

Conservation/UW-EX Education Committee
Thursday, September 4, 2025 Minutes
Oneida County Courthouse, County Board Room and Virtually by ZOOM

Committee Members: Chair Collette Sorgel, Linnaea Newman, Lenore Lopez, and Robb Jensen. Chris Schultz was excused.

Others Present: Michele Sadauskas, Stephanie Boismenu, JoAnne Lund, Levi Rhody, Amber Rehberg, Allison Wilson, Terri Kolb, Rosie Page, Elise Williams, Quinn Williams, Tracy Beckman, Anne Williams, Tracy Hartman, Eric Rempala, Jim Tharman, and Jessica Young. Jonna Jewell on Zoom.

1. Call to order and Chairperson's Announcements:

Chair Sorgel called the meeting to order at 1 p.m. The meeting was properly posted and handicapped accessible and ADA compliant.

2. Approve Agenda: A motion by Newman/Lopez to approve the September 4, 2025 Agenda with the order of items at the Chair's discretion. All ayes; motion carried.

3. Approve Minutes: A motion by Jensen/Newman to approve the minutes of August 11, 2025 as presented. All ayes; motion carried.

4. Dates/Location of Future Meetings:

Monday, October 13, 2025 at 1:00 p.m. Oneida County Courthouse; County Board Room.

5. Public Comment:

None.

6. PFAS Update:

Eric Rempala, Oneida County Clean Waters Action (OCCWA) presented on the current status of PFAS in Oneida County. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has recently updated its fish and deer consumption advisories due to PFAS contamination in the Town of Stella and the Moen Lake Chain.

- Fish Consumption Advisory: The advisory has been elevated to a "Do Not Eat" status. This means that no fish should be consumed from the Moen Lake Chain, Sunset Lake, Snowden Lake, and Starks Creek.
- Deer Consumption Advisory: The DRN now recommends limiting consumption of deer muscle tissue to one meal per month. Additionally, there is a "Do Not Eat" advisory for deer liver, which was already under restriction due to PFAS contamination.

Rempala spoke with the DNR regarding the expanded PFAS well testing initiative. Initial outreach was directed to selected residents in the towns of Pine Lake, Sugar Camp,

Pelican, Newbold, and Crescent. These residents received direct mail invitations for free well testing. It's important to note that this was not a public or open invitation, only specific addresses were selected. The selection focused primarily on properties near agricultural fields. Due to a lower-than-expected response rate, the DNR has expanded its outreach and sent additional mailings to encourage participation. This testing is part of a broader effort to determine whether PFAS contamination extends beyond the Town of Stella. Biosolids were applied in areas outside of Stella, so this investigation is critical to understanding the full scope of contamination in Oneida County.

The Town of Stella is planning a public meeting with representatives from the DNR and possibly the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), to provide updates on PFAS-related developments. This meeting will focus specifically on Stella and its residents. The EPA is currently assessing Stella for potential designation as a Superfund site. The expanded water testing across Oneida County is being funded by the EPA and carried out by the DNR. Additionally, the EPA has funded soil testing in Stella, and results are expected to be shared at the upcoming meeting. The DNR and EPA prefer to receive questions in advance to provide thorough responses during presentations, OCCWA has submitted suggested questions for consideration. Without pre-submitted questions, answers may be delayed or deferred. The date for this meeting has not yet been confirmed, it is anticipated to take place in October. More information will be shared publicly once the Town of Stella finalizes the details.

7. Lumberjack Grant Submission – Tracy Beckman

This item was moved up on the agenda before item #6, PFAs Update.

Tracy Beckman, Executive Director for Lumberjack RC&D and a representative for the Friends of Town Line Lake Park, gave the Committee some background information on why the grant is being submitted.

Quinn and Elise Williams, two local Girl Scouts, approached the Friends of Town Line Lake Park with interest in undertaking a Silver Award project. As frequent visitors and neighbors of the park, they were eager to contribute through a conservation-focused initiative. This led to a discussion about the presence of *Spotted knapweed* in the area, and the possibility of organizing a hand-pulling workday to help manage the invasive species. What began as a simple volunteer effort gradually evolved into a comprehensive project; a full-scale invasive species management plan for Town Line Lake Park.

