

**State Technical Committee Meeting  
NRCS State Office Conference Room  
February 11, 2010**

**10:00 am – 2:45 pm**

Juan Hernandez, State Conservationist, welcomed and opened the meeting with introductions from the State Technical Committee (STTC) Members.

**USDA State Technical Committee Functions and Responsibilities/Membership – and Future Meeting Agenda Items - Chris Jones, NRCS State Resource Conservationist**

Chris stated that the STTC is to provide the USDA technical advice on our USDA conservation programs. He asked for assistance from the STTC in diversifying and expanding the membership of the STTC by sharing the Maine STTC Membership form (located on the Maine NRCS website) with others that they believe might be interested in serving on the committee. Chris also asked the STTC to review the contact information for the STTC and to email any changes or additions to Chris Jones at [chris.jones@me.usda.gov](mailto:chris.jones@me.usda.gov).

Chris also reviewed the function of the STTC, which is to assist the USDA in matters relating to the implementation and technical aspects of conservation programs under Title II of the Food, Conservation and Energy Act of 2008 Farm Bill. The STTC, according to the 2008 Farm Bill, shall be composed of agricultural producers and other professionals that represent a variety of disciplines in soil, water, wetland, and wildlife sciences. The role of the STTC is advisory and has no implementation or enforcement authority. The USDA will give consideration to the recommendations made by the STTC in administering the appropriate programs.

**State Forest Assessment and Strategies – Donald J. Mansius, Maine Forest Service Director of Forest Policy and Management**

Chris mentioned to the members that the State Forest Assessment and Strategies which the Maine Forest Service is conducting will be extremely valuable to the State STTC, as well as the Local Working Groups, as we move forward to assess what the conservation needs are for the state.

Donald informed the members they will be receiving via email Maine's Statewide Forest Assessment and Strategy Survey document for their review and comment to be sent back to him as soon as possible. (This email was previously sent out to all STTC on February 12, 2010). The results from this survey will be posted on the following website and will have a big influence on delivery of conservation programs on Maine's forest which cover 90% of the state: <http://www.maineforestservice.com>

The PowerPoint presentation is located at:  
<http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov/STTCMeetings2010.html>

**Conservation Reserve Program Priority/Cost Share Rates – Ken Gustin, Farm Service Agency (FSA)**

Ken spoke about certain payment rates and policies on how FSA administers the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). FSA needs to receive recommendations from the STTC on establishing cost share rates and flat rates for maintenance.

FSA annually works with NRCS to determine cost share rates that are used for payment of installing practices under CRP. FSA proposes to partner with NRCS to establish CRP cost share rates similar to NRCS's EQIP cost share rates. Ken also stated CRP contracts require some maintenance. Every year, the STTC members are asked to concur with the establishment of maintenance rates.

**Recommendation: A recommendation was made by the STTC for FSA to use the maximum maintenance rates allowable, and that FSA should work with NRCS to have CRP cost share rates similar to EQIP.**

### **Renewing and Revising State Conservation Priority Areas (CPA's) – Ken Gustin - FSA**

Ken stated that the National and State CPA's provide basic land eligibility for CRP. In addition, offers in water, wildlife, and air quality zones were awarded points within the Environmental Benefits Index (EBI). In previous CRP general signups, CPA's were limited to not more than 33 percent of the remaining available cropland in the State. State CPA's expire after 5 years. The State Offices must renew or revise their State CPA's and associated zones.

FSA would like to hear STTC proposals on areas that should be CPAs. There may be other wildlife area issues or particular areas in the state that are not on the list that the group might want to propose. There was an email message sent out to all STTC requesting a response by March 1, 2010 on areas the group recommends for CPAs. Attached to this email message were three maps showing three different areas that the STTC discussed during the meeting: the existing CPA, which is part of eastern Aroostook county; Atlantic salmon critical habitat and occupied watersheds; and the Upland Sandpiper and Other At-Risk Bird Species area. This area covers most of the cropland in Aroostook County and a small part of northeastern Penobscot.

