



Thursday Note

An Update on Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Issues

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Special Edition on WLWCA/WALCE Merger Talks

As many of you know, the Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association (WLWCA) and the Wisconsin Association of Land Conservation Employees (WALCE) are considering merging into a single organization. An ad-hoc committee has been working on merger details since January and is now looking for input from both memberships. As a first step, this entire *Thursday Note* is dedicated to the merger discussions. But before getting into the details, let's start with this:

Why Should WLWCA and WALCE Merge?

- *Sustainable Future*. Merging the two associations would lead to one stronger, more efficient, and financially sustainable association, provide more staff support (WLWCA), and cause less volunteer (i.e. LCD) burnout while carrying out state association activities.
- *Focused Resources*. The on-going trend for downsizing County Boards and combining and downsizing departments is resulting in fewer people having less time for land and water conservation issues or to participate in state association activities. A merged association with a well-defined and empowered committee structure would better focus limited resources, provide more valuable services, and encourage more participation by LCCs and LCD staff.
- *Expanded Expertise*. Merging WLWCA and WALCE would combine the diverse technical, administrative and policy expertise and talents of both organizations.
- *Better Cross-Training*. Combining workshops, tours, conferences and other training opportunities would improve the quality, attendance, revenue, and ultimately the program understanding and support between LCCs and LCD staff – something we need to sustain local programs in the long-term.
- *Improved Policy Influence*. A joint Legislative Committee would help build a stronger and more unified voice for conservation issues and improve our effectiveness in influencing policy makers – thus having a greater impact than either organization could on their own in supporting county land and water conservation programs.
- *Faster Response Time*. A merged and empowered committee system would also help streamline the decision-making process, allowing members and staff to develop or review draft policies, craft a position and give WLWCA staff and lobbyist direction in a much shorter time frame, which is critical in the fast-paced policy decision making that occurs these days, especially relating to budget processes.

In fall of 2010, the Boards of Directors from WLWCA and WALCE each appointed five members to an Ad-hoc Merger Committee. They also adopted a process and guiding principles for the committee to use in their deliberations on how such a merger could be carried out. The guiding principles are listed below.

Guiding Principles in Merger Talks:

