

USDA
Natural Resources Conservation Service

sponsored

Listening Session in Tifton, Georgia

on the

Conservation Security Program



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Georgia

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INTRODUCTION

Logistics

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in Georgia sponsored two listening sessions to gather public comments on the *Conservation Security Program*. These listening sessions were held in South Georgia in Tifton at the Rural Development Center on February 10, 2004, and in Middle Georgia in Perry at the USDA Service Center on February 11, 2004. The timeframe for both sessions was 7:00pm – 10:00pm. Twenty-two people were present in Tifton; fifty-three people were present in Perry.

This report provides the transcript from the listening session in Tifton, Georgia.

Acknowledgements

USDA NRCS Georgia Personnel

- **Jim Dial**, Assistant State Conservationist for Program Development, **David Lamm**, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, **Mary Ann McQuinn**, State Public Affairs Specialist, and **Ron Brown**, State Outreach Coordinator, organized and coordinated the listening sessions.
- The State Public Affairs Specialist, **Mary Ann McQuinn**, prepared public service announcements and information packets for distribution to the target audience and session participants.
- District Conservationists **Mary Leidner** in Tifton and **Andy Page** in Perry were the primary contacts to the State Office for advertising the meetings and coordinating meeting room availability and setup.

- **David Lamm**, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, delivered an extensive presentation on the *Conservation Security Program* and fielded questions from audiences at both locations.
- **Anthony Burns**, Assistant State Conservationist for Technology, fielded questions from the audiences related to database and technology use.
- **John Glover**, Acting State Conservationist for Georgia, provided overall leadership and support to NRCS staff, to producers and operators, and to all others who attended the listening sessions.

Other Recognitions

The Mid-State Conservation Tillage Alliance, **Scott Moore** President, sponsored a barbecue dinner at the Perry location.

Dignitaries from the NRCS Southeast Regional Office and Georgia Farm Bureau were present at the listening session in Tifton.

Human Capital Developers

Donna Taylor, President/Senior Associate and staff of the Athens, Georgia-based consulting company Human Capital Developers, provided consulting services that included (a) moderating both listening sessions, (b) recording, compiling, summarizing, and preparing this written report, and (c) providing an oral report to the NRCS-GA State Office.

Recording and sound equipment was subcontracted through Human Capital Developers and provided by Board Room Audio Visuals of Loganville, Georgia.

SUMMARY ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY CONCERNS

The following information is an analysis of the primary concerns that producers expressed during the listening sessions in Tifton. For a complete listing of the comments as stated by producers during the listening session, see pages 7 – 12 of this report.

- One recommendation was that the water and soil quality conservation problems all over the United States be identified and ranked by priority. Due to limited funding of agricultural programs, all Ag programs dollars should be targeted to address the top priority conservation problem, then the second, and then the third until each problem has been addressed.
- An ever-present concern of producers/operators was the lack of ultimate control over their land due to the fact that many operators rent or lease farm land. There was much concern about what the penalty might be should they enter the Program and the land changes owners and they [the operators] lose control of the land before the end of their contracts.
- Many producers own or lease land in more than one watershed. They want to be able to participate in the Program even if it means coming in at different times when their specific watershed is selected.

- Utilizing an internet or web-based sign-up program concerned several producers who pointed out that:
 - The average age of Georgia farmers is 60 years. These folk do not have the time or the enthusiasm to learn to use the computer.
 - The best internet service does not exist in most rural areas and the lines are often slow and sometimes costly to utilize due to no local access numbers in the areas.
 - The agricultural software programs are often too cumbersome to manipulate. Keeping the software program simple was strongly encouraged.

- Producers expressed concern that only a few producers are knowledgeable enough to take advantage of the Farm Bill programs. They want means devised whereby every producer would be better educated and therefore have the opportunity to participate in the various agricultural programs.

- Many Georgia producers farm land that falls under several farm serial numbers, or that falls under one farm serial number but has multiple owners. Producers would like to see each owner considered separately for contracts.

- Selecting producers who are eligible for CSP should be done on a local basis by NRCS personnel.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Following are the public comments generated during the listening session in Tifton, Georgia. Efforts were made to maintain the integrity and intent of what each participant said by not changing the wording or phrasing of sentences and statements. The only exception is in those cases where a change made a sentence clearer and more easily understood.

TIFTON, GEORGIA

Questions of Concern

1. How will we know that the watershed that we're in is applicable because if the watershed is not in it, everything else is a moot point? The debate is whether the decision should be made at the state level or in Washington at the national level.
2. Has the criteria for the watershed been set?
3. I live downstream of a watershed project. The water comes downstream so fast that it washes the roads out and causes us major problems. Will there be any way to address situations like that?
4. It sounds like implementing the CSP is going to be a nightmare for the local folk. Does NRCS have personnel to handle this?
5. How many more programs out there, like EQIP, are under these conservation programs? How many millions all together are being allocated for these total conservation programs?

Is it too late to apply the KISS-Principle? Someone should identify the major conservation problems all over the United States that affect water and soil quality and environment and then identify those 3 or 4 programs that address these. All the efforts should be in put into addressing the top problem, then #2, #3, #4 and so on down the line with the money that's available. It seems that these items should be identified and worked on from the top priority item down and the money applied as needed.