The following documents were discussed at the meeting and are located at:

<http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov/STTCMeetings2010.html>

- *Renewing and Revising State Conservation Priority*
- *Memo regarding Per acre Maintenance Rate for Continuous Signup Practices*
- *Water Quality Areas CRP-18 Signup (Aroostook County, Maine)*
- *CPA-Water Quality Map*
- *CPA Atlantic Salmon Critical Habitat and Occupied Watersheds Map*
- *CPA Upland Sandpiper and other At-Risk Bird Species Map*

### **Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) – William Yamartino – NRCS**

Chris stated that Maine NRCS has used WRP on tidal wetlands, such as the Scarborough Marsh. Maine NRCS has received approximately 3.5 million dollars in allocations each in the past two years, but have not enrolled any new acres.

Bill mentioned that WRP is a program where we can have easements and do restoration under those easements, or we could simply have cost share agreements like we do with some of other programs for wetland restoration work. In Maine, we have two easements acquired since 1995. Both of these easements were donated. We have done thousands of acres of wetland

restoration using WRP restoration agreements. Most of this work was done in the salt marshes and some on state land. Recently the 2008 Farm Bill reauthorized WRP but changed some of the eligibility factors which have an impact. At the same time, they increased the total acreage nationally that can be enrolled. We are being encouraged to increase participation in WRP. These discussions with the State Technical Committee are intended to increase the awareness of the WRP opportunities for our partners.

Bill spoke about one of the significant changes in land eligibility under WRP. He mentioned that NRCS can only consider for enrollment private lands or lands owned by Indian Tribes. This means public lands are not eligible. NRCS shall determine whether land is eligible for enrollment and whether, once found eligible, the lands may be included in the program based on the likelihood of successful restoration of wetland functions and values when considering the cost of acquiring the easement and the cost of the restoration, protection, enhancement, maintenance and management. Land shall only be considered eligible for enrollment in the WRP if NRCS determines, in consultation with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USF&WS), that the enrollment of such land maximizes wildlife benefits and wetland values and functions. Such land is farmed wetland or converted wetland, together with adjacent lands that are functionally dependent on the wetlands. NRCS is specifically looking at former or degraded wetlands that occur on lands that have been used or are currently being used for the production of food and fiber, including forest production lands, where the hydrology has been significantly degraded or modified and will be substantially restored. Maine does not have a lot of agricultural lands that have been diked or drained to make them farmable. Based on the new definition, wet pastures are eligible for restoration or easement. In areas that are not open agricultural lands, NRCS is looking for substantial manipulation that converted these wetlands. Bill stressed to the group the two basic groups of eligible lands-- open agricultural lands that are wet, with or without altered hydrology, and forestland that has had its hydrology altered.

Like CRP, when NRCS does an easement under WRP the restrictions are significant. The people continue to own the land and can use the property for recreation, but they can no longer harvest trees or agricultural products without a written plan and approved by NRCS. NRCS becomes the holder of the easement and we can do the restoration directly under a permanent easement. NRCS would pay 100% of the restoration costs.

Question – As far as the landowner eligibility, is there some reference to HEL and income? Are they the same as EQIP?

Answer – Yes, participants in WRP have to meet conservation compliance and Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) eligibility in order to participate. Additionally, an applicant has to own the land for seven years. NRCS can waive this requirement if justified.

Question – Is a 30 year contract enrollment option only available to acres owned by Indian Tribes?

Answer – Yes, only tribal lands can be enrolled in a 30 year restoration contract. There is a 10 year restoration agreement, which is our typical cost share agreement, and except for tribes the only other two options would be a 30 year easement or a permanent easement.

The following document is located at: <http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov/STTCMeetings2010.html>

- *Title 7: Agriculture – Wetland Reserve Program*

**Draft - Maine NRCS Wetland Reserve Program State Ranking Worksheet – Jeff Norment, NRCS**

**Chris requested the group to review the draft Wetland Reserve Program State Ranking Worksheet and email any comments or suggestions back to Jeff by March 12, 2010 at [jeff.norment@me.usda.gov](mailto:jeff.norment@me.usda.gov) .**

Jeff reminded the group that the Subpart C - Ranking Criteria of the Conservation Program Manual document was emailed to the STTC a couple weeks ago for their review before the meeting for discussion and comments. He also spoke about the ranking process that will enable the NRCS State Conservationist to prioritize enrollment offers by determining the projects that most merit enrollment. However, such ranking does not vest any right or entitlement to funding by an applicant. Separate ranking criteria that emphasize the same criteria discussed in this Subpart C should be developed for permanent easements, 30-year easements, 30-year contracts, and restoration cost-share agreements. The point spread on the ranking system should be sufficient to allow differentiation between applications. The State Conservationist will develop a form to record the ranking criteria and develop a process to collect data, rank the applications, and select projects for funding. These state-developed ranking forms will be made available to the public through the State's WRP webpage.

