits EPA's Permitting Authority under the Clean Water Act
- EPA To Address 'Government Overreach' on Defining WOTUS
- Lexology: EPA to Roll Back 31 Environmental Rules
- EPA Celebrates America's Farmers and Ranchers on National Agriculture Day

Other Business

District Facebook Guidelines

Mr. Breaux discussed assisting LACD with creating some guidelines that SWCDS should follow on their district Facebook pages. He mentioned that NACD has sent out some guidelines that could be useful to this process. The purpose of these guidelines is to make sure that the district pages are professional and are strictly displaying information on what is happening with the districts. There should also be an effort to have a backup administrator on the district Facebook page just in case the primary administrator resigns or is unavailable to post important information. Ms. Gerace said Facebook is a useful tool for districts as well as possible partners. The current issue with existing pages is that they were setup as personal pages instead of business pages. Facebook business pages currently have the requirement of having one administrator. NRCS has inquired about district Facebook pages on several occasions because it would be another way to get their information out to the public. When districts post any information on their Face Book page, they can also account for the task in the Farm Bill reporting system.

Next Meeting

Chairman Garber said the next state Commission Meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, April 22, 2025 in the LDAF Veterans Auditorium, 5825 Florida Blvd., Baton Rouge, LA 70806

Public Comment

Adjournment

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

Motion: Mr. Steve Horvath made a motion to adjourn at 3:22 P.M. The motion was seconded by Mr. Ed Yerger and passed unanimously.

Earl J. Garber

/s/

Mr. Earl Garber, Chairman, State Soil and Water Conservation Commission