

## Stac Meeting 4/30/2024.

Welcome and introductions with Ann Fischer the ASTC-Partnerships and Acting State Tribal Liaison

Alan, our State Conservationist, has other commitments today.

Thank you to those joining us online.

### NRCS Updates:

NRCS has been hiring and we have 2 of our new folks with us today. Josh Schrecengost is the State Resource Conservationist (SRC) for Alaska. He has been here 3 weeks and came from 14 years in Montana. Josh is in charge of the ecological science division at NRCS Alaska. He has two resource conservationists on his staff as well as an archaeologist, agronomist, biologist and grazing specialist. He is in charge of making sure that technology is applied across various practices to ensure what we are recommending is the best recommendation as well as providing quality assurance to make sure we are meeting national requirements.

Austin Shero is our new Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations (ASTC FO). He started the same day Josh did but has been moving and in meetings most of the time, so this is day 4 in the office for him. Prior to that he was the ASTC-FO in Washington State. Austin's role and function is to manage the district conservationists and field operations.

Regarding funding- it is the same funding we talked about most of the year.

Our public affairs specialist has been busy getting some of our publications redone. The new publications are moose habitat, urban ag and salmon habitat. We have them available in our field offices and the state office for distribution.

We have other movement in personnel. Nikia Angevine is a watershed planner on the watershed staff. We have a new environmental compliance specialist on the watershed staff. His name is Rob Sherwood and he is located at our Fairbanks Field Office. Jeff Oatley is the Watershed Team Leader and Daniel Fisher has moved to supervisory hydrologist position. We hope we are getting staffed up to get projects done.

A new program we are looking at using in Alaska is an AFA. AFA's are an alternative funding arrangement that can be used for EQIP, CSP and RCPP. They are specifically for Tribes and allow more flexibility with regard to project cost and roles they are involved in regarding the project. It is something that we are exploring to see if we can make work in Alaska.

### Local work group meeting updates

Anchorage SWCD – Met 2 additional folks after the last update and we are adding more into the same perspective and continuing to connect.

Fairbanks SWCD –Have not had a local work group meeting, but we have some things coming up that we plan to combine with.

Kodiak SWCD- Currently they have been doing their community learning series to highlight agriculture things like how to build soil in Kodiak. They had their first large meeting in February and brought as many people from the growing community as possible that were ag related. They were asked what they felt they could use more support in. From that meeting they created the series in cooperation with the local co-op to bring the features asked to the forefront. They are bringing local people with local knowledge and had a lot of success with participation. Last meeting they had standing room only. They are also trying to get more people involved with NRCS financial assistance.

Eklutna TCD – One of your partners is Alaska Resilience Farm and one of their focuses is soil building. They have a demo garden in Anchorage, and hope to do virtual workshops this year. They plan to partner with Alaska Pacific University (APU) to do virtual workshops. They are still looking at how to get salmon back in their system. They will be holding interviews tomorrow for their seasonal techs who will be doing water sampling, minnow trapping and genetic sampling. They may have a slide that will alter their entire river so working with geologists. Their garden is going strong. Some of their field work is going out to Iliamna and may have some on the road system. They are working on veg clearing of the Pow Wow grounds as well to get rid of some invasive species (sweet clover). (Idea from KWSCD was to use chicken tractors)

Tyonek TCD- As usual, salmon habitat is mostly focused on and barriers. Invasives, such as pike and elodea are also a concern. They are at the southern end of the pike invasion. Something new this year is getting into food distribution working with tribes on LFP grants and realizing that there is not funding for infrastructure- only procurement. They have also been talking about farm resiliency. The last few seasons have been very wet and they don't know what this year will look like. There is potential for working with the corporation on demo-ing some very old infrastructure that has been abandoned for 40 years and restoration work they would do in those areas. They are also renovating their website and want to be a hub of info and connecting. They have received 2-3 resilience planning grants that they will be reaching out to partners on.

Knik TCD- They are working with stakeholders, tribes and though partner TCD's to revisit the local work group process. They have a lot of resource concerns and it would help if there was a guide that would help connect the description of what NRCS is asking for in terms of priorities to resource concerns. They had a number of state districts and TCD's meet together and did a survey and got their results in. They've been comparing a draft survey they did last round and updating it to compare for current concerns. Forestry has been a resource concern in a number of areas. They are also trying to provide a place to have TCD or state conservation districts together to discuss how to prepare forest management plans. They got a national equity grant that connects them to that, so they are trying to work with technical service providers and planners to start talking elements and see how they can align resources and technical assistance to help collect data. They are hoping to have space for that, contract out as a potential forestry tsp and build more tech capacity in house. APU and Kellogg farm is a stakeholder to one of their demos and they are collaborating there as well as trying to facilitate a field training in Tyonek with Laurie. There are a lot of barriers, but they are working through them. Ann has been helping. They have been connecting to more tech assistance and people to create continuity to collaborate on funding and capacity to capture the forestry funding opportunity while improving conservation elements. They also have a partnership agreement with Fish and Game and US Fish and Wildlife with streambank restoration as well as developing their capacity to take on different sized projects. They are also hoping to use the forest management plans to look at Knik properties that are

more suitable to native plant collection. Their group, as stakeholders to Knik TCD, is talking about different resource concerns with fish passages and forestry.

