

## **NRCS State Technical Committee (STC)**

### **Meeting Minutes**

**Date: August 3, 2010**

**Time: 10:00 AM – 12:45 PM**

**Location: FDACS, Division of Plant Industry, Doyle Conner Auditorium**

**1911 S.W. 34<sup>th</sup> Street, Gainesville, FL 32608**

Ed Wright, Asst. Conservationist for Easement Programs, called the meeting to order at 10:02 AM and briefed those in attendance on the overall objectives of the meeting. Following Ed's opening remarks, he introduced Carlos Suarez, State Conservationist.

Carlos Suarez, welcomed everyone in attendance and thanked them for taking time out of their busy schedules to attend and participate. Carlos mentioned that the STC meets every 4-6 months based upon needs. After defining the purpose and importance of the STC, Carlos stated that the presentations, comments and recommendations that result from the STC meeting assist him greatly in providing guidance in the implementation of all NRCS - Farm Bill Programs in Florida.

Carlos stated a few NRCS accomplishments this year that he was particularly proud of. He stated that NRCS – Florida had available \$ 165 million in conservation financial assistance for Farm Bill participants in Fiscal Year 2010. Special incentive programs, such as the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative (MBHI), which is designed to assistance landowners in helping migratory birds impacted from Gulf of Mexico oil spill impacts, are being provided. The Special WRP project known as the Fisheating Creek Project, the largest contiguous WRP project at 26,000 acres, could not have happened without the strong commitment of many of our partner organizations such as FDACS, SFWMD, TNC, FWC, Farm Bureau, and the USFWS. Carlos stated that in all of his years of experience, he has never witnessed such over arching support from so many partners with such diverse missions, and he expressed his appreciation to everyone present.

Carlos stated that WRP was a growing program in Florida, and this year NRCS has received \$130 million in financial assistance to partner with landowners to create conservation easements for wetland restoration. To put this into context Carlos said, that \$ 130 million represents 25% of the national WRP budget. Therefore, to facilitate our WRP growth, Carlos stated that he has created a WRP planning team of four NRCS staff in Okeechobee consisting of a Conservation

Planner, Biologist, Engineer, and a Engineering Technician. Carlos also stated that he has realigned his Program's leadership to mimic our National Office and better address Florida's needs. As of August 30<sup>th</sup>, Jeff Woods will become the Assistance State Conservationist for Incentive Programs, and will be responsible for Florida's NRCS Farm Bill incentive-based Programs such as EQIP, WHIP, AWEP, CSP, and CIG. Ed Wright, will become the Assistant State Conservationist for Easement Programs and will be responsible for WRP, GRP and FRPP, while still maintaining his former responsibilities as liaison to the Everglades Restoration Task Force. Carlos mentioned that with this realignment the overall assistance to all of our Program clients and our partners will be better served.

Carlos mentioned that he is anticipating good funding for next year's budget, and that this indicated that conservation is still a primary focus of the NRCS and the Administration.

Jeff Woods, provided updates on all of the NRCS Programs easement and "working lands" incentive based Programs. Jeff expanded on the Fisheating Creek WRP Special project. This comprehensive WRP project will expand approximately 26,000 acres and involved 4 individual land owners on 5 separate properties in Highlands county just west of the Lake Wales Ridge. This WRP will be the largest contiguous acquisition under the WRP program to-date nationally.

Jeff discussed the easement compensation values for WRP & GRP and noted that they will need to be analyzed and updated for the FY 2011 Program Year. Currently they are as follows:

Current WRP Compensation Values - FY 2010

\$ 4,015/Acre - Improved Pasture

\$ 3,285/Acre - Semi-Improved Pasture

\$2,195/Acre - Natural (Native), wooded/forest land or functional wetlands

Current GRP Compensation Values - FY 2010

\$ 3,630/Acre - Improved Pasture

\$ 2,970/Acre - Semi-Improved Pasture

\$1,980/Acre - Natural (Native), wooded/forest land or functional wetlands

Jeff also mentioned that one proposal was submitted for the Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP) and was not funded by NHQ. This was the second attempt to obtain a program in Florida. Although this program has a very low national allocation of \$ 9.5 million nationally, there was expressed interest by some of the meeting participants that NRCS should continue the effort and submit another proposal for FY 2011.

