

State Technical Committee Meeting
June 1, 2010
Meeting Minutes

Denise Coleman, PA NRCS State Conservationist, welcomed all and introduced herself. Ms. Coleman stated: “we have a diverse state with a lot of people to reach. We are challenged by the 2008 Farm Bill to reach out to all. Today we will discuss the Chesapeake Bay executive order strategy, which shows the reach of all there is to do (working with streams, wetlands, etc). This is a large task to work on nation’s private lands.”

Introductions by all: J. Speicher, Lanc. Poured Walls; G. Smith, NRCS; K. O’Neill, CBF; S. Hightower, NRCS; J. Malot, NRCS; G. Gromicko, EA Eng; D. Heicher, SRBC; B. Erikson, Nat’l WTF; B. Isaacs, NRCS; M. Dubin, U. of MD; C. Johnson, NRCS; H. Latshaw, NRCS; K. Sykes, USDA FS; M. Pechart, PDA; M. Genchur, Rural Water Assoc.; N. Lathbury, Centre Co. Govt; J. Weld, PSU; P. Kleinman, USDA ARS; E. Rajotte, PSU; D. Bittinger, M. Pyle, PCO; M. Muir, GLCI; J. Courtney, GLCI; B. Frantz, NRCS; D. Coleman, NRCS; R. Dale, Farmland Enviro.; B. Dersham, US F&W; Mark Roberts, US F&W; M. Pruss, Game Comm.; S. Carney, PA F&B; K. Brown, SCC; S. Marquart, PACD; D. Goodlander, SCC; J. Myers, PA No-Till; C. Fetzner, FSA; K. Saacke-Blunk, PSU; S. McDowell, EPA; F. Suffian, EPA; H. Zygmunt, EPA; S. Friedman, EDF; H. Jones, NRCS; S. Burky, NRCS; M. Goodson, NRCS.

Pete Kleinman, USDA ARS, presentation on P-Saturation/P-Index:

- NRCS 590 Options: 1. Soil threshold – agronomic; 2. Soil threshold – agronomic; 3.
- P-based management in the USA – P index & soil P threshold.
- National Issues: variability – state P-index ratings and recommendations range widely, response is not an indication of failing, need to shift systems and move farming systems; accuracy – poor representation of some conditions; driving concern – some p-indices are too lenient, manure is being applied to soils that should not receive more manure; uniform standard – NRCS (HQ) wants one uniform approach to p-based management, HQ is working to devise a revised set of standards for 590 practices.
- Chesapeake Bay Guidance for Federal Land Management – 1. Replace P-index with soil environmental threshold (for federal lands and expect that states will look to guidance for their recommendations; comply or adopt), >20% PSAT, no added P, <20% PSAT, up to N-basis, if PSAT is greater, P-basis; 2. Need other tools to deal with hydrology, including re-implementing P index.
- P-Index as Too Permissive; Business as Usual: Watershed Stewardship report: waterstewardshipinc.com, treats P-Index as ‘conventional’ management; 37M lbs P are applied in excess of crop requirement in 11 CB WS counties with highest animal densities (excessive application of manure in soils)
- P-Index – Identified Critical Source Areas – slide shows targeting of P management that contribute to WS P. The PA P-Index, Version 2 shows different variables. P-Index takes sources (soil P, manure, fertilizer) and compares them to transport sources (runoff, erosion, leaching) – gives site rating and management recommendation (interpretation of rating).

- Soil P alone does not represent P Loss potential – slide shows runoff P and soil test P. Justifies management of water quality on basis of soil runoff alone. When applying manure phosphorous, shows amount of P in soil and amount in runoff disappears.
- Testing the PA P Index: P index takes recently applied manure and shows value.
- Soil P Sorption saturation = Soil P Saturation: perceived as ‘environmental’ indicator; strongly correlated with soils test P, but more consistent across multiple soils; tied to particulate-bound P loss (erosion) potential; tied to dissolved P loss potential but only when soil is primary control of P loss. As soil becomes more saturated it becomes leakier. P saturation increases as you go from one to the other and more P is coming off.
- Soil P Saturation Limits: 1. only an indicator of source and not even of all sources (potential as a P index component); 2. no consistent definition, including in Chesapeake federal lands guidance; 3. unintended consequences, readily reversed by tillage (can be easily manipulated).
- Soil P Saturation – soil indicator only: soil shows runoff monitoring from 2002 – 2004.
- Soil P saturation – no consistent definition: Chesapeake Bay federal land guidance leaves PSAT measurement to states, only defines 20% limit.
- Soil P Saturation – manipulated by tillage/sampling depth: slide shows phosphorous-overloaded soils, representing deep plowing.
- Soil P Test Summary: slide shows hot spots in watershed, where manure needs to be exported (Maryland). Chester PA farmers would like to import poultry litter but cannot for economic and other reasons.
- 2010 Manure Expo, July 15, Rock Springs (APD Fairgrounds).

Denise Coleman: NRCS has not made any decisions at the national level. Guidance is for federal lands only at this time and not extended to private lands.

Karl Brown: this is not a mandated regulatory document but serves as advice and guidance, recommendations for all ag lands, not just federal lands.

Hank Zygmunt: EPA has responded to all comments on this issue. States 502 guidance is technical guidance, but there is intent to look at next generation tools and this is why EPA recommends from a technical guidance document utilization of PSAT policy. There is concern about steady buildup of P soils, seeing nutrients increasing.

KB: PA has worked hard to come up with an index that considered all the aspects, looking historically at what was done, judgments, etc.

HZ: If P-indices are modified in the future, EPA will modify technical guidance. Waiting to see how NRCS and Sara 17 group work together.

Chesapeake Bay Issues/Executive Order – Denise Coleman (handout):

- Accelerate on-ground and in-water efforts, establishing 2-year milestones. PA will work with other states to reach these two-year milestones. It is difficult to measure and report on existing conservation practices that may not be cost-shared to our financial programs.
- Looks at water quality, habitat recovery and fish and wildlife conservation.
- NRCS targets resources and looks at comprehensive approaches to address water quality and ecosystem.
- Key strategies: restoring clean water (implement TMDL, and more), recovering habitat (restore 30,000 acres of title and non-title acres), sustaining fish and wildlife (bay-wide restoration strategy), conserving land and increasing public access.

- Outcomes of initiatives: expanding citizen stewardship, developing environmental markets, responding to climate change, and strengthening science.

Easement Programs:

Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP)

- Most successful in terms of funds obligated and easements enrolled
- Initial \$4M, requested and received \$2M.
- Obligated just over \$6M in PA. Some funding left and asked some entities to put together proposals to get funding for this year, and will request another portion of funding from HQ.
- Sept 1 is the deadