***Colorado Association of Conservation Districts***

***Board of Directors Meeting Minutes***

***March 16, 2022, via Zoom***

***Attendees:***

*Tyler Neely, CACD Vice President - Rio Grande River Watershed*

*Mike Cleary, CACD Secretary/Treasurer - Gunnison Dolores Watershed*

*Nick Charchalis, CACD Director – North-Platte/White-Yampa River Watershed*

*George Fosha, CACD Director - Upper Arkansas River Watershed*

*Gary Thrash, CACD Director - San Juan Basin - CO NACD Alternate Representative*

*Charlie Carnahan, CACD Director - Upper South Platte Watershed*

*Bob Warner, CACD Alternate Director - CO NACD Representative - NCF Trustee*

*Bobbi Ketels, CACD Executive Director*

***Absent:***

*Jim Cecil, CACD President - Republican River Watershed*

*Scott Jones, CACD Director - Colorado River Watershed*

*Brett Moore, CACD Legislative Liaison*

***Guests:***

*Bronson Smart, NRCS*

*Randy Randall, NRCS*

*Les Owen, CDA*

*Cindy Lair, CSCB*

*Max Neumeyer*

***Call to Order:***

*The meeting was called to order by* ***Vice******President Tyler Neely*** *at 7:35 AM after establishing a quorum.*

***Prior Meeting Minutes:***

***Vice President Tyler Neely*** *asked for a motion to approve the* ***February 2022*** *minutes.* ***Director George Fosha*** *moves to approve the February 2022 minutes.* ***Director Mike Cleary*** *gives the second.* ***Motion Passes.***

***NRCS Update:***

***Bronson Smart*** *stated that NRCS offices are back to 75% staffing. As of this week, producers do not need an appointment. Additional changes are expected this week, possibly opening for travel and more normal operations. Supervisors return to the office on April 18 and on May 2, all employees return to the office and normal work schedules. Bronson is hoping to travel to Colorado and attend partner meetings as soon as out of state travel is approved.*

*Priorities for the agency include equity climate smart agriculture, so cover crops are big right now, and there is a push to get producers involved in urban agriculture with farmer’s markets (locally grown food) for people growing food on small acreage for market. There has been progress with the watershed program, which is part of the infrastructure package. They have had two sponsors send request letters. The letters have been sent to the National office. NRCS is encouraging additional participation in the program.*

*Bronson noted that there was a huge increase in CRP this year. Employees have been working overtime to assist FSA and get work finished. There was also a significant increase in EQIP sign-ups this year. Field offices are finishing the paperwork on those applications and hope to have contacts obligated in the next few weeks. It has been so successful that Colorado has asked for additional funding. Colorado was one of two states that was able to obligate all the cover crop initiative funding. Colorado fully funded over $1.5 million for cover crops. An additional $5 million has been requested for the cover crop initiative.*

*As a follow up to last month’s meeting, Bronson stated that NRCS will provide an additional payment for projects, such as piping, to offset the cost of materials until March 31, 2022. Colorado has petitioned the National office to continue these payments. Clint Evans is working on this request.*

***Randy Randall*** *added that there will be a State Technical Advisory Committee meeting on April 21 that will be virtual. Colorado will be hosting the Soil and Water Conservation Society meeting on July 31 thru August 3, 2022, in Denver. Site tours within 1.5 hours of Denver will be scheduled.*

*Randy noted that the budget has been approved and he will be working on the contracts that NRCS supports.*

***Cindy Lair*** *asked if Districts are allowed to have their regular board meetings in NRCS offices. Randy replied that the answer is maybe. As each office requests to have these meetings held in their office, the request has been sent to Aster Boozer for final approval. The covid community rate is considered before approval is given.*

***Director George Fosha*** *asked about the infrastructure monies. He stated that at the online seminar held a couple of weeks ago, the PL-566 was discussed. John Andrews stated that money for maintenance is not available. Bronson stated that maintenance is not an approved purpose. Per the law when the program was written, they can help build infrastructure but not operate and maintain it. If it is a dam that was built several years ago and it needs brought up to current standards or rehabilitated, they must show that it has been operated and maintained over the life of the dam for them to be eligible for the program again.*