Jeff indicated that NRCS was making great strides on EQIP this year with 98% of the allocated funds obligated to Program participants. Several special initiatives were mentioned that included the Organic (certified & transitioning to organic), High Tunnels where ~ \$150,000 were obligated, and the Migratory Bird Habitat Initiative (MBHI) as a result of the Gulf oil spill. FL NRCS received \$ 200,000 in WHIP and \$ 100,000 in EQIP for MBHI. Currently NRCS has only received 3 applicants for EQIP estimated at ~ \$44,000 in habitat enhancement treatments, and 10 applicants for WHIP estimated at ~ \$28,000 in habitat enhancement treatments.

Jeff mentioned that EQIP funds were available this year for Agricultural Energy Management to conduct on-farm/ranch energy audits. However, there was no particular interest in the program, since Florida received no applicants.

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) are a component under EQIP that encourages innovative development of conservation treatments, applications, and activities currently deficient within in EQIP. Requests for proposals were held at the national level and 13 submitted proposals were linked to Florida conservation needs. NHQ allocated \$25 million for FY 2010 Grants, with announcement of those selected yet to be determined. It is anticipated that CIG 2010 grantees will be announced within the next couple of weeks.

Jeff mentioned that the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) had been scaled back in the current Program year, FY 2010, to \$5 M nation-wide. Florida received no proposals for funding this year.

Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) received \$ 505,000 in funding for the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the Suwannee Partnership project that was begun last year to address water conservation in the Suwannee River Basin region. Four additional proposals were received this year for funding consideration. FDACS/SWFMD/Hillsborough-SWCD was the only new project proposal accepted this year and was funded at \$750,000 in FY 2010. This AWEP project will initiate water conservation activities in Hillsborough County and is being referred to as the Dover Partnership project.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) had two signups in FY 2010;

1<sup>st</sup> sign-up obligated \$393 M, initiated 46 contracts on 23,700 acres.

2<sup>nd</sup> sign-up just ended and is estimated to have obligated an additional \$878,000.

Jeff concluded by saying that in FY 2011, outreach will be a principle mission of making landowners more aware of Farm Bill Programs, and that assistance from all our partners will be essential. NRCS will continue to utilize our contract with USDA – NASS for mass mailing to landowners. Guidance from Local Working Groups at the local county level is critical in

developing an effective grassroots delivery of Farm Bill programs in Florida, and we will be seeking guidance from them early. Jeff also indicated that we will continue to utilize local news media and Southeast AgNet – Radio for interviews and news spots to assist making landowners aware of our Programs.

Jeff also announced that the batching deadlines for those landowners interested in getting into EQIP, WHIP, WRP & GRP for FY 2011 will be October 29, 2010.

Signups for AWEP, CSP and FRPP will be announced later in the Fiscal Year.

Jeff stressed that landowners interested in participating in Farm Bill Programs in FY 2011 should be working with their local NRCS offices and Farm Services Agency (FSA) representatives to complete their Program eligibility requirements.