Jeff asked if there needs to be any additions made or any changes to prioritizing the various Factor points in this draft Maine NRCS Wetland Reserve Program State Ranking Factors Worksheet. He mentioned to the group the first four factors deal with environmental issues. Factor 1 relates to wetland type and which wetland types are to receive priority consideration for restoration by WRP. Feedback on this Factor 1 is welcomed. Another important factor he wanted the group to consider is where a wetland restoration project is located, and how points are to be awarded based on proximity to other wetlands and priority focus areas.

A STTC member expressed a concern on the current negative values (i.e., -5 to -15 pts) associated with Factor 5 – Design, Operation and Maintenance and Factor 6 – Likelihood of Success Limiting Factors. The member felt the relatively small negative values will be swamped and ineffective considering the total potential points available (250 pts). The suggestion was made to increase the negative values to more effectively select against projects with undesirable elements that will impede successful restoration and/or operation and maintenance. Jeff said a negative values response will be changed to reflect more negatively on identified and undesirable features or elements that may be associated with some restoration projects.

Question – Who is responsible for Operation and Maintenance of restoration practices and structures referenced in Factor 5 – Design, Operation & Maintenance?

Answer – Bill Yamartino responded that NRCS is responsible for operation and maintenance of our conservation practice standards implemented on WRP easements.

The following document is located at: <http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov/STTCMeetings2010.html>

- *Maine NRCS Wetland Reserve Program State Ranking Factors Worksheet*

## **Wetland Restoration and Wetland Enhancement Conservation Practice Standards – Jeff Norment, NRCS**

Chris mentioned to the group that the Wetland Restoration and Wetland Enhancement Conservation Standards are used when NRCS does wetland restoration work. He requested the group email any comments or suggestions back to Jeff Norment by March 31, 2010 at [jeff.norment@me.usda.gov](mailto:jeff.norment@me.usda.gov)

Jeff stated the wetland restoration conservation standard is used to restore a wetland to its historic natural condition to the maximum extent practicable. The wetland restoration standard has a separate specifications document which provides additional details not specified in the standard itself. The wetland enhancement standard is used to accentuate certain wetland features to enhance priority wetland functions and/or to enhance habitat for priority wetland dependent species. The Wetland Enhancement standard does not have a separate specification document. He also mentioned that the standards are tools used to design and maintain NRCS conservation practices. The standards contain multiple sections, but the group should focus on the Criteria and the Conservation sections. The Criteria in a standard are non-negotiable required elements and there should be a criteria established for each purpose stated in the standard. Considerations are desirable actions or design features that a planner and client should consider when designing a practice, but they are not required elements. NRCS encourages planners and clients to integrate applicable Considerations in their wetland restoration designs where practicable.

The following document is located at: <http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov/STTCMeetings2010.html>

- *Wetland Enhancement Practice Standard*
- *Wetland Restoration Practice Standard*
- *Wetland Restoration Specifications Guide Sheet*

## **Easement Programs Market Survey and Geographic Area Rate Cap Documentation – Bill Yamartino, NRCS**

Bill discussed the use of Geographic Area Rate Caps for easement valuation in the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) and WRP programs. He discussed the methodology for deriving per acre valuation rates for these programs using National Agricultural Statistics Service Market Survey information.

**Recommendation: The STTC concurred with the rates and recommended that they be used for these programs in 2010.**

The following document is located at: <http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov/STTCMeetings2010.html>

- *Easement Programs Market Survey and Geographic Area Rate Cap Documentation*

## **Outreach with Partners – Chris Jones, NRCS**

Chris stated that NRCS needs to customize a fact or information sheet for private foresters so they can assist us with outreach on the wetland reserve opportunities.

Chris mentioned that NRCS has an employee that is working with the land trust groups and on April 30 and May 1, 2010 there will be a meeting for land trusts. Maine NRCS plans on having a

presence at this meeting. A committee member mentioned there is a Maine Land Trust Network located at [www.mltfn.org](http://www.mltfn.org) and is housed at Maine Coast Heritage Land Trust. This is a network to get information out to various land trusts in the state. It was suggested for the NRCS Public Affairs Specialist get more involved with outreaching with the Maine Coast Heritage Land Trust.