***Legislative Update – Brett Moore:***

*No Report*

***CSCB Update - Cindy Lair:***

*Prior to Cindy’s report, Max Neumeyer, a consultant for Group Up Consulting who has been working with CDA to develop and launch the STAR program, provided an overview of the Climate Smart Commodities grant proposal. He addressed the structure of the proposal and Cindy will address how CACD might fit into the program. Max shared a presentation giving additional detail about the grant opportunity. CDA is reading the climate smart practices as soil health practices. Funding will provide technical and financial assistance to producers to implement these practices on a voluntary basis. It will pilot cost effective and innovative methods for quantification; monitoring, reporting and verification of greenhouse gas and carbon sequestration benefits; market the resultant climate smart commodities; and will include the inclusion of small and underserved producers as well as early adopters. This grant is about practice implementation and will support the same practices as the STAR program.*

*The CDA proposal for the Climate Smart Commodities grant is expanding the STAR Plus program. They will ensure that several of the eligible entities working under the new program will work with disadvantaged groups. Max went on to explain the STAR and STAR Plus programs. The one piece that would be added to the new proposal is quantifying and verifying the climate benefits on behalf of producers, empowering them to choose what market opportunities to participate in. The grant will partner with the marketing department at CDA to develop a market strategy that positions the STAR rating as a branding opportunity for producers. They are hoping that producers using healthy soil practices will be paid more for their goods. The research component of this grant is tracking the carbon sequestration and greenhouse gasses using the COMET planner to better understand the water soil connection.*

*This proposal would add thirty new conservation districts and eligible entities which would equal 369 new STAR Plus participants. It will come with $20,000 up front for conservation districts and an additional $2,000 for each producer that they work with each year for 3 years. There will also be an equipment grant for the district or for participants. It will come with technical assistance providers to help CDs get started with the new programming. There will be an aspect that would look to regional expansion by creating STAR ambassadors to work with other western states and potentially partnering with Illinois’ STAR program. The new program will also have an economic component through the partial budget analysis tool and soil moisture monitor probes will installed. There will be a final report that will hopefully show how the new practices have improved producer profitability.*

*COMET stands for Carbon On Management and Evaluation Tool. It is a project that CSU and NRCS worked on together and has become the national standard.*

*Cindy stated that CDA went with the scenario that will include the largest number of conservation district participation. She went on to offer CACD participation in the program. If agreed, CACD would sign a contract with CDA to issue the $20,000.00 payment to participating districts. CACD would receive a 5% overhead payment and possibly an additional 5% administration fee to do this. The 5% fee could potentially trigger an audit for CACD. Audit fees can range from $5,400 to $13,000 depending on what CPA is used. If this cost is a deterrent to CACD, CDA welcomes any other ideas CACD might have where they could participate. Cindy does not want to add to Bobbi’s current workload if she does not have the time to write these checks. Discussion about this offer continued with Bobbi stating that their CPA said a full audit would cost around $14,000. to $17,000. Bobbi also asked NRCS if they were on track to receive the educational funding. Randy and Bronson were not able to verify the amount because the final federal budget is not known yet. Bobbi asked Cindy if CDA would contribute or cover the audit costs. Cindy replied that the cost would come from the administrative fee. It is possible that CACD could receive as much as $50,000-$60,000. between the overhead fee and the administrative fee. CACD could also reduce the number of checks they would issue for the $20,000. and that would prevent the full audit.*

*There will be non-conservation district participants (eligible entities) included in the thirty participants. Cindy added that the funds may not be available until later in the year. She anticipates that the money will be in one lump sum. Max added that they will need a letter of support from conservation districts, CACD and other participants for the grant application.* ***Director Nick Charchalis*** *moves to adopt this program and help disseminate it and manage it through the current warehousing process and try to get districts involved as much as we can.* ***Director George Fosha*** *seconds the motion. With no further discussion the* ***motion passes.***