Jeff indicated that supporting tools for FY 2011 EQIP, WHIP & AWEP will be reviewed and updated as needed. These tools included, 1) ranking templates, 2) conservation practice guidance documents, 3) payment schedules and 4) implementation timelines

**NRCS Farm Bill Program Information Presented**

<b>Easement Programs</b>	<b>Initial Allocation</b>	<b>Current/Total Allocation</b>	<b>Program Participants</b>	<b>Acres Enrolled</b>
Wetland Reserve Program (WRP)	\$ 11 M	\$ 130 M	50 Ranked	~ 13,000
Wetland Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP)	NA	NA	1 – Not Eligible	NA
Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)	\$ 1.7 M	\$ 3.6 M	4 – Easements	1,512
Farm & Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP)	\$ 2.4	\$ 8.2 M	6 - Easements	6,200

<b>Financial Incentive-Based Programs</b>	<b>Initial Allocation</b>	<b>Current/Total Allocation</b>	<b>Program Participants</b>	<b>Acres Enrolled</b>
Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)	\$ 17 M	\$ 17M	411 – Contracts (To-Date)	182,685 (To-Date)
Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)	\$ 1.739 M ----- \$ 200,000 MBHI \$704,000 SEFI \$835,000 General	\$ 1.739 M	102 – Contracts (To-Date)	16,000 (To-Date)

**Q&A's Following Jeff Wood's Presentation:**

**Ray Scott, FDACS**, asked were the dollar amounts cited in the initial allocations included in the current allocations? **Answer: Yes**

**Ray Scott, FDACS**, asked were the WRP & GRP compensation values a state-wide determined value or were they regional developed? **Answer Regional developed**

**Ray Scott, FDCAS**, asked about the separation of muck soils as WRP & GRP compensation values? **Answer: Muck soils were not evaluated as a separate land value, however in FY 2011, NRCS plans to include cropland as a WRP & GRP compensation value.**

**Chris Demers, DOF**, asked who was NRCS's contact for SEAgNet? **Answer: Gail Hendricks, NRCS, PAS.**

**Nolan Galloway, landowner, Gilchrist County**, asked what was the premise behind only allowing 450 trees per acre for planting on EQIP? **Answer: The primary objective for tree planting under EQIP and WHIP is to provide wildlife habitat benefits in association with timber production.**

**Mr. Galloway** responded by saying that depending on the species of trees planted, type of planting materials (bare root vs. container) and the site, mortality will range from 58% to 80%. He recommended that NRCS take tree mortality into account on tree establishment density limitations.

**Marty Mesh, FL Organic Growers**, asked how was the Local Working Group concept of getting grassroots information elevated working? **Answer: As far as we were aware the Local Working Groups are functioning well.**

**David Still, Executive Director, SRWMD, and Jon Dinges, SRWMD,** presented information related to Northeast Florida's water supply. Mr. Still indicated that agriculture is threatened by diminishing water supply. The Upper Floridan Aquifer is declining at an alarming rate. Data indicates that in some portions of the SRWMD region, the Upper Floridan Aquifer has declined 30 feet since monitoring began. Another point presented that added to the critical issue of declining ground water was the contraction of the 1936 Groundwater Divide. Since 1947 when measurements began, this divide has continued a westerly migration reducing its recharge into the SRWMD region. Other evidence pointing toward groundwater depletion in the region was reduced median flow data from the Upper Santa Fe River and Ichetucknee River, and water levels in Lake Butler and White Springs. It was noted that projected groundwater pumping in both the SRWMD and SJRWMD regions was projected to increase over the next 20 years.

**Recommendations: Continue the EQIP priority areas for Springs allocations benefiting Ichetucknee and Fanning/Manatee Springs.**

- 1. Consider adding water quality and quantity management tools to the EQIP Payment Schedule, e.g., soil moisture probes, precision fertilizer application equipment, nutrient management monitoring tools, and irrigation efficiency monitoring tools.**
- 2. Consider increasing the incentive payment of \$97.50/acre for Conservation Crop Rotation – Sod Based Rotation.**
- 3. Consider developing a special Farm Bill priority area for the Santa Fe Basin and North East Florida to address the following issues:**
  - Irrigation system conversion (emphasis on efficient systems)**
  - Irrigation system nozzle package upgrades (end gun shutoffs)**
  - Pump and power unit upgrades**
  - Crop Tools (Soil moisture probes, irrigation monitoring and control) across District boundaries**
  - Increase Conservation Tillage/Sod Based Rotation Incentive**
  - Special emphasis on Irrigation Water Mgt. assistance**

**Q&A's Following Still & Dinges' Presentation:**

**Paul Still, Bradford SWCD,** commented that wetland restoration on private lands assist not only with promoting groundwater recharge, and but also providing a water quality benefit by filtering nutrients and pollutants from surface waters. Paul made a pitch for NRCS Engineering

to evaluate their ditch plug standards and consider adjusting them to what he consider to be more practical for their intended use.

