

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

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

April 22, 2025
1:15 PM

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE & FORESTRY
VETERANS AUDITORIUM
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 1:18 P.M.

ROLL CALL

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

Members and Alternates 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
Mr. Ed Yerger, Area II Member

Members Absent

Southern University Agricultural Center Representative
Dr. Michael Salassi, LSU AgCenter Alternate Member

Mr. Ed Giering, Area III Member

A quorum was present.

Others Present:

Ms. Tabitha Irvin, LDAF Executive Counsel
Ms. Jade Saunders, LDAF General Counsel
Mr. Theron Phillips, LDAF-OSWC
Mr. Jerry Davenport, LDAF-OSWC

Ms. Kelli McClelland, Acting LA NRCS State Conservationist
Ms. Bethany Gonzalez, LDAF General Counsel
Mr. Joey Breaux, SWCC Exec. Director
Ms. Wendy Gibson- LDAF-OSWC
Ms. "Clay" Alexander, LDAF-OSWC

Public Comments

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

Approval of the April 22, 2025 agenda

Chairman Garber called for a motion to approve the April 22, 2025 SWCC agenda.

Motion by: Mr. Brad Spicer

Seconded by: Mr. Reggie Skains

Motion passed unanimously.

Approval of March 18, 2025 minutes

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

Motion by: Mr. Reggie Skains

Seconded by: Mr. Price Gay

Motion passed unanimously.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

NRCS/OSWC Farm Bill Cooperative Agreement

March 2025 FB Total Drawdown: \$101,372

Remaining Balance: \$414,571

Mr. Breaux reported that 10 districts have already maxed out on their farm bill assistance allocations. The districts are Bodcau, Boeuf River, Calcasieu, Crescent, DeSoto, Lower Delta, Madison, Natchitoches, New River, and St. Martin SWCD. These 10 districts have exceeded their farm bill allocations by \$92,524. Mr. Breaux mentioned that it is imperative that districts continue to report their monthly farm bill hours so that when the farm bill funding resumes payments can get to districts quickly.

Districts have received notice regarding the funding pause on the Farm Bill, PSS, and LARU technician agreements. Within the notice, districts were given scenarios for consideration to help them get through the funding pause, such as sharing employees with neighboring SWCDs, seeking parish/municipal assistance and reducing pay rates.

Legislative Session/State Funding

Mr. Breaux mentioned that he, Mr. Gay, Ms. Gerace, and Commissioner Strain got the chance to meet with Senator Womack and Rep. McFarland several weeks ago regarding district funding. As mentioned in prior SWCC meetings, Commissioner Strain submitted his executive budget for the upcoming fiscal year. The budget was returned with \$209,000 less than what was requested. Mr. Breaux said that Senator McFarland was aware of the figure due to districts reaching out to legislators as requested by the Commission. Mr. Gay said he has spoken to Mrs. Gerace, and they are strongly considering sending another round of letters and emails to legislators to continue the momentum regarding legislative funding for districts.

NEW BUSINESS

NRCS State Conservationist Report- Ms. Kelli McClelland, Acting LA NRCS State Conservationist

Ms. McClelland said NRCS has ranked approximately 422 EQIP applications with 87 of the applications being obligated. Nearly all CSP applications have been ranked and are on the way to the obligation phase within the next week. She said that she did receive a few messages from Mr. Anderson regarding IRA funding. Mr. Anderson stated that most of the IRA funding had been un-paused and that NRCS was able to process payments for the LARU technician agreement. In a later email sent to Ms. McClelland, he said NRCS is waiting on further guidance on the other pending payments for Farm bill and Program Support Specialist agreements. Ms. McClelland said the State Technical Committee meeting took place recently. She said that she was unable to attend but was informed that they discussed and agreed to maintain the 10 high priority practices as well as the current source water protection areas in the Lafayette and Monroe areas. Ms. McClelland said she recently signed the district unfunded MOUs and are on the way to Grants and Administration (GAD).

OSWC Update

Mr. Breaux mentioned Louisiana's first known agriculture working land easement project, on the Live Oak Farm in Vermillion Parish, was funding in part by the Louisiana Outdoors Forever program, which provided the non-federal match of nearly \$500,000. The farm is widely known as a conservation farm and has been operated by multiple generations within the same family, some of whom are Certified LA Master Farmers. Mr. Breaux introduced Mr. Davenport to give updates on the 319 and PL-566 programs. Mr. Davenport said all watershed projects are moving forward as planned. PIFRs that were in the works have been completed and environmental assessments for 5 districts are in process. Mr. Davenport reported that Vermillion SWCD is has gotten the furthest in the

process and is the 1st district to pass the technical review. The next steps for Vermillion's project would be: Passing headquarters review, going through a federal government registry where other federal agencies can give comment on the project within a certain timeframe, contacting state agencies for comment (Mr. Davenport is currently working on a list of agencies to send the project to) and have the public review the project and ask for comments.

Once all the above steps are completed, the project would go into the engineer and construction phases. LDAF is waiting to hear about funding to start new PIFRs and environmental assessments. OSWC is working with DEQ and EPA to revise their documents due to all the new executive orders being released. They are also working on the 319 2024 workplan which will include 2 new project areas: Bayou Cortableau and Bayou Que de Tortue.

Supervisor Waivers/ Resignations/ Appointments / Reappointments

Chairman Garber said one waiver request was received:

- Mr. Rickey Bourque, St. Mary SWCD

Mr. Bourque 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. Bourque, St. Mary SWCD making him eligible for re-election.

