

**State Technical Committee Meeting**  
**April 8, 2009**  
**Spectacular Events Center**  
**Bangor, Maine**

Terrell Erickson, Acting State Conservationist opened the meeting with introductions from the members.

**Grassland Reserve Program – Bill Yamartino, ASTC for Programs, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) –**

The following documents were discussed at the meeting and are located at:  
<http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov/StateTechCommittee.html> :

- *Draft: 2009 Maine NRCS GRP Eligible Practice Payment Schedule Spreadsheet*
- *Maine NRCS 2009 Grassland Reserve Program Ranking Criteria – Easement*
- *Maine NRCS 2009 Grassland Reserve Program Ranking Criteria – Rental Contract*

Bill announced that a subcommittee meeting was held a couple of weeks ago to make recommendations and comments on the state priorities regarding the Grassland Reserve Program. He also stated that Maine is receiving \$180,000 for the signup which will be held this summer. We are trying to target Conservation Reserve Program acres that have recently expired or will expire this year. This is a voluntary program for landowners and operators to protect, restore, and enhance grassland, including rangeland, pastureland, shrub land, and certain other lands. The program emphasizes support for working grazing operations; enhancement of plant and animal biodiversity; and protection of grassland and land containing shrubs and forbs under threat of conversion. In the last five years, GRP has closed on over 250 easements covering more than 115,000 acres in 38 states.

Bill spoke to the committee about the split of funds on easements and rental contracts. The split would be 60% of national funds to easements and 40% to rental contracts. He stated that each state has to meet these figures.

We will work in conjunction with the Farm Service Agency regarding the signup which will take place sometime in May or June and have contracts and easements closed by September.

**Farm and Ranchland Protection Program – Bill Yamartino, NRCS and Stephanie Gilbert, Maine Department of Agricultural, Food and Rural Resources (MDAFRR)**

The following document was discussed at the meeting and are located at:  
<http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov/StateTechCommittee.html> :

- *Draft – Maine Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) Ranking Criteria 2009*

The Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) is a voluntary program that helps farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture. The program provides matching funds to State, Tribal, or local governments and non-governmental

organizations with existing farm and ranch land protection programs to purchase conservation easements.

Stephanie Gilbert provided an overview of the ranking criteria including the weight given to the National and State developed elements.

Bill asked the group to review the documents and make comments and recommendations on the weight given to the State factors that he and Stephanie developed for Maine. He mentioned that there is a short turn around period for the roll out which starts before the end of April and ends June 5, 2009. He also needed input from the committee regarding the weight to be given for economic viability (Item #8 in the National Criteria).

Bill asked the group if they were in favor of the weight split being 60% federal and 40% state. The consensus of the group was to use these weights.

### **Easement Valuation – Bill Yamartino, NRCS**

The following document is located at:

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

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

Bill discussed the easement valuation method to be used for the Grassland Reserve Program, Wetlands Reserve Program and Flood Plain Easement Program. Maine has little or no experience of actually purchasing easements under these programs. He stated that instead of doing individual appraisals, he was proposing that we use the market survey from the 2007 Ag Census to establish fair market values. The Geographic Area Rate Caps are established as a maximum easement valuation for the listed programs. The group recommended using these values as they were presented.

### **Environmental Quality Incentives Program Irrigation Assistance – Bill Yamartino, NRCS**

The following document is located at:

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

- *State of Maine EQIP Irrigation Water Efficiency FY 2009 Signup*

Bill stated that NRCS is presenting to all producers opportunities for technical and financial assistance for irrigation water efficiency under the 2008 Farm Bill. Under EQIP provisions and Maine's new water use regulations, NRCS is offering continuous signup for Irrigation Water Management Plans, Efficiency Improvements of Existing Irrigation Systems, and Development of Alternative Water Sources. Eligible lands are those that have been irrigated at least 2 of the last 5 years.

An invitation to provide comments and input into EQIP irrigation assistance was extended to the State Technical Committee at the February 24<sup>th</sup> meeting. Subsequently, an irrigation subcommittee was convened and met on March 10<sup>th</sup> to develop the ranking criteria and propose eligible practices to make available. Representatives from the Maine Wild Blueberry Commission, Maine Agricultural Water Management Board and

the Penobscot County Soil and Water Conservation District, as well as staff from NRCS participated. Bill presented ranking criteria and a list of eligible practices that were developed with the input of the subcommittee. The ranking criteria included elements that give highest priority to irrigation systems where the water source is regulated by the State of Maine. Another element in the ranking criteria presented was the use of an irrigation management tool originally developed for the Conservation Security Program. This tool provides a relative measure of the general efficiency and management of existing irrigation systems. For current year ranking, this will be used to help prioritize applications that show the most need for improvement. There were no recommendations to change the ranking criteria or list of eligible practices as they were presented.