Rosie Page, Coordinator for the Wisconsin Headwaters Invasives Partnership (WHIP), addressed the Committee to explain the purpose of the project. The Committee is a registered member of the Lumberjack RC&D, which is the source of the grant funding the group intends to apply for. Page will serve as a consultant and mentor to Quinn and Elise Williams throughout the project. Her role will include educating them on invasive plant species, conducting a background survey of Town Line Lake Park, developing

informational signage, and helping prioritize species based on their ecological impact, such as identifying which are toxic to wildlife and which pose minimal threat. She will also recommend management strategies that will be compiled into a plan. In addition, the group will actively work to control invasive species in the area and seek partnerships with Forestry and other organizations to support their efforts.

The central focus of the Silver Award project is the development of an invasive species management plan. This document will be a valuable resource for Oneida County, offering actionable recommendations for the Land and Water Conservation Department, the Forestry Department, and WHIP.

The grant application outlines three primary objectives:

- a) Manual removal of *Spotted knapweed*.
- b) Development of a management plan.
- c) On-the-ground implementation of control measures.

Quinn Williams noted that the project benefits Oneida County by removing invasive species and producing a tailored management plan for Town Line Lake Park, which may help attract more visitors. The group also plans to plant native species to support pollinators.

Elise Williams shared that the project offers a unique learning opportunity, allowing her to explore topics not typically covered in school, such as invasive species and how to manage and control them.

Quinn and Elise plan to engage their peers by organizing a volunteer workday focused on hand-pulling invasive plants.

Jensen/Newman made a motion to have the Committee support the Lumberjack RC&D grant application for the Girl Scouts local invasive species project at Town Line Lake and to include that support in the application. All ayes; motion carried.

8. Grant Awards & Approvals:

a. Clean Boats Clean Waters Resolution

Jensen/Sorgel made a motion to approve the resolution to apply for the WDNR Clean Boats and Clean Waters Grant and forward it on to the full County Board for approval as a consent agenda item. All ayes; motion carried.

b. LMPN (AIS) Resolution

Jensen/Lopez made a motion to approve the resolution to apply for the WDNR Lake Monitoring Protection Network, LMPN resolution as presented and forward on to the full County Board as a consent agenda item for their consideration. All ayes; motion carried.

9. Lake Classification Direction:

The County is nearing completion of its 2023 County Lake Grant, which included the development of a lake classification system. While most of the work is completed, a few final components remain.

The initiative began in 2021, following a noticeable increase in lake development and outdoor recreation in the post-COVID period. In response, the County pursued grant funding to create a classification system that would help guide lake protection efforts. With support from an advisory group, lakes were analyzed and grouped into three distinct classes.

Unlike traditional lake classification systems that function as zoning regulations, this model is designed to group lakes and assign appropriate protection activities. A list of these activities has been shared with the Committee.

All that is left is finalizing reports, creating a graphic representation of protection activities, compiling resource lists, integrating the classification system in the County's five-year Land and Water Resource Management Plan, and developing and distributing educational materials to promote protection strategies.

Committee directed Sadauskas to compile a report to be presented to the County Board.

10. Wildlife Damage Program – Jim Tharman

This item was moved up on the agenda before item #9, Lake Classification Direction.

Jim Tharman, representing United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Wildlife Services, addressed the Committee regarding the 2026 budget for the Wildlife Damage Abatement and Claims Program.

a. 2026 Budget Approval

The 2026 budget reflects a 4% increase over the 2025 budget, primarily due to adjustments in salaries and benefits. Of that increase, approximately 2% is attributed to the Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA). In real terms, this equates to an increase of roughly \$1,100, bringing the total budget from \$36,979 in 2025 to a requested budget of \$38,087.85 for 2026.

The program is supported by a combination of state and federal funding. Historically, the funding split was approximately 50/50, but over time, the balance has shifted more heavily toward state contributions. The program is rooted in agricultural support and its impact in Oneida County extends to nurseries, apiaries, and truck gardens. These operations benefit directly from the program's efforts to mitigate wildlife damage, helping to protect local livelihoods and resources.