**Marty Mesh, Florida Organic Growers**, commented that if groundwater depletion was so critical, why were consumptive use permits being given to water bottling companies that transport water out of the region? **Answer: All water use permits by law are required to be evaluated independently and fairly regardless of their intended use.**

**Scott Sanders, FWC**, presented information on imperiled species management systems and the proposed new rule, 68A-27.007. This new rule will allow T & E species under FWC protection to not require a permit authorizing incidental take so long as the land management activities benefit wildlife, are not inconsistent with FWC Management Plans, or if on Agricultural Lands, conducted in accordance with best management practices (BMPs) as defined under State Statute 403.067. Scott suggested that as FWC & FDACS begins development of guidance materials for landowners under the proposed new rule, they plan to build upon the good work already established by the NRCS/USFWS Endangered Species Act (ESA) Consultation Matrix.

Scott also presented an update to the FWC/DOF/NRCS one-plan development pilot that was begun earlier this year. Scott said that FWC has assisted DOF with their Forest Stewardship Plans, funded largely by USDA-Forest Service private lands funding to assist DOF in providing technical and financial assistance to forest landowners, and FWC has assisted NRCS in the develop of Conservation Plans oriented toward assisting landowners to address wildlife habitat improvement on range, pasture crop, and forest lands. One observation is that it is not uncommon for landowners to have one plan from DOF and another from NRCS. Scott stated after collective discussions among DOF, NRCS & FWC staff, better coordination would benefit all agencies, and provide a better and consistent product to landowners. The end result would be a conservation planning document that was more comprehensive, and would allow landowners to make better informed decisions concerning land management and addressing natural resource concerns.

Scott indicated that DOF, NRCS & FWC have engaged 2 landowners in the Live Oak and Kissimmee areas to pilot this combined conservation planning approach. The objective of this exercise is to look for streamlining opportunities, ID barriers, and recommend solutions to issues to overcome obstacles that would prevent interagency conservation planning assistance to private landowners. As a secondary part of this initiative is to also better coordinate on field days, workshops and outreach to better promote DOF, FWC & NRCS Programs and technical assistance to landowners. DOF, FWC and NRCS will be concluding their evaluations on the one-plan concept and present to each agencies leadership in the coming months.

***Recommendation: Requests State Technical Committee support for the one-plan conservation planning concept as the most effective delivery of technical and financial assistance to private landowners in Florida.***

**Q&A's Following Scott Sanders' Presentation:**

**Jim Handley, Florida Cattlemen's Association**, stated, anything that would streamline the process that would allow for more timely conservation planning is urgently needed, and that FCA would strongly support.

**Rich Budell, FDACS**, presented information on the Florida Ranchlands Environmental Services Program – Northern Everglades (FRESP). Rich explained this program was designed to provide a payment for environmental services (PES) to ranchers who enrolled grazing lands into 10 – 20 year contracts where they agree to install conservation practices and apply management that would reduce the amount of drainage from their properties. The premise is that ranchlands make up the largest geographic land use within the Northern Everglade region. Surface water is the principle conveyer of nutrients into the public water management system that drains into Lake Okeechobee, and ultimately into the environmentally sensitive areas of the St. Lucie/Indian River Lagoon, Caloosahatchee River/Pine Island Sound, and the Everglades/Florida Bay. It was noted that FRESP – Northern Everglades would allow landowners in a voluntary way, to contribute to improving water quality throughout the region, while maintaining lands enrolled into this PES program in agriculture, and under private management. Rich expressed that he felt this was a very cost-effective alternative that ranchers could contribute greatly toward addressing water quality issues in the region.