The following document is located at: <http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov/STTCMeetings2010.html>

- *Farm Bill 2008 –Wetlands Reserve Program At-A-Glance*

### **AMA – High Tunnel Pilot – Chris Jones, NRCS**

Chris referred the STTC to the Fact Sheet titled, “Seasonal High Tunnels for Food and Other Specialty Crop Production”, dated January, 2010. The purpose of the seasonal high tunnel is to extend the crop growing season. There is anecdotal evidence which suggests that there are conservation benefits associated with high tunnels. Maine NRCS is using this Interim Conservation Practice Standard to field test this new technology and determine the validity of potential conservation benefits. We will analyze data provided by clients that install high tunnels and will prepare annual reports to discuss the strengths and weaknesses. We will provide recommendations about whether to develop high tunnels into a national conservation practice standard to the NRCS national office. Additional purposes of high tunnels include improved plant quality, improved soil quality, and improved water quality from reduced nutrient and pesticide transport. NRCS plans to use the \$135,000 of Agricultural Management Assistance Program (AMA) funds for this pilot. We estimate we will fund between 18-20 high tunnels this fiscal year. Chris stated that NRCS is working with the University of Maine Cooperative Extension (UMCE) on educating interested people on high tunnels. Currently, UMCE and NRCS plan on having a field day on high tunnels at the Highmoor Farm in Monmouth, Maine on March 29, 2010.

The following documents are located at: <http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov/STTCMeetings2010.html>

- *Seasonal High Tunnels for Food and Other Specialty Crop Production*
- *High Tunnel Field Day Flyer*

### **Update National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Document – Chris Jones, NRCS**

Chris mentioned that NRCS in New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island and New York developed a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and Environmental Assessment, dated April, 2007. The title of the document is “Environmental Assessment (EA) of NRCS Conservation Practices Used to Address Natural Resource Concerns on Non-Federal Lands in the New England States and New York”. The document is available at [ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/NHQ/ecs/Enviro/FONSI\\_and\\_Regional\\_EA.pdf](ftp://ftp-fc.sc.egov.usda.gov/NHQ/ecs/Enviro/FONSI_and_Regional_EA.pdf). This EA covered most of the conservation practices commonly used in Maine. There is a desire among NRCS to keep the EA up to date. Chris stated that NRCS has developed “Network Diagrams” for nine additional conservation practices. They include the following: Agrichemical Mixing Facility (Code 702); Atmospheric Resource Quality Management (Code 370); Irrigation Water Conveyance, Pipeline, Reinforced Plastic Mortar (Code 430GG); Pond Sealing or Lining, (Code 521A); (Code 521B); (Code 521C); Recreation Land Grading and Shaping (Code 566); Recycle 100% of Farm Lubricants (Code ENR04) and Seasonal High Tunnel System for Crops Interim Practice Standard (Code 798).

The following documents are located at: <http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov/STTCMeetings2010.html>

- *Irrigation Water Conveyance/Aluminum Tubing Pipe (Code 430AA)*
- *Atmospheric Resource Quality Management – Animal Feeding Operations (Code 370)*
- *Seasonal High Tunnel for Crops (Code 798)*
- *Environmental Enhancement – Recycle 100% of Farm Lubricants (EEM41)*
- *Agrichemical Handling Facility (Code 309)*
- *Recreation Land Grading and Shaping (Code 566)*
- *Pond Sealing or Lining (Codes 521A, 521B, 521C)*

### **Agenda Items for Future Meetings**

The following are suggestions made by the group for the future State Technical Committee Meetings:

- Forestry and Program Delivery Needs
- AgroForestry Issues (for example “Herbal”)
- Representative from Local Working Group with specifics in your areas and how recommendations are adopted
- Carbon Credit on Forest Land – Oxford County Pilot Workshop
- Plant Materials Report
- Atlantic salmon listings as they evolve around both forestland and cropland potential
- State and Private Forest Grants
- Programs dealing with methodologies regarding carbon
- Good organic matter and deep root systems receiving carbon credit

Juan Hernandez, NRCS State Conservationist, thanked the State Technical Committee for their input.