

**Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)
Utah State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) Meeting Notes
February 5, 2013 • 9 am – 12:30 pm
125 S. State St., Salt Lake City, Utah
Conducted via Video Teleconference to Price,
Richfield, and Ogden, Utah and also Phone Conference**

Participants:

Salt Lake City

Dave Whittekiend, USFS
Betsy Herrmann, USFWS
Janet Valle, USFS
Carl Adams, UDEQ/DWQ
Daniel Gunnell, UACD
Thayne Mickelson, UDAF/UCC
Jim Bowcutt, UDEQ/DWQ
Troy Forrest, UDAF/GIP
Arthur Douglas, FSA
Geoff McNaughton, UDNR
Lori Jones, FSA
Michele Devaney, NRCS
Dave Brown, NRCS
Pedro Ramos, NRCS
Elise Boeke, NRCS
Casey Burns, NRCS
Niels Hansen, NRCS
David Hanson, NRCS
Gary McRae, NRCS
Ron Francis, NRCS
Jason Roper, NRCS
Travis James, NRCS
Mike Domeier, NRCS
Jeff Williams, NRCS

Ogden

Jake Powell, UACD
Karl Fleming, USFWS
Hannah Freeze, UACD
Craig McKnight, NRCS

Danny McBride, NRCS
Don Ashby, NRCS
Patti Barney, NRCS
Aaron Dalling, NRCS

Price

Wayne Greenhalgh, NRCS

Richfield

Mack Morrell, Fremont River CD
Dean Chappell, Fremont River CD
Michael Larson, Sanpete CD
Boyd Miller, Sevier County CD
Sarah Shaugnessy, FFSL
Tracy Balch, UACD
Daryl Noyes, UACD
David Pace, UACD
Tyce Palmer, UACD
Wade Ingram, NRCS
Brian Miller, NRCS
Kevin Williams, NRCS
Lee Woolsey, NRCS
Dan Curtis, NRCS
Jeremiah Armstrong, NRCS
Travis Thomason, NRCS

Via Phone

Matt Phillippi, NRCS
Benjamin Hudson, NRCS
Ed Bench

Welcome and Introductions - Michele Devaney, NRCS

Michele Devaney welcomed everyone. Participants at the NRCS office in Salt Lake City introduced themselves.

Sage Grouse Update - Dave Brown, NRCS

Dave Brown welcomed everyone to the meeting and discussed the use of new video teleconference technology to conduct STAC meetings. He discussed how to integrate NRCS's Sage Grouse Initiative with other funding sources in Utah. He stated that NRCS Utah funding for sage-grouse doubled from last year, to \$2.5 million for fiscal year 2013. NRCS has had a lot of interest and good sign ups for this initiative. Dave said that the governor's office has organized the development of a Utah Sage Grouse Management Plan which is going through some fine tuning before the Governor releases it to the public. The plan addresses state, private, public lands, etc. and designates a coordination team lead by Alan Clark that will include NRCS. Dave discussed how pursuing the low-hanging fruit, such as improved habitat through pinion juniper removal and marking critical fences, will be most effective to coordinate with past efforts. He added that while conifer removal may be a high priority practice, other available practices include prescribed grazing, range seeding, and other grazing support practices such as water developments and fencing. He further stated that all of these management tools are available options under the current NRCS EQIP Sage Grouse Initiative.

Dave then explained that national level officials with NRCS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service USFWS are discussing Certainty for landowners if sage-grouse becomes listed as an endangered species. He said that Certainty is an opportunity for a rancher/landowner to develop a NRCS approved conservation plan and then implement that conservation plan without any taking of land for sage grouse or other wildlife.

David Hanson asked if NRCS leadership can be present at upcoming conservation district zone meetings to touch on Certainty and address landowner concerns. The greatest concern is that landowners do not want anyone to know, never mind make it public knowledge by entering into a NRCS contract, that there are sage grouse on their property.

Dave Brown stated that this issue can definitely be addressed at upcoming meetings and that everyone needs to be prepared in the event that sage-grouse is listed as endangered.

Mack Morrell with the Fremont River Conservation District stated that he recently attended a meeting where a sage-grouse ranking sheet was presented. He said he is concerned that the ranking sheet doesn't address predation of red fox. Can the ranking be changed from a two to a four?

Elise Boeke with NRCS stated that NRCS is aware of some issues in the ranking and has modified the ranking sheet and threats checklist to hopefully adequately reflect threats such as predation.

NRCS Statewide Local work Group Kickoff for 2014 - Pedro Ramos, NRCS

Pedro Ramos introduced the locally-led conservation concept and funding proposals for 2014 NRCS Farm Bill programs. He presented and referred to a flyer outlining the proposals that local work groups will generate and submit to NRCS. These proposals will then form Utah's budget request to national headquarters. The first part of the budget proposals will be general funding requests for Utah NRCS programs. He stated that there is a template on the flyer that can be used for proposals. The template also asks for a ranking for each program.

