

State Technical Committee Meeting Minutes  
February 24, 2009  
Spectacular Events Center  
Griffin Road  
Bangor, Maine

Terrell Erickson, Acting State Conservationist, introduced herself to the members.

**State Technical Committee Rule – Jim Johnson, Resource Conservationist, NRCS**

Jim Johnson, Acting State Resource Conservationist, reviewed the function of the State Technical Committee (STTC) which is to provide technical and program advice to the USDA on conservation issues. He also stated that NRCS published a State Technical Committee Interim Final Rule on November 25, 2008 with requests for comments by January 26, 2009. NRCS previously e-mailed this notice to members of the STTC. Jim presented and explained to the STTC the following documents that are currently posted on the Maine NRCS website at <http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov/StateTechCommittee.html>

- State Technical Committee – Interim Final Rule with request for comments
- USDA Press Release – Interim Final Rule
- At-a-Glance: State Technical Committees
- State Technical Committee Members List
- What is the State Technical Committee?
- State Technical Committee Membership Form

He explained that the major changes in the STTC as proposed by the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (2008 Farm Bill) include:

- Expand agricultural and forestry involvement
- Exempt Local Working Groups from the Federal Advisory Committee Act
- Expand STTC's authority to review Local Working Groups' efforts to address State program priorities
- Reaffirm the role of the State Technical Committee as an advisory committee
- Support standardization of the Committee's operations through the development and publication of standard operating procedures (not completed as of 1/29/09).

Jim also asked the committee to review the "State Technical Committee Membership List" and if anyone's contact information needs to be updated to please email Christopher Jones, State Resource Conservationist, at [chris.jones@me.usda.gov](mailto:chris.jones@me.usda.gov) with the correct information. He also requested that if they knew of any groups or individuals that they think would be interested in serving on the committee, to please let Chris Jones know.

**FSA Conservation Programs – Conservation Reserve Program and Grassland Reserve Program – Ken Gustin, Administrative Officer, FSA**

Ken explained to the STTC that the USDA Farm Service Agency's (FSA) Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) is a voluntary program that assists agricultural producers safeguard environmentally-sensitive land. CRP participants plan long-term, resource

conservation covers to improve the quality of water, control soil erosion and enhance wildlife habitat. He mentioned that FSA provides participants with rental payments in return and cost-share assistance. There are approximately 821 CRP contracts on 20,800 acres in Maine.

Ken also stated that the maintenance incentive rates are established to reimburse participants for the average annual cost of practice maintenance. The policy requires that FSA consult with the State Technical Committee for their recommendation on maintenance rates. In past years, the STTC has recommended to FSA to use the maximum maintenance rates allowed. **The consensus of the group was to use the maximum maintenance rates for CRP.**

At the upcoming subcommittee working group session there will be discussions relating to the Grassland Reserve Program -- how to find a way to target certain areas in Maine and decide on a ranking criteria.

### **2008 Farm Bill Rules – Bill Yamartino, ASTC for Programs, NRCS**

Bill spoke on the high points and answered questions regarding the following programs relating to the 2008 Farm Bill:

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program
- USDA NRCS Definitions for Beginning, Limited Resource, and Socially-Disadvantaged Farmers
- Agricultural Water Enhancement Program
- Conservation Innovation Grants
- Specialty Crops
- Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program
- Agricultural Management Assistance
- Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program
- Grassland Reserve Program
- Healthy Forests Reserve Program
- Wetland Reserve Program
- Conservation Stewardship Program
- Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative
- Adjusted Gross Income Provision

The “At a Glance” brief sheets regarding each of the above programs can be found at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/farmbill/2008/ata glance.html>

**Question** – What is the definition of non-industrial private forest land?

**Answer** – These are privately-held forestlands that are owned separately from forest products processing capacity, such as lumber or paper mills.

**Question** – Does wildlife include fish?

**Answer** – Yes, the definition in the Final Rule includes aquatic species.

**Agricultural Water Enhancement – Susan Arrants, Resource Conservationist, NRCS**

Susan stated that the Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) is a voluntary conservation program under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). AWEP provides financial and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers to assist them in applying agricultural water enhancement activities that conserve ground and surface water and improve water quality on agricultural lands. NRCS may carry out AWEP by entering into contracts with agricultural producers who apply directly or through partnership agreements with entities that apply on behalf of agricultural producers. The purpose of this program is to promote ground and surface water conservation and improve water quality. The 2008 Farm Bill provides \$73 million for fiscal years 2009 and 2010; \$74 million for fiscal year 2011; and \$60 million for fiscal year 2012 and each year thereafter.

**Question** – Is the program available to private landowners?

**Answer** – Yes, AWEP funds must go to private individuals or entities that are eligible for EQIP.

**Joint State Technical Committee/Forest Stewardship Advisory Committee Effort to Assess and Prioritize Natural Resource Concerns of Maine Forests – Andy Schultz, Maine Forest Service**

Andy stated that the purpose of this joint committee is to determine priorities among various broad areas of conservation, such as forestry, agriculture, wildlife, etc., which may in turn inform allocation of NRCS-administered program funds at the state level. It is understood that within areas of resource concerns, a lead agency (i.e., Maine Forest Service with respect to forestry), in consultation with NRCS, will determine priorities for individual partners and strategies. This purpose is aligned with the recently-signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between NRCS, U.S. Forest Service, (USFS) National Association of Conservation Districts, (NACD) and Northeastern Area Association of State Foresters (NAASF). The Maine Forest Service will analyze existing Stewardship Forest Management Plans and Prescribed Forestry Plans with respect to recommended activities such as thinning, pruning, planting, harvesting, and crop tree release. A standing Forestry sub-committee of the State Technical Committee will be formed to review the results of the analysis and prioritize rankings and dollar amounts. This sub-committee will be one and the same as the Statewide Stewardship Coordinating Committee, and will include representation from the USDA Forest Service and Soil and Water Conservation Districts. A final report will be made to the State Conservationist, who then decides on statewide allocations.

**State Resource Priorities (Ranking Criteria and Statewide Funding Pools) – Bill Yamartino, NRCS**

Bill went over the spreadsheet that was enclosed in the handout package “Maine 2009 Financial Assistance Funding Summary by Program as of 1/29/2009” (see attached).

Looking for recommendations at the next meeting for setting up statewide pools and would like responses back from the Local Working Groups on any concerns relating to this matter.

### **Program Ranking Sheets**

Bill stated that all ranking tools include national, state and local ranking elements. The national priorities in the ranking criteria are established nationally and are not subject to any modification on the part of NRCS.

The State ranking elements are open for recommendations from the State Technical Committee and the local ranking elements are open for recommendations from the USDA Local Work Groups.

He also went over the handout “Program Ranking Sheets – State Technical Committee Recommendations” (see attached) which included the EQIP Ranking Tools and WHIP Ranking Tools. Bill stated that the Local Working Groups will have an opportunity to review the ranking criteria and recommend changes to reflect their local priorities. The STTC was invited to indicate their top five State Ranking priorities. Some of the committee members in attendance provided hard copies of their priorities which were collected by Bill. Bill invited others to submit their priorities by the end of the week (February 27).

**Note: From input collected at the February 24<sup>th</sup> meeting as well as through numerous e-mail responses, the following five resource concerns were identified as state priorities. These will all receive 100 points on the ranking tool and will not be subject to modification by Local Working Groups.**

**Soil Erosion – Classic Gully Erosion**

**Water Quality – Excessive Nutrients in Surface Water**

**Water Quality – Excessive Suspended Sediments and Turbidity in Surface Waters**

**Fish & Wildlife – Federal listed T&E species**

**Fish & Wildlife – State listed T&E species**

Bill informed the STTC that NRCS was intending to re-introduce irrigation assistance into the EQIP program. He spoke about how NRCS proposes that Maine adopt two additional criteria to determine the priority for providing irrigation financial assistance with EQIP. The first criterion is that the water withdrawals on an applicant’s farm be subject to the new State low flow rules and regulations. He mentioned that the second criterion would be to adapt a screening tool, similar to the one used for the Conservation Security Program, to assess the general sustainability and management of current irrigation systems on a farm. The result of this screening will be an index number. If an irrigation operation falls below a predetermined index value, the operation would be considered a high priority for EQIP financial assistance. If the results of the screening tool were above the threshold, they would be a low priority for assistance. Bill invited the State Technical Committee to participate in a subcommittee to complete the development of the screening tool and recommend eligible practices.