

State Technical Committee Meeting Minutes
Florida Farm Bureau Building
5700 S.W. 34th Street Gainesville, Florida 32608.
November 16, 2009

Carlos Suarez, State Conservationist, NRCS, opened the meeting and welcomed everyone. Mr. Suarez discussed the budget that we have received for Fiscal Year (FY) 2010. The following allocations for financial assistance have been received: WRP - \$11,217,063, FRRP - \$2,404,927, GRP - \$1,766,644, EQIP - \$16,381,274, and WHIP - \$298,535 for a total of \$32,091,372. The allocation for WRP is distributed each quarter not for the entire year. Mr. Suarez talked about his beliefs in the partnership programs and explained why the State Technical Committee was developed. He hopes to visit all the partners this year and assured them that his lines of communication were always open to them.

The NRCS Partner of the Year Award 2009 was presented to Payne Ranch, Inc. in Highlands County. The Payne family has donated 482 acres for a permanent easement for WRP which is valued at \$2.8M. Mr. C.M. Payne and son accepted the award which was presented by Mr. Suarez.

Carlos Suarez and Jeffrey Woods, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs presented WRP Ranking Team Jackets and Hats to employees of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife and to the Florida Fish Wildlife Conservation Commission for their contributions to the WRP program during FY 2009.

The first presentation was made by Denise Tennessee, Agriculture Program Coordinator, from the EPA in Atlanta. She gave an overview of three programs that she is currently working on. The first program is the Perdue Clean Waters Environmental Initiative. The EPA will work with Perdue to provide training and environmental assessments to producers, establish a producer recognition program and jointly conduct an annual evaluation of the program. Perdue will also implement a deviation notification process that enables producers to correct problems. The second program supports the development of sustainable, local food systems to improve inner-city residents access to healthy foods that includes production, processing, distribution, consumption and recycling. This project is targeted to several communities in the Southeast. The third program is the National Clean Diesel Funding Assistance Program. This program issues competitive grants to fund implementation of EPA or CARB verified and certified diesel emission reduction technologies. Miami-Dade County received a \$2M grant this year from this program.

Ron Howard, NRCS State Easement Program Specialist made a presentation of NRCS easement programs. The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is a voluntary program that provides technical and financial assistance to eligible landowners to address wetland, wildlife habitats, soil, water, and related natural resource concerns on private lands in an environmentally beneficial and cost effective manner. In FY 2009 thirteen projects were

enrolled in the WRP that included 12,280 acres at a cost of \$76,000,000, in FA funds (all are permanent easements). The Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) provides matching funds to conservation partners to acquire conservation easements on working farms or property with historical significance. In FY 2009 two projects were completed that included 165 acres for \$1,470,000, in FA funds. The Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) is a voluntary program offering landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance grasslands on their property. In FY 2009 one project was completed that included 640 acres for \$3,200,000, in FA funds. Two sub-committees were formed to review and comment on the easement programs ranking sheets and valuation methodology for the new ranking sheet. Ron reviewed the Draft Ranking Sheet which was attached to the meeting notice. Please send comments to Ron and/or Jeffrey Woods by November 30, 2009. The WRP Team wants to give consideration for priority areas in the state not just the Everglades. The policy should be reviewed before adding a page on considerations.

Mr. Howard stated that units of governments are not eligible to participate in WRP under the 2008 Farm Bill. The only way WMDs can acquire the land is to purchase it from the landowner after restoration is completed. Policy states that restoration must be completed before selling land and the landowner will be responsible if the restoration is not complete. There is a twenty percent reduction for WRP easement compensation value when land is used for grazing, and it must be compatible with the WRP management plan. Better policy needs to be written on easement deeds, how they are received and how to compensate landowner. This policy needs to be sent out earlier before the end of the fiscal year.

WREP Mississippi Valley River Basin is receiving \$50,000,000 this fiscal year and it will be distributed through NRCS. No guidance has been received on how the money will be spent on each project or how much each state will receive in the process.

Working Agricultural Lands Program has two major changes in FY 2010. The first is how to allocate funds; it must be land use/agriculture operation type based and transparent. The second is after the allocation/subaccount methodology and procedures are developed they must be concurred on by the State Conservationist and the Regional Conservationist. Katura Wright discussed how the ranking tool has changed by comparing nursery against nursery and then by area. Questions and comments were entertained from the committee members regarding the EQIP allocations/subaccounts and ranking templates. Ken Morgan stated that there are no changes in WHIP and CSP for FY 2010. Ranking template will be revised. CSP is changing to Conservation Stewardship Program and sign-ups will be taken the way they are described on FSA's books.

Andrew Walmsley of the Florida Farm Bureau Federation and Casey Welch of Florida Citrus Mutual made a presentation on the HLB Greening for Citrus. This is a disease that kills citrus trees and manifests itself in abandoned groves. So far it has spread to over thirty-three counties. Funds are needed to assist abandoned groves owners, possible EQIP dollars, to combat this disease. They will work on grants with the citrus working

groups. Citrus provides 76,000 jobs and is a \$9,000,000,000 industry in Florida. Currently there are 140,000 acres of abandoned groves in the state. Their next step is to define abandoned groves and figure the cost per acre.

Dr. Katherine Milla from Florida A&M University gave a presentation on enhancing NASA's COAST On-line Application for Agricultural BMP Decision Support.

David Still from the Suwannee River Partnership gave an update on the Suwannee-Santa Fe Water Supply and Springs. He stated that SRWMD has the highest concentration of freshwater in Florida with 252 known springs which can account for 72% of Suwannee Flow. There are several serious water resource issues that include water quality, and water supply. Mr. Still believes that the best way to resolve these threats is for NRCS to continue its partnership with Suwannee River Partnership and the Ichetucknee Partnership using best management practices. Carlos Suarez welcomed input from the SRWMD on developing the EQIP ranking criteria for springsheds in FY 2010.

Tony Grossman from Florida Department of Forestry made the next presentation on the Longleaf Pine Landowner Initiative and the status of the Florida State Wide Forestry Assessment. The Longleaf Pine ecosystem restoration received stimulus funds for landowners. Tree planting is at a twenty year low. They are looking into planting methods on restoration projects that reduce extra fuel supply and danger of fire. The State Assessment and Response Plan have seven key issues: fire, non-nature, climate change, longleaf pine ecosystems, water quality, water quantity, and brush management. Drafts will be sent out to partners for comments and a meeting will be held in mid-January. The assessment must be completed by June 18, 2010.

A brief discussion was held on bio-fuels and the Biomass Crop Assistance Program (BCAP) administered by FSA. To date, 12 facilities have been approved in Florida for BCAP, and the next step is working with the producers.

Carlos thanked everyone for their attendance, and again reminded the committee members and partners that NRCS is open to and appreciates the input they provide in deliverance of the Farm Bill conservation programs in Florida. The meeting adjourned.