Sorgel/Lopez made a motion to approve the budget as presented for the fiscal year and pass it on to the Finance Committee. All ayes; motion carried.

b. **2026 Deer Donation Program Approval**

The current form is to confirm whether the County wishes to participate in the program for 2026. It does not require detailed information, such as the number of deer donated. If the County chooses not to participate, USDA Wildlife Services will notify local processors and food pantries accordingly. Participation is entirely at the discretion of the County.

Jensen/Sorgel made a motion to approve the Wisconsin Deer Donation 2026 County Agreement and to confirm the County's participation in the program. All ayes, motion carried.

11. 2026 LWCD Budget:

Additional funding is anticipated through the DATCP Staffing Grant, which will take effect for fiscal years 2026 and 2027. The current budget request totals just over \$82,500, reflecting a decrease of approximately \$13,500 compared to the 2025 budget.

The Committee had no further comments regarding the additional budget documents presented.

Jensen/Lopez made a motion to approve the Land and Water Conservation Department's 2026 budget as submitted, and to forward it to the budget hearings for consideration. All ayes; motion carried.

12. Notification of Hearing & Resolution: to discontinue a portion of Fawn Lake Road, Town of Lake Tomahawk:

Committee members were provided with a map outlining the proposed discontinuation of a portion of Fawn Lake Road. A public hearing regarding this matter is scheduled for September 24 at 6:30 p.m. Committee members are invited to review the materials, and if desired, submit comments either in writing or during the public hearing.

13. Lake District Reports:

Crescent Lake: The recent meeting was successful, people seem to be happy with how things are going.

14. LWCD Up-Coming Events:

- Oneida County Pasture Walk at Hanson's Garden, 3 p.m. – 5 p.m., September 10
- Grant Writing Seminar at Kemp Natural Resource Station, 8:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m., September 25

15. LWCD Office Reports: – August, 2025.

- a. Budget Actual.

- b. Invoices Paid.

16. LWCD items to include on next agenda:

Regular agenda items.

17. Programming/Educator Report: - FoodWise Wrap-Up

Allison Wilson delivered a comprehensive review of the FoodWise program in Oneida County as it approaches its conclusion at the end of September. Over the past four years, Allison Wilson, Mary Stys, and Terri Kolb have played pivotal roles in implementing nutrition education initiatives targeting school-aged youth and Head Start children. On average, the program has reached approximately 460 students annually, providing multi-week classroom sessions focused on healthy eating habits and introducing new fruits and vegetables.

The Rhinelander School District has consistently supported the program, recognizing its value in supplementing nutrition education that teachers often lack time to provide. Feedback from families has highlighted the positive impact of the lessons, with students frequently sharing their newfound knowledge at home.

In addition to classroom education, Wilson emphasized the success of the Hodag Food Wagon, a summer initiative launched in partnership with the Rhinelander Area Food Pantry (RAFP). Initially a small food distribution effort, the program has grown into a vital resource for families, offering five breakfasts and five lunches weekly to children in need across Oneida County. The initiative also included engaging activities, cooking experiences, and educational resources aimed at reducing stigma around food assistance and fostering a welcome environment. The Hodag Food Wagon served on average 170 families per week.

The StrongBodies program was introduced to the residents of Rhine Haus, a low-income housing complex. These strength training sessions marked the first structured exercise experience for many residents in years. The classes were well-attended and yielded measurable improvements in participants' balance, mobility, strength, and social engagement. A mobile food pantry, spearheaded by FoodWise educator Mary Stys, was also established at Rhine Haus, in partnership with RAFP. This monthly program transformed the community room at Rhine Haus into a mini grocery store, allowing residents, many of whom face transportation challenges, to access nutritious food in a dignified and convenient setting.

Throughout the years, FoodWise also facilitated cooking classes for diverse groups, including seniors and teenagers, often in partnership with the YMCA of the Northwoods and RAFP. These sessions not only taught practical culinary skills but also emphasized mindful eating and the connection between food and overall well-being.

The FoodWise team actively participated in community events in an attempt to broaden their outreach efforts. Regular engagements included YMCA Healthy Kids Day, Harvest Hoedown, and the community baby shower hosted by the Oneida County Health Department, to name a few. A recent collaboration with the Demmer Memorial Public Library in Three Lakes provided a fun and educational experience for families, further extending the program's reach.