A STAC member asked which counties will be eligible for the National Water Quality Initiative. Pedro responded that NRCS will put funding for this initiative where the State Division of Water Quality is focusing their efforts and funding. Jim Bowcutt with the State Division of Water Quality stated that they are now focusing on the Wasatch Front. Pedro stated that thus NRCS funding would be concentrated in the NRCS South Bonneville Team.

The second part of the budget proposals is the strategic funding proposals which will be ranked by a subcommittee of the STAC following the May 1, 2013 deadline. He stated that there is \$500 million for funding strategic proposals in fiscal year 2014. He stressed that just like the general funding request, the strategic proposals should be submitted by local work group teams.

A STAC member asked if Pedro could provide an example of a strategic proposal. Pedro said that one example would be an area where there is a lot of property in the Conservation Reserve Program that will soon be nearing the end of the contract. In this case the local work group needs to make sure that the property can produce a crop. The proposal could include fencing, water development, no-till, etc.

A STAC member asked if a strategic funding proposal could be a general watershed project. Pedro replied that it could be, but that the project needs to be focused.

A STAC member asked what the difference is between submitting a general funding request for the National Water Quality Initiative and submitting a strategic funding proposal for a watershed project. Pedro responded that a strategic funding proposal for a watershed project could be submitted in addition to a general funding request for the National Water Quality Initiative.

A STAC member asked how funding would work for a watershed project in which the participants are not all lined up in one year, but will be lined up in three years time. Pedro said that these projects could be funded and to include a three year plan as part of the strategic funding proposal.

A STAC member asked if the \$500,000 is implementation funding or technical assistance funding. Pedro replied that it is implementation money.

Travis Thomason with NRCS clarified the local work group funding proposal process. Local work groups will convene on a team basis where they will revisit short-term plans, long-term plans, and past issues/items. The work groups will submit two proposals: (1) a general funding proposal with funding requests and rankings for all NRCS Utah fund pools; and (2) any strategic funding proposals for specific projects in their area. The work groups should decide on high priority areas/projects to submit for funding. Pedro stated that there is no requirement to submit strategic funding proposals. If a work group does not have any projects that are ready to be funded, then perhaps they should start planning to submit a proposal for fiscal year 2015 instead of fiscal year 2014.

A STAC member asked if NRCS will make a multi-year commitment if a multi-year strategic funding proposal is selected. Pedro responded that yes, in year one funding will be committed and in years two and three additional aspects of the project will be added along with funding.

David Hanson asked how work groups are expected to not pad their funding requests. Pedro replied that

UACD Zone Coordinators should be examining numbers and be realistic about the work and resources involved and the level of interest from producers.

Thayne Mickelson with UACD asked if in a typical year NRCS uses all the obligated money or is money sent back to Washington. Pedro said that in most years all the obligated money is used. He said that however, there are times, as in the case with salinity funding last year, when deadlines pre-empt project funding.

A STAC member asked what kind of outreach can be provided to customers and potential customers to bring additional dollars to Utah. Dave Brown responded that the hope is that local work groups use partners to help conduct outreach. Partners should discuss together critical natural resource concerns and landowner involvement, etc. They can focus on general areas and programs first and then conduct targeted outreach by using producers that promote involvement with NRCS. Participation will only come with buy in from farmers and ranchers. He stressed that funding we have is for implementation and that there is very little NRCS funding, or funding from other sources, for planning.

A STAC member asked what the deadline is for submitting funding proposals. Pedro replied that it is May 1, 2013.

A STAC member asked if there were any statewide pools in fiscal year 2014. Pedro said that landscape initiative pools will be statewide. This funding is not permitted to be used at any lower level.

A STAC member asked that if a work group requests \$1 million for one project, does it mean they will receive no money for other projects. Pedro responded that if a work group doesn't submit a request for a particular fund pool then there will be no money in that fund pool.

A STAC member asked about an instance in which a work group does not submit a request for energy funds and after May 1st a producer submits an application for an energy audit. Will funding for that application be available? Pedro replied that funding requests must align with proposal requests. If energy funds are requested by the work group in the proposal, but no energy applications are submitted, then funds will be pulled back. If energy funds are not requested by the work group in the proposal but are requested after May 1, there will be no funds for it.

A STAC member asked if Animal Feeding Operations (AFO) were intentionally missing from the general funding proposal template. Pedro said that it may have been missed. He stated that if there are any funds pools that are not on the template, then a work group can add it under "Other".

Rate Caps for NRCS Easements - Jeff Williams, NRCS

Jeff Williams discussed the geographic area rate caps for the NRCS Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) and Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP). He explained that having a pre-determined cap on the maximum dollars that can be offered per acre for certain regions of the state will allow NRCS employees to be more responsive when a landowner expresses interest in establishing an easement and wonders how much will be received. He said that in the past rate caps were determined by individual appraisal, but that the Fiscal Year 2013 rates are based on a Utah Area Wide Market Analysis prepared by a contracted, professional appraiser. Jeff said that he sent the rate caps out via email to STAC members in November. He further explained that there are five different regions across the state and

each has a different rate cap for WRP and GRP. The range for WRP is \$2,313 - \$4,717 per acre and the range for GRP is \$345 - \$802 per acre.