NRCS will close the first of EQIP ranking and evaluation period on May 20, 2009 and are preparing to obligate 90% of EQIP funds by June 10, 2009.

Bill opened up for discussion on where we are headed regarding the irrigation issue. He stressed to the group that EQIP needs to be focused on addressing resource problems.

**Question** – How many Local Working Groups set aside pools of money for local needs regarding irrigation?

**Answer** –As of this meeting two Local Working Groups had determined to fund irrigation related practices in the first EQIP sign-up.

**Question** – Why can't the State Technical Committee make recommendations to the State Conservationist to set aside money to spend on irrigation and set it as a priority in the future when we receive a lump sum of EQIP funds?

**Answer** – That is a possibility. NRCS in Maine depends on the input of Local Working Groups to establish local priorities and recommend how allocated funds are directed. However, an opportunity to target funds for these types of projects is available through the Agriculture Water Enhancement Program or the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI). We encourage interested parties to submit proposals.

**Question** – How much more funding would be potentially available?

**Answer** – There is currently about \$450,000 set aside in EQIP for the CCPI. In addition, we are hopeful that an extra \$2.5 million of EQIP funds would be available through regional equity. The regional equity funds are not available in Maine at this time. There will be another round of signups for these funds. Bill mentioned that the first round would be obligated by June 10<sup>th</sup> and second round would utilize regional equity funds to rank and fund additional applications.

**Question** – Were the Local Working Groups made aware of the irrigation practices available throughout the state?

**Answer** – Local Working Groups started to meet in late February and early March with information that we had given to them, including opportunities to do something with irrigation. They did not have the full practice list or the ranking criteria when they met. These are just now being finalized. Bill also discussed that Local Working Groups are

asked to make their recommendation to the local District Conservationist about distribution of funds.

Bill stated that under EQIP provisions and Maine's new water efficiency regulations, NRCS Maine is offering continuous signup for the following:

- **Irrigation Water Management Plans** – We offer technical support to develop plans, and will pilot new provisions of the Farm Bill offering Irrigation Management Activity Plans developed by Technical Service Providers.
- **Efficiencies and Improvements of Existing Irrigation Systems** – We offer financial assistance for conservation practices, including changes to physical infrastructure and/or land management changes to improve irrigation efficiencies.
- **Alternative Water Sources** – We offer technical and financial assistance for producers to develop alternative water sources in order to comply with the State of Maine's new in-stream flow regulations.

**Question** – When were the above plans or documents stated above shared with the District Conservationists?

**Answer** – The documents have not been distributed because they are not final. The District Conservationists received in February 2009 the narrative in the “State of Maine Environmental Quality Incentives Program Irrigation Water Efficiency” document. He also suggested that Local Working Groups could hold another meeting to discuss the issues that were covered at this State Technical Committee meeting.

**Question** – A member of the Local Working Group asked why they were not asked to review individual practices. They felt over the past years their group's recommendations were just recommendations and not brought to the State Technical Committee for consideration.

**Answer** – Bill mentioned that all recommendations from the Local Working Groups would be considered. Local Working Groups make their recommendations to their District Conservationist and they forward them to Bill Yamartino, ASTC for Programs, at the State Office. The Local Working Group recommendations for funding different needs are then used when allocations are actually made.

**Question** – Can any farmer go to their local field office for assistance if it is cost shared?

**Answer** – If eligibility criteria is met and the land has been irrigated for 2 out of 5 years then an application can be made. The starting point for assistance will be an irrigation water management plan. If a producer is seeking assistance and they do not have an irrigation water management plan we will recommend that they get that plan first. Contracts for irrigation-related practices are based on the needs identified in a plan.

**Recommendation made by the Maine Potato Board to the State Technical Committee** – The State Office of NRCS should set aside regional equity funds to address irrigation in the second round. We should set aside \$2 – \$3 million to direct toward irrigation assistance because of the demand for these practices.

Dan Labrie, President of MACD concurred with the recommendation regarding setting aside regional equity funds for irrigation practices.