Homer SWCD- They had about 15 different organizations represented and a lot of tribal participation. Tyonek came as well- thank you for coming! The concerns really focused on wildlife habitat and food security and variations of those. Discussion was held about how to educate people about landowner rights. Meg (Mueller-NRCS District Conservationist) presented on CSP and some key components that came up were the cost of practices being greater than the benefit. The practice payout needs to be higher. One thought was that the practices are over engineered so they don't pencil out to land owners. Top issues were increasing salmon habitat protection, growing more local food security, funding for new farmers, more information on conservations easements, education and outreach about responsible land use and cooperative planning for trail systems as well as access to hunting and fishing zones. At the last STAC Coowe Walker presented on Salmon Habitat and she recently passed away. They would love to have a copy of her last recording. It is her last presentation so it would be great if they can continue to use that and spread the good work.

Ann- It is worth revisiting a statewide look at our salmon habitat.

Comments on where we are in the state on resources.

Forest Service – There was a recent Announcement that is infrastructure related for funding through Fish and Wildlife Service's fish passage program that was announced last week. There were 3 projects funded in Alaska. One was with Chickaloon working on the Moose Creek Drainage and the other 2 were for fish passage work. Also, infrastructure funding related, the federal highway administration will be releasing it's next funding opportunity for barriers, culverts and weirs across our geography. It will be road network infrastructure related with broad eligibility. It should be FY 24 funding. It's a new program that they had to create first and could be multiple year funding with different deadlines throughout. This continues to be a reminder of how critical this opportunity is, and timing, as people are stretched thin. The guidance is getting it and sorting it out later, which is hard to do. Mike will share it when he gets it. It will likely come through Saundra and will be on grants.gov and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). The culvert AOP program would be key words to search for.

Kwethluk IRA Council – They have been having meetings and have added another board member but have not done anything so far. This summer they are working on their garden from last year. They have halted the conservations district for a few years, so are starting from beginning.

Amanda, NRCS Programs

There are 3 folks that work the farm bill programs. Two of them specialize in specific program areas and the other person works in the easement programs. They have many different programs at NRCS. They have resource inventories, water resource programs, emergency programs and farm bill programs.

Farm bill programs are the programs that work with private lands owners on a much smaller scale. EQIP is the bread and butter in Alaska and can be a small project on someone's land. For example, a high tunnel in a back yard, a culvert replacement, or trails in rural areas as well as forestry work.

They received feedback from the STAC on the 2018 farm bill and asked how they should prioritize the funding pools. They take that information each year and then develop their budget. It all depends on what applications come in. They try to fund as many applications as they can and sometimes they have to shift the money, but they always start with the STAC recommendations.

They also have Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG's). There are national grant programs with an option for states to offer a state level grant. They asked the STAC and the STAC has requested a state level CIG. They are working on that; it is sitting at Head Quarters for finalization. They took your feedback to make it as broad as possible. When it is available they will share via govdelivery.com. If you subscribe to the newsletter you will be notified.

CSP is the Conservation Stewardship program. This program is for people already doing conservation but want to do it at a higher level or more intensive scale. They asked the STAC what resource concerns they should focus on for this program and they used the STAC input to rank their applications.

For the easement program, in particular the wetland easements, they looked at the fair market value and then have an established payment cap. In FY 21 the STAC requested the cap be increased from \$5,000 to \$5200. They asked again last year and there was no feedback that it should be changed so they kept it the same.

That is how we use your feedback with our programs in Alaska.

Further comments

Anchorage SWCD- The started working with 4-H to incorporate Anchorage School District and one hurdle for EQIP is the land lease ownership agreement with the school district in order to install a high tunnel. They would love to have a guest speaker at the school board to present how they can collaborate and show that the school district can be included as well. ASWCD is working as an urban ag leader- it is hard to find a space big enough in a back yard as well as with the municipality asking for zoning permits if over certain sizes there are barriers. Is there anything they can recommend to the container growers or hydroponics if it is inside and not in the back Yard?

Josh- More challenging if we are providing financial assistance but for technical assistance, we could have a workshop and have someone come speak about an aspect of that.

Anchorage SWCD - Another thing is compost waste.

Eklutna TCD- There is a grant for hospital food waste – may be worth reaching out to them. They have also been looking at composting units that would take it from a few months to a week, but the price is around 300k to ship to Alaska. It looks like a Connex box but we are looking for funding. Compost is a huge problem with animal waste and food waste.

KSWCD is looking into compost on the island in 2 ways – they have village farms that they are looking into with the EQIP program for vessel composters and there was a presentation for municipality and small local governments to apply for grant funding for composting programs. Applications were at the beginning of month, but he suspects funding will be offered next year. So it may be worth looking at paperwork now. It is though USDA.

Forest Service – We are working on an IRA program that is being created from the ground up. It is forest landowner support and there will be more to come on that for Alaska.

#### TCD Update

Tyonek TCD - We are setting better meeting schedules from here on out.

Knik TCD- We had more internal updates this round, but we have a plan with talking to TCD's and hearing what communities have going on and what their interests and discussion points are. We will do outreach and share highlights.

Ann – The Intent in the future is to set these meeting up in advance to have 3 meeting next year one in October/ November and one mid-winter and one hopefully in March. If anyone has anything please send it to Jess. If there is information needed to be shared out Jess will share with Tracy to get it out in the partner newsletter. If you want to be added to partner newsletter, please let us know.