Rich stated that FRESP began from a CIG fund authorization from NRCS-Washington D.C. to the World Wildlife Fund. Through a cooperative pilot study involving FDACS, SFWMD, WWF, IFAS, and the Kellogg Foundation, this grant was to investigate the feasibility of developing a payment for environmental services program that would engage the landowner in a voluntary program, be economically sound from an agricultural producer's perspective, and allow EQIP to address resource concerns in a novel and unique manner.

Rich indicated that the SFWMD had dedicated \$ 2 million for PES for this program in 2010/2011. Rich stated that FDCAS and NRCS field staff would be instrumental in providing guidance and technical assistance to enrolled landowners and their consulting engineers who would develop the engineering designs needed to implement water management plans on their grazing lands. Rich suggested that he anticipated that most if not all of the ranchers enrolling into this PES program would be seeking EQIP assistance for structures for water control and other supporting practices needed to implement their water quality improvement projects.

***Recommendations: Requested support from the State Technical Committee for implementing a payment for environmental services program in the Northern Everglades region. And, to establish a dedicated FRESP-EQIP funding account for ranchers in the Northern Everglades to compete for financial assistance funds for installing conservation practices associated with their FRESP water quality projects.***

**Julie Ferris, DEP and Andrew Walmsley, Florida Farm Bureau**, presented information on the benefits of biodigesters for air quality. It was pointed out that anytime that we can take a waste product and turn it into an energy resource, everyone wins. Dairy manure is a leading feedstock for renewable energy generation through newly improved and commercially proven anaerobic digestion technology. The Florida Farm Bureau is actively engaged with IFAS, and European developers and suppliers of biodigester technology. In light of climate change concerns, renewable energy interests, and the ever present need to enhance water quality, Ms. Ferris and Mr. Walmsley believe that biodigester technology is desperately needed in Florida to address agricultural waste management concerns.

***Recommendation: Develop opportunities for Florida agriculture to incorporate biodigester technology into waste management systems with support of Farm Bill Programs.***

**Greg Hendricks, USDA-NRCS**, presented information on food safety, and ways NRCS conservation practice standards could be used to address this issue. Greg stated that:

- Most freshly consumed fruits & vegetables are free of microorganisms
- Most fruits & vegetables have natural barriers that minimize contamination
- Nutritionists have promoted the values of fresh vs. cooked fruits & vegetables
- Consumers are seeking more farm-fresh fruits & vegetables in their diet
- Consumers are seeking more fruits & vegetables from local markets/producers
- Contamination events in recent years although, few & far between, have had serious impacts to consumer health & confidence in their food supply
- Contamination by microbial pathogens can only occur from external sources

Greg noted that food safety must begin on the farm, that once food crops are contaminated it is costly & difficult to kill pathogens, and prevention of microbial contamination from production to consumption is critically important. Food safety must be addressed from “farm to fork”, and that any viable food safety program requires a good documentation of preventative programs or practices to be a credible food safety program.

Greg indicated food safety can be broken into the following segments:

Pre Harvest

- Water Sources
- Animal Fecal Contamination

At Harvest

- Worker Health & Hygiene
- Field & Harvest Sanitation

Post Harvest

- Packing Facilities
- Transportation, Storage & Distribution

Greg noted that water was the principle vector of delivery of contaminants to fresh fruits and vegetables. Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs'), were described as practices that provide food safety guidance on critical production steps where food safety might be compromised during the growing, harvesting, transportation, cooling, packing and storage of fresh produce.

Greg outlined the following NRCS conservation practices as ones he felt had the most direct potential influence of on protecting fruits and vegetables from microbial pathogens from external threats.