6. Will these payments be tied to acres that are enrolled in the contract?
7. How does NRCS see recording this data long-term or are you looking at implementing GIS databases into the local county offices to monitor these sorts of things and establish benchmarks? I assume that means establishing what your nutrient levels are, what the organic level is on a starting basis so you know what you're working from. What type of database are you proposing to house this information and how are you proposing to do it? How are you going to justify how you're going to pay these people?
8. Can there be multiple contracts on a farm or a split? Say a guy is enrolled that is cash-renting from the landowner and he is in a CSP with the row-crop and he's got a pecan orchard, woodland, and grazing operation, can he enroll the portion of the farm that he does make day-to-day decisions on and directs profits from? There are quite a few landowners who cash-rent the crop out but have cows or/and pecan orchards on parts of the farm that they themselves as a semi-retired person.

9. Will there need to be a farm management plan implemented or forest stewardship plan implemented before we can qualify or enroll in CSP?

10. Should we have a farm management plan implemented now and how do we go about getting one? I've asked my man in the local office to do one for the last two years and I haven't had it done yet. I first heard about starting two years ago and that's when I started asking for a plan to be done. Do pesticide management and nutrient management fall under the farm management plan? Would now be the time to get an independent person, a TSP, to do this for me?

11. Enhancements: For those of us who participate in farm programs already, do you see limiting or decreasing those payments because we don't have all these programs put together for our farm?

12. Precision Ag technologies: Will it be considered an enhancement for the producers that already participate in that? As a TSP, if I work with growers who are already doing that, what step should I be taking to insure that they are eligible?

13. We're in the third year of the Farm Bill, when will money actually get to farmers' pockets for implementing these programs – by end of 2004 or in 2005?

TIFTON, GEORGIA

General Comments

1. The priority conservation problem in the Georgia farming section is erosion.
2. Most of us are in the Upper Suwannee watershed which is a category one priority watershed. This should be tied to water and soil quality. If you have good soil quality you have good water quality.
3. Georgia needs to implement some kind of plan to help growers who are practicing conservation tillage. I read where other states are helping and Georgia should get on that same bandwagon.
4. One of the reasons I'm here is to figure out ways to help farmers implement some of these programs. We're in a situation in the southeast that up until this year we've had a good year, but now there are money crunches. From what I've understood, I think other areas of the country have benefited more from these green payments and we need to expand on this in the Southeast. Many farmers around here don't understand what they can get from these programs so educational meetings like this one need to be done more often. The off-season is the best time to educate.
5. Most producers come to meetings after the decisions have been made. I'm from Turner County and there are at least two meetings going on there tonight about production items and people chose to be at those. I didn't get the letter about this meeting until two days

ago. It is very likely that the problem is within the mail system because sometimes the mail comes and sometimes it doesn't.

6. I've looked on the USDA website for meetings like this and this meeting was not posted on there. There were meetings listed as being held across the country and this one was not posted on the website.
7. I as a farmer would like to know ahead of time what is needed. If the District Conservationist is coming to my farm I need to know if she wants to see, for example, soil sample results or whatever I can provide that I can hand over. If I knew in advance I could be developing it.
8. A web-based screening tool: I don't think it's going to work. The average age of a Georgia farmer is 60 years and these folks don't have time nor the enthusiasm to get on a computer to make comments. For the younger generation it would be fine and it's a wonderful system, but I don't know enough about it [computers and the internet] to be comfortable and I won't go unless I have to get online for something.
9. Selection eligibility for CSP: Should be done on a local basis by NRCS personnel in the counties because they know more about what's going on regarding water quality and erosion more than folks in Atlanta or elsewhere.
10. Conservation practices on specialty crops (i.e. blueberries): Talking about organic matter, we're in the process of adding pine bark to the blueberry field for organic matter and to

hold the soil. That decreases the weed pressure and the chemicals we have to use for weed control and encourages the quail and other animals to live around the blueberry fields.

11. Herbicide and pesticide use on blueberry fields: Herbicides, pesticides, and fungicides are all used. There is the capability of using an integrated pest management type of thing where you minimize the use of these. With organic, not as much commercial fertilizer is needed because organics take care of it.

12. The 1990 tobacco crop was a disaster crop. Ninety (90) million pounds of tobacco that has been in storage since 1990 should be used as organic matter for blueberries versus putting it in a landfill in Virginia or somewhere.

TIFTON, GEORGIA ATTENDEES

Name	Phone	Affiliation
1. David H. Lee	912-632-4871	Farmer
2. Michelle Deen	912-367-6432	Farmer
3. Jeff Deen	912-367-6432	Farmer
4. Robert Lindsey	229-686-0689	Farmer
5. Debbie Waters	229-382-0424	ICT
6. Allen Whitehead	229-567-4542	Farmer
7. Don Register	229-382-7523	Farmer
8. Danny Tyson	229-382-1587	Farmer NRCS
9. Gerald Brands	229-382-5682	
10. Allen McConvey	229-386-7291	UGA - NCPC
11. Aubrey Brown	229-528-6737	Farmer
12. Wanda Fenell		NRCS
13. Mary Leidner	229-382-4776	NRCS
14. John Glover	706-546-2272	NRCS
15. Jim Dial	706-546-2272	NRCS
16. Anthony Burns	706-546-2272	NRCS
17. Henry McFarland		NRCS
18. David Lamm	706-546-2272	NRCS
19. Ron Brown	706-546-2272	NRCS
20. Mary Ann McQuinn	706-546-2272	NRCS
21. Pete Martinez	404-347-6105	NRCS
22. Donna Taylor	706-546-0568	Human Capital Developers