**Andy Shultz, Maine Forest Service** – The Maine Forest Service acknowledges that the cost of irrigation practices is at a different scale than forestry practices. He wanted to know how a determination is made on how EQIP or other funds should be divided into different concerns. The Maine Forest Service has proposed methodology that would come up with a need for forestry practices, and would like it to be considered when supplemental funds are received. He suggested that there needs to be a rational way to identify other resource concerns and not simply a motion for all supplemental regional equity to be directed into one resource at the expense of another resource need. He suggested holding a round of meetings to try to generate interests to make people aware of the forestry plans that need to be inputted into EQIP applications and to make sure forestry concerns are on the table along with other identified needs.

#### **Andy Shultz's statement was supported by the members**

**Answer** – Bill commented that the NRCS still wants the Local Working Groups to make recommendations to their local District Conservationist on priorities and the distribution of funds that their area receives. We have to balance all competing interests before we set aside additional funds for any one resource need. The Local Working Group will have an opportunity to consider current issues and revisit their distribution of funds when additional funds are received. Bill repeated that there are funds available through the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative to address targeted issues.

#### **Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) – Susan Arrants, NRCS**

The following document is located at the following link:

[http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/ccpi/FedRegis\\_CCPI\\_3-10-09.pdf](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/ccpi/FedRegis_CCPI_3-10-09.pdf)

- *Federal Register/Vol. 74, No. 45/Tuesday, March 10, 2009/Notices Under DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE – Commodity Credit Corporation*

The 2008 Farm Bill re-authorized the use of the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) to assist potential partners with focusing conservation assistance in defined project areas to achieve high-priority natural resource objectives. In FY2009, NRCS will make Environmental Quality Incentives Program and Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program funds available to owners and operators of agricultural and nonindustrial private forest lands who will participate in CCPI projects. We need to inform potential partners and producers of the availability of CCPI funds and other assistance. Maine NRCS is soliciting proposals from potential partners who seek to enter into partnership agreements with NRCS to enhance conservation outcomes on agricultural and nonindustrial private forest land. NRCS requests public comments on how CCPI can contribute to the Nation's efforts on energy, climate change, and carbon sequestration within the framework of the Initiative.

CCPI proposals for projects fully contained in Maine should be sent to the Maine NRCS State Conservationist no later than April 23, 2009. CCPI proposals for projects that will cover an area that crosses state lines should be sent to the NRCS Chief. Proposal criteria and pertinent addresses are outlined in detail in the CCPI Notice of Request for Proposals published in the Federal Register, which can be accessed through this link: [http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/ccpi/FedRegis\\_CCPI\\_3-10-09.pdf](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/ccpi/FedRegis_CCPI_3-10-09.pdf)

The National NRCS office is accepting public comments on how CCPI can contribute to the Nation's efforts on energy, climate change, and carbon sequestration within the framework of the initiative. The details of how to submit comments can also be found in the CCPI Notice of Request for Proposals. The deadline for submitting comments was April 8, 2009.

**Question** – Is the opportunity to apply for CCPI offered annually?

**Answer** – CCPI is not a new initiative. In recent years, CCPI funds were used to develop watershed assessments. Under the 2008 Farm Bill, the opportunities have been expanded. Proposal requirements may be different next year, but the opportunity should still be there.

### **State Technical Committee Standard Operating Procedures – Susan Arrants, NRCS**

The following document is located at:

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

- *Federal Register, Vol. 74, No. 65, dated Tuesday, April 7, 2009 under Proposed Rules*

Bill stated that the State Technical Committees provide information, analysis and recommendations to appropriate officials of USDA who are charged with implementing and establishing priorities and criteria for the Natural Resources Conservation activities and programs under Title XII of the 1985 Act, as amended. Although State Technical Committees are advisory in nature and have no implementation or enforcement authority, USDA gives strong consideration to the State Technical Committees' recommendations.

Bill reviewed the "Roles and Responsibilities" of the State Conservationists and the Local Working Groups, which is documented in the Federal Register – Proposed Rules under Part 501, Subpart 501.11, (d) – Review of Local Working Groups. The State Conservationist will Chair the committee; ensure representation of all interests to the extent practicable; give strong consideration to the committee's advice on NRCS programs initiatives, and activities; call and provide notice of public meetings; follow the Standard Operating Procedures; and provide other USDA agencies with recommendations from the State Technical Committee for programs under their purview.

Bill stated that the State Technical Committees will review annually whether or not Local Working Groups are addressing State priorities. It will be up to the State Technical Committee members to recommend how this will be determined.