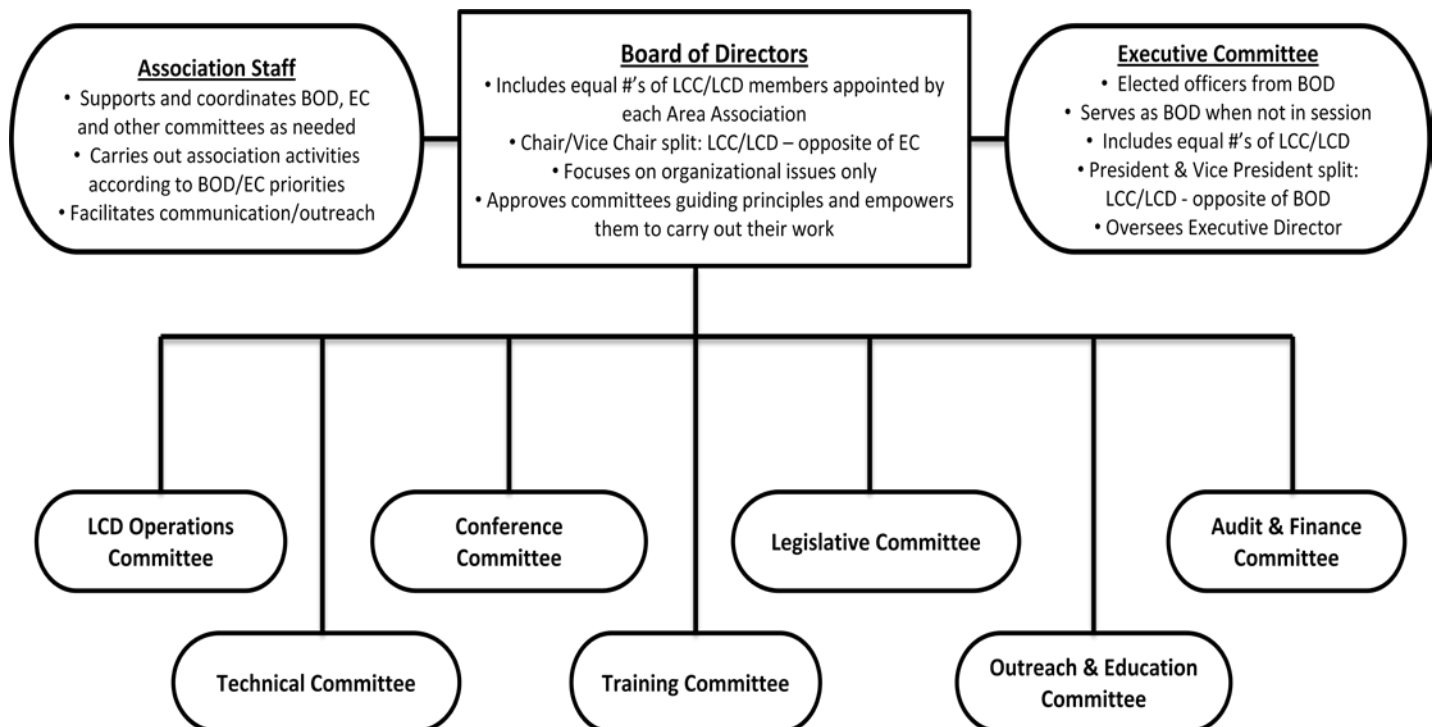
- Prescribe multifaceted functions of the association, including legislative advocacy, technical and administrative program review and information sharing, environmental education and membership training.
- Charge the Board of Directors with organizational issues such as budgets, staff oversight, contracts, bylaws, annual meeting, and coordinating activities among committees.
- Ensure equal representation of LCD staff and LCC committee members on the joint Board of Directors and consider the number of directors needed to carry out their duties.

- Create a committee structure that serves as the focus of organization activities, giving the committees clear direction and empowering them to efficiently carry out their duties.
- Hold a single annual conference for training, elections, budget approval, bylaw changes, etc.
- Review and make recommendations on regional boundaries and the annual dues structure.

To date, the Merger Committee has met six times and developed a number of draft recommendations, which were recently presented to both Boards of Directors. Both BODs agreed to proceed to the next steps, including an outreach program to gather input from the two memberships. Some of the recommendations of the Merger Committee include:

- Maintain the name “Wisconsin Land and Water Conservation Association” for the joint organization. It was felt that it has name recognition and the title is broad enough to cover both groups.
- Maintain the current eight WLWCA Area Associations, but be open to any boundary changes that members suggest during this process.
- Have each county appoint one LCC member and one LCD staff to their Area Association.
- Each Area Association should elect one LCC and one LCD person to represent them on the WLWCA Board of Directors (16), through an open nomination process to all LCC and LCD members in the area.
- Create eight empowered committees (shown below), with targeted membership and clear duties and expectations (details available at www.wlwca.org/wlwca_walce.html).
- Have the Board of Directors elect a Chair and Vice Chair, which would be split between an LCC and LCD representative. The BOD would also elect members to their Executive Committee (6-8), with the President and Vice President also split between LCC and LCD representatives, opposite of the BOD.

Proposed WLWCA/WALCE Joint Organizational Structure



Note: To improve communication and coordination, cross-membership among the BOD and Executive Committee with all other committees shown is encouraged. WLWCA staff will also be charged with facilitating this task. More details on the mission of each committee are available on the WLWCA web site www.wlwca.org/wlwca_walce.html.