Motion by: Mr. Brad Spicer

Seconded by: Mr. Steve Horvath

Motion passed unanimously.

Chairman Garber said there are 3 resignations this month:

- Mr. Steve Bates, Dugdemona SWCD, elected position, effective April 18, 2025.
- Mr. Thomas Smith, Grant SWCD, elected position, effective March 17, 2025.
- Mr. John Hays, Saline SWCD, elected position, effective March 13, 2025.

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

- Mr. Steve Bates, Dugdemona SWCD, elected position, effective April 18, 2025.
- Mr. Thomas Smith, Grant SWCD, elected position, effective March 17, 2025.
- Mr. John Hays, Saline SWCD, elected position, effective March 13, 2025.

Motion by: Mr. Reggie Skains

Seconded by: Mr. Price Gay

Motion passed unanimously.

Chairman Garber said there are 4 appointments this month:

- Mr. Don Knuppel, Crescent SWCD, elected position formerly held by Mr. Alvin Melancon, effective April 22, 2025- June 30, 2026.
- Mr. Guy Sanders, Dorcheat SWCD, elected position formerly held by Mickey Chandler, effective April 22, 2025- June 30, 2027
- Mr. Glenn Austin, Dugdemona SWCD, elected position formerly held by Steve Bates, effective April 22, 2025- June 30, 2026
- Mr. Steve Bates, Dugdemona SWCD, appointed position formerly held by Don Price, effective April 22, 2025- March 25, 2028

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

- Mr. Don Knuppel, Crescent SWCD, elected position formerly held by Mr. Alvin Melancon, effective April 22, 2025- June 30, 2026.
- Mr. Guy Sanders, Dorcheat SWCD, elected position formerly held by Mickey Chandler, effective April 22, 2025- June 30, 2027
- Mr. Glenn Austin, Dugdemonia SWCD, elected position formerly held by Steve Bates, effective April 22, 2025- June 30, 2026
- Mr. Steve Bates, Dugdemonia SWCD, appointed position formerly held by Don Price, effective April 22, 2025- March 25, 2028

Motion by: Mr. Brad Spicer

Seconded by: Mr. Price Gay

Motion passed unanimously.

Chairman Garber said the Commission received 6 reappointments:

- Mr. Earl Garber, Acadia SWCD, appointed position, effective June 11, 2025- June 11, 2028.
- Mr. Blaise Pezold, Crescent SWCD, appointed position, effective June 21, 2025- June 21, 2028
- Mr. Andre Danos, Lafourche-Terrebonne SWCD, appointed position, effective June 11, 2025- June 11, 2028.
- Mr. Grant Crochet, Lower Delta SWCD, appointed position, effective May 4, 2025- May 4, 2028
- Mr. Sidney Evans, Natchitoches SWCD, appointed position, effective, June 26, 2025-June 26, 2028
- Mr. Edwin Lashney II, Rapides SWCD, appointed position, effective June 26, 2025-June 26, 2028.

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

- Mr. Earl Garber, Acadia SWCD, appointed position, effective June 11, 2025- June 11, 2028.
- Mr. Blaise Pezold, Crescent SWCD, appointed position, effective June 21, 2025- June 21, 2028
- Mr. Andre Danos, Lafourche-Terrebonne SWCD, appointed position, effective June 11, 2025- June 11, 2028.
- Mr. Grant Crochet, Lower Delta SWCD, appointed position, effective May 4, 2025- May 4, 2028
- Mr. Sidney Evans, Natchitoches SWCD, appointed position, effective, June 26, 2025-June 26, 2028
- Mr. Edwin Lashney II, Rapides SWCD, appointed position, effective June 26, 2025-June 26, 2028.

Motion by: Mr. Price Gay

Seconded by: Mr. Reggie Skains

Motion passed unanimously

SWCC Goals

Chairman Garber and the Commission members discussed the goals list. Mr. Skains and Chairman Garber discussed the difficulty of trying to get more dedicated funding. Mr. Breaux said statutes state that legally districts can't leverage special assessments fees or taxes. Many years ago, there was an attempt to partner with the forest industry on their proposed severance tax assessment and was denied. Mr. Skains suggested that the Commission should work towards getting the statute changed. Mr. Breaux said the idea of revising the statutes was recently discussed and it was decided that it wasn't the right time to propose the idea. Current HB 564 by Representative Jacob Landry establishes the Conservation Incentive Program which will help landowners with enhancing wildlife habitats and wetlands on private property. The program will also address impacts of invasive species and related matters. The bill is presented on behalf of the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and presents a partnership opportunity for conservation districts. Chairman Garber said we should consider other state agencies to partner with in funding and partnership efforts.

Correspondence

- Lexology: The Trump Administration's March 12, 2025 Guidance
- Biology of soil determines the fate of applied fertilizer
- Letlow Pushes to designate Ouachita River as Marine Highway
- Official Newsletter from the Office of Congresswoman Julia Letlow
- AI in water management: Balancing innovation and consumption
- On WOTUS Notice: EPA Gives Notice of Yet Another Clean Water Act Rule

Other Business

Mr. Skains encouraged Commission members to review the proposed bills especially SB 244 which regards the Sparta Groundwater Commission.

Next Meeting

Chairman Garber said the next state Commission Meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, May 27, 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: At 3:06 P.M. Mr. Steve Horvath made a motion to adjourn. The motion was seconded by Mr. Brad Spicer and passed unanimously.

/s/ 

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