*Cindy added that they are having staffing challenges. They are ready to advertise for Noah’s position. It has been reconfigured to include outreach and education, communication, and youth programing. Garth will work on the Conservator and other CACD outreach needs. She invited members of the CACD Board to sit in on the interviews for Noah’s former job. Bobbi noted that she is working with Noah on Camp Rock. She asked if CSCB would have a person that might be able to attend the Camp and help. Cindy stated that it would be ideal to have a person hired that could shadow Noah and learn the processes. She will encourage volunteers from her staff. Cindy offered to help pay for part of Noah’s fee once CACD knows what his fee will be.*

*Letters are going out for the Soil Health Advisory Committee. Cindy plans to have all meetings virtually, with the first being in April. It will be a 16-member committee. Margaret Lenz will likely be the chairperson. The next CSCB meeting will be on June 22-23 in Greely.*

*Cindy, Bobbi, and Petra have been working on another video with Christy Bode. This one will be about NRCS and their partners and the work they do together.*

***Director George Fosha*** *asked Cindy if the CSCB is still using the 3 year double direct assistance for Districts that consolidate. Cindy sated that a request has been received from a District requesting that the double direst assistance be perpetual. A Committee that was formed to address this issue is still discussing it. Cindy invites comments from CACD. Discussions followed.* ***Director George Fosha*** *moves that CACD write a letter to CSCB in support of the perpetual double payment for districts that consolidate.* ***Director Charlie Carnahan*** *seconds the motion.* ***Motion passes.***

***CDA Update – Les Owen:***

*Les reported that the soil health program is moving along but it has been difficult to get the Renewable Energy Grant Program funds spent due to supply chain issues and the nature of this type of project. The funds expire soon. CDA is trying to get an extension. The drought funds are out, and some projects are in the works. They have spent about $500,000 of the funds at this time. A class was held recently for the Master Irrigation Program. This program was funded by the drought program funds.*

*The Legislature will start working on the Long Bill next week. The CSCB matching grant funds sunset this year and there is a bill in place to extend the funding. Along with the grant, CDA is looking to ask for additional funds like the $15,000 given to CDs last year. He would like to have Districts send a letter stating how the funds received last year were used by the Districts. If the funds were used for a project, he would like photos of the project included.*

*The Wolves Stakeholder Advisory Group will meet next week. The court decision that relisted the Wolf has caused issues. CPW and the Fish and Wildlife Service are working together to review their options. They will file a 10-J Experimental Non-Essential Population Rule developed for Colorado. The process will be long as it requires an environmental impact statement under NEPA. Les encourages all Western Slope conservation districts request to be a cooperating agency on the Environmental Impact Statement once it gets underway.*

***NACD Update – Gary Thrash:***

*Gary stated that CACD had a Resolution at the NACD meeting in Orlando referencing death taxes. The Resolution did not make it through committee because there is already a policy that addresses no additional taxes affecting private land ownership. The 30-30, America the Beautiful, had three additional states that submitted resolutions at the state level besides Colorado. The states submitting 30-30 resolutions to the NACD national level pulled their resolutions. The committee decided to add “beef” to an existing NACD policy statement. Gary read the changed policy for the Board. The Natural Resource Committee met and NACD sent a letter to the Secretary of the Interior that identified comments from the committee meeting.*

*He added that NACD is reviewing the sunsets on their Policies to make sure they are still applicable. Gary suggested that CACD do the same thing.*

*Today there will be an online seminar to discuss carbon markets. It will be at 2:00. The scheduled Fly-In will be virtual next week, and call-in meetings will be scheduled with local legislators. The NACD Summer Meeting is the 16th thru 19th of July.*

***CACD Programs:***

*Will be addressed at a future meeting, due to time constraints of this meeting.*

***CACD Financials***

*Will be addressed at a future meeting or via email, due to time constraints of this meeting.*

***President Misc. Discussion and Updates:***

***Director George Fosha*** *asked that a follow up meeting be scheduled to finish this Board meeting.* ***Vice President Tyler Neely*** *agreed and wanted to make sure there would be a quorum for voting purposes. Bobbi will send out an email for issues requiring votes.*

***The next Board meeting will be April 20, 2022, via Zoom.***

***Meeting Adjourned 9:37 AM.***

*Respectfully Submitted,*

***Bobbi Ketels***

***CACD Executive Director***