FoodWise educators just began supporting two new promising regional initiatives. The Food Pantry Network, led by Terri Kolb, brought together food pantries from across the Northwoods Region to foster collaboration, share best practices, and reduce the isolation often felt by pantry directors. The Oneida County Nutrition Coalition was launched in partnership with Marshfield Clinic, RAFF, the YMCA of the Northwoods, and FoodWise. This coalition convened regularly to strategize ways to promote healthy eating across Oneida County. With participation from organizations such as Human Services, school districts, ADRC's, and WIC, the coalition laid the groundwork for a robust network focused on improving food access and nutrition education.

Wilson concluded her presentation by addressing the broader implications of the upcoming termination of SNAP-Ed funding, which will end FoodWise operations. Despite its modest cost – approximately \$5.15 per person annually – the program has demonstrated a strong return on investment, with every dollar spent saving an estimated \$10 in long-term healthcare costs. The loss of FoodWise represents more than a budgetary cut; it signifies the disappearance of essential services that have empowered families with limited incomes to make healthier choices. Without nutrition education, communities face increased risks of chronic diseases, exacerbated by misleading food marketing and limited access to reliable information. Poor nutrition can impair a child's development, academic performance, and long-term health outcomes. The absence of programs like FoodWise could lead to higher healthcare costs, greater reliance on social safety nets, and a decline in overall community well-being.

As the FoodWise program in Oneida County comes to an end, Allison Wilson shared heartfelt reflections on the significance of the work and the uncertainty of what lies ahead. Wilson encouraged community leaders and elected officials to remain attentive to the voices of residents and to recognize that meaningful progress - whether in health, education, or sustainability – requires investment, collaboration, and compassion. Reflecting on her nearly four years as a FoodWise educator, Wilson described her role as one of the most fulfilling of her career. She expressed gratitude for the opportunity to work closely with the people of Oneida County, praising their kindness, resilience, and commitment to family and community.

18. FY2026 Amended Budget:

The 2026 Budget has been revised since the last CUW Committee Meeting to account for a correction in the Wages & Benefits Worksheet, where employee hours had been

understated. This adjustment impacted several related personnel expense accounts. As a result, the amended budget reflects an overall increase of \$900 compared to the previously submitted request. The updated total remains below the 2025 budget amount.

Jensen/Lopez made a motion to approve the amended 2026 proposed budget for UW-Extension for a total of \$138,293 and to forward it on to the budget hearing for consideration. All ayes; motion carried.

19. Area 4 Extension Director Update: – A Rehberg.

a. UWEX Status Update:

i. 136 Contract Review for 2026 & MOU

There are no major changes from the previous year. The contract is not signed until after the County budget is finalized, this version is for review purposes only before being submitted to Corporation Counsel. The primary change from last year is a shortened non-discrimination statement. The University has been working to streamline this language for clarity and alignment with institutional standards. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is not a required document, but rather a companion to the contract. It outlines the roles and responsibilities of both Extension and the County. Committee members and Amber Rehberg all expressed comfort with the current arrangement and agreed that the MOU could be revisited in the future if needed.

Jensen/Sorgel made a motion to approve the 136 Contract with UW-Extension of Oneida County, pending review by the Oneida County Corporation Counsel. All ayes; motion carried.

ii. Nicolet Facilities & Partnership Update

Summer programming with Nicolet was successful and educators are beginning to transition into fall programming.

A recent development with Nicolet College was discussed; the college will be reducing facility access starting in October and continuing through the winter months. Specifically, the campus will no longer be open on Sundays, which impacts some Extension programming – particularly 4-H Youth Development activities that often occur on Sunday evenings. The team will continue to actively explore alternative community locations, such as town halls within Oneida County and the community room in the Oneida County Sheriff's Office, that are free of charge.

20. UWEX Office Reports: – August, 2025.

- a. Budget Actual.
- b. Invoices Paid.

21. UWEX items to include on next agenda

UWEX will not present at the October CUW Committee Meeting.

22. Public Comment:

None.

23. Adjournment: Chair Sorgel adjourned the meeting at 2:54 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,
Jessica Young, Recording Secretary