- Nutrient Management (Code 590)
- Water Well (Code 642)
- Irrigation Water Management (Code 449)
- Irrigation System - Tailwater Recovery (Code 447)
- Constructed Wetland (Code 656)
- Field Border (Code 386)
- Hedgerow Planting (Code 422)
- Windbreak/Shelter Belt Establishment (Code 380)
- Filter Strip (Code 393)

- Herbaceous Wind Barriers (Code 603)
- Fence (382)

In conclusion Greg mentioned that he had been contacted by Reggie Brown, Florida Tomato Growers Exchange, who wished to present this topic to the committee, however, due to prior commitments was unable to attend. Mr. Brown had expressed the need of fencing as viable enclosures to prevent the introduction of microbial pathogens onto tomato crops in Florida. Greg also mentioned that USDA – NRCS was reviewing the Food Safety Considerations for Conservation Planners: A Field Guide for Practitioners, July 2009, developed by the RC&D of Monterey, CA as a potential national guidance document to NRCS. He stated that representative from CA, NY, FL and Washington DC were working on the concept.

***Recommendation: Consider the needs of fresh fruit and vegetable growers to ensure food safety mechanisms are in place, and seek opportunities to allow EQIP to assist producers to install conservation practices such as fencing and other supporting practices to prevent the introduction of microbial pathogens onto crop fields.***

**Q & A following Greg’s presentation:**

**Mike Sparks, Florida Citrus Mutual**, stated that although fresh citrus has a protective barrier to most potential microbial pathogens, contamination is a real concern for these growers, and they would support EQIP practices that would help ensure that food safety mechanisms are in place to address their water quality concerns.

**Odemar Mbuya, Fla. A&M University**, stated, that as NRCS considers the food safety concerns from pathogens, they should also consider potential impacts from heavy metals, and appropriate conservation practices needed to address this resource concern.

**Ed Wright, Assistant State Conservationist for Easements**, outlined the highlights and actions that NRCS staff will need to address following the meeting and report back to the committee. These included, but are limited to:

- Follow-up on trees per acre requirements and limitations. (Programs-lead, ECS & Partners)
- Alert committee as soon as CIG projects have been awarded by NHQ. (Jeff Woods)
- Evaluate SRWMD’s recommendations concerning water conservation needs. (Programs-lead, ENG & ECS)
- Evaluate FWC’s recommendation of promoting the “one-plan” concept for efficient and streamlined conservation technical assistance delivery for NRCS, DOF & FWC. (ECS)

- Evaluate FDACS's recommendation of providing a special EQIP funding allocation for FRESP participants for financial assistance on water management/quality practices. (Programs-lead, ECS, ENG)
- Evaluate DEP's recommendation of supporting biodigesters technology with Farm Bill Programs. (Programs- lead, ENG)
- Evaluate the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange recommendation of addressing food safety concerns of fresh fruit and vegetable growers with EQIP. (Programs-lead, ECS)
- Review the effectiveness of Local Working Groups and report back to the committee (Ed Wright)

**Carlos Suarez, State Conservationist**, closed the meeting by thanking everyone who attended, the speakers, and for everyone's input and contribution. Carlos stated that he feels that Florida's current State Technical Committee process is working well, but that it can always be improved upon. He challenged those in attendance for their assistance in helping NRCS to make improvements where needed. In closing, Carlos said that he would take all comments and suggestions under advisement, however, he noted that we sometimes cannot always do all that is requested due to various reasons.

**Additional Items for Handout:**

FSA Factsheet – Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), General Sign-Up 39, August 2 through 27, 2010

FSA Factsheet – Conservation Reserve Program Sign-Up 39 Environmental Benefits Index (EBI)

Also, please note that USDA will be joining other agencies in the roll out of the America's Great Outdoor initiative. For more information please go to the AGO website, <http://www.doi.gov/americasgreatoutdoors/>.