The Merger Committee also identified some challenges of merging and risks of not merging the two organizations:

Challenges of a WLWCA/WALCE Merger:

- Leaving Titles at the Door. As a non-profit organization with a unified mission to support county land and water conservation programs, LCC members and LCD staff need to work effectively together as equals. We need to build on each other's strengths and focus on consensus decisions.
- Broad Participation. One of the guiding principles is also a major challenge for a merger - maintaining the multifaceted functions of the two organizations. To be effective at legislative advocacy, technical and administrative program review and information sharing, environmental education and membership training, a merged organization needs broad membership participation on a variety of committees to be effective.
- Organization of Counties or Individuals? WLWCA is structured more as an organization of counties, while WALCE is an organization of individual professionals. It is proposed that we maintain a bit of both through a three tiered dues structure, which a future BOD would finalize.
- Voting Process. WLWCA has a history of voting on resolutions at an annual conference to establish organizational policy, with each county getting one vote. WALCE has focused on an empowered committee structure following guiding principles adopted by the Board of Directors. A merged organization may need to allow for both to occur, but is proposed to focus on an empowered committee structure.
- Commitment/Diversity/Turnover. WALCE is made up of career professional staff with a strong commitment to conservation issues, while LCC members come from a wide variety of backgrounds and have a higher turnover rate through biennial elections. Therefore, membership training is critical to sustain momentum.

Risks of Not Merging:

- Decline. Given the current merger and downsizing trends locally, the future sustainability of an effective WLWCA or WALCE as two independent organizations is questionable. This may result in steadily declining opportunities for professional improvement, a loss of a unified conservation voice on land and water conservation policy issues, and reduced local program funding.
- Division. One option that has been discussed is to only merge County Conservationists with the WLWCA since they work closely together on policy matters anyway. This type of merger would be similar to the way county highway commissioners are organized and to what was proposed and narrowly defeated at the 2004 WLWCA annual meeting. However, this would lead to less County Conservationist involvement in WALCE and less input by technical staff on conservation policy. While this is not the preferred merger path, it remains a valid option.

To ensure an open process during the merger discussions, all committee meetings are advertised by email to every county and a call-in option is available to anyone who wants to listen in or participate in the dialog. The WLWCA web site is the clearing house for all information related to the Merger Committee, including: committee members contact information, meeting minutes, proposed organizational chart and committee assignments, and draft bylaw revisions (later this year). To gather input from the two organizations, the Merger Committee plans to sponsor other outreach efforts such as speaking at Area Association meetings and sponsoring a WALCE webinar. Stay tuned for dates, etc.

If you have questions or concerns, the earlier you speak up the better. Feel free to call or write any of the Merger Committee members or send comments to the WLWCA office, preferably before the next Merger Committee meeting on June 15th. To complete a merger, both WLWCA and WALCE memberships would need to approve bylaw changes by a 2/3 majority vote. Organizing a joint meeting of the two associations is logistically difficult because annual meeting dates are already set. This means sequential voting would need to occur (WLWCA in December/WALCE in February), making floor amendments very difficult. This is why it is important that issues be raised early in the process, so they can be addressed while drafting the bylaws, if necessary. As co-chairs of the Merger Committee, we believe merging WLWCA and WALCE is a natural evolution whose time has come. We hope you agree and invite your comments.

Chuck Wagner, Merger Committee Co-Chair (WLWCA)
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Calendar of Events

SAA Meeting, Madison	May 24
SOC Meeting, Madison	May 25
Memorial Day, WLWCA Closed	May 30
WCLWCA Meeting & Summer Tour, Durand	Jun 9
NCLWCA Meeting, Antigo	Jun 10
Conservation Observance Day, Fall River	Jun 13
WLWCA BOD Meeting, Stevens Point	Jun 14
WALCE BOD Meeting, Stevens Point	Jun 15
WLWCA-WALCE Ad Hoc Merger Meeting, Stevens Point	Jun 15
Agroforestry In-Service Workshop, LaFarge & Viola	Jun 16
WLWCA Conservation Camp, Bruce	Jun 21-24
Sand Lake Conservation Camp, Crivitz	Jun 23-25
NACD Legislative Conference, Washington, DC	Jul 17-19
SOC Meeting, Madison	Jul 21
Canon Envirothon, Sackville, NB, CA	Jul 24-29

For more information, visit www.wlwca.org/eventscalendar.html.

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