Thayne Mickelson asked what actually determines the rate and why is the rate for WRP significantly higher than the rate for GRP. Jeff responded that the rates were determined by the market analysis which is based on recent sales throughout the state. The rate for WRP is higher than for GRP because a landowner can still graze the property under the GRP program, thereby continuing to earn income from the land. Grazing, however, is not allowed on property in the WRP. Thayne said that considering the difference in values across the state for grazing lands, there is no real incentive to participate in these programs.

A STAC member asked given the value of the land how the rate cap was determined, what percentage was used? Jeff said that it depended on the region rate, but generally between 75 – 85 percent of the market value for both.

Locally Important Soil Designations and Eligibility for the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) - Jeff Williams and Mike Domeier, NRCS

Jeff discussed prime, unique, and statewide soil designations and what the designations mean for FRPP program eligibility. He further explained the basic land eligibility requirements for FRPP: the land must be compliant with the Highly Erodible Land provisions and at least 50 percent of the soils must be of prime, unique, or statewide importance. Jeff stated that the FRPP pays 50 percent of fair market value for the easement.

Jeff then discussed how local jurisdictions can create their own soil designations. Rich County conducted a public process and created designations through meetings, letters, maps, etc. The process resulted in soil designations such as productivity, adequate water, etc. Jeff encouraged other local groups to undertake a similar process of soil designations in order to increase the pool of eligible land for easement programs. Jeff noted that many of the lands where Utah fruit producers are located could be considered soils of local importance and should be designated as so.

Mike Domeier, NRCS State Soil Scientist, provided a summary of important farmlands. During the 1970s and 1980s there was a growing interest in important farmlands and soil designation legislation was adopted. Mike explained the designations of locally important farmland, state important farmland, unique farmlands, and prime farmlands. He reiterated Jeff's encouragement for local committees to adopt their own soil designations. He stated that San Juan County is currently in the process and that Summit and Wasatch Counties have expressed interest. Mike explained that all local entities must be included when conducting local designations. He said that there are some key areas throughout the state such as orchards and high PH soils that are important locally and would benefit from being included in the soil designations. He further stated that there are some instances such as vegetable farms that have beneficially altered the soil and should be re-designated.

A STAC member asked who undertakes the soil designation process. Who actually approves the designations? Mike responded that the state legislation does not specify who approves soil designations, but all major stakeholders need to be involved. FRPP regulations state that soil designation documentation be included in the FRPP application.

Travis James with NRCS said that other states are widely using FRPP and asked what the impediment for using FRPP is in Utah. Jeff stated that in his opinion the impediment is a lack of matching funds and possibly a lack of program awareness. Other states have organizations and other mechanisms to provide matching funds.

Demonstration of the Utah Division of Water Quality (DWQ) Beneficial Uses and Assessment Interactive Map – Carl Adams, Utah DWQ

Carl Adams provided the website (<http://wq/deq/utah.gov>) for the DWQ's new interactive water quality assessment map. He said that the online map allows the public and DWQ partners to view the designated beneficial uses of streams and lakes and assessed water quality conditions of all surface waters (i.e. streams, rivers, lakes, wetlands) in Utah. The map does not include groundwater. DWQ hopes the map will help increase public awareness of local water quality conditions and provide information regarding areas of concern. Carl encouraged everyone to play with the map and click all the links and options. He said it is very user friendly and thanked the Utah Automated Geographic Reference Center for helping create the site.

Carl demonstrated how to use the search engine to locate a specific stream and the assessment information available regarding that stream, such as beneficial uses, TMDL information, watershed management unit, etc. He explained that the assessment information for surface waters is submitted to the EPA every two years. The latest approved EPA listings are included on the map. Carl said that there is also an option to print a .pdf of the map you are viewing. He asked that you send any suggestion for improvements to the map directly to him via email at carladams@utah.gov.

A STAC member asked from DWQ's standpoint, is it more effective to invest the resources to keep a stream off the 303d list or to have it listed to obtain the funding to bring an impaired stream back to better water quality. Carl responded that it is always better to work to keep a stream off the 303d list.

STAC Input and Next Meeting Date – Michele Devaney, NRCS

Michele asked if there was any issue or topic that was not addressed during the meeting that a STAC member would like to discuss. There was no reply. She then explained that the next meeting would be in May so the local work group funding proposals could be presented to and reviewed by the STAC. She asked if there were any major event conflicts for STAC members in May and a STAC member responded that there is a salinity forum on May 13th - May 17th.

Dave Brown encouraged everyone to participate in local work groups; to bring partners together to work on resource concerns, projects, etc. The general funding requests and strategic funding proposals will be brought back to the STAC for review in May. He stated that fiscal year 2013 is the last year everyone will be working under the current farm bill. Congress is now working on the new farm bill and this local work group process is helping NRCS Utah work on the fiscal year 2014 budget request. Dave thanked everyone for participating in the meeting. He apologized for the difficulties with the video teleconference technology and asked people to send him feedback regarding the use of the technology.

NEXT MEETING DATE: May 2013, the exact date, time, and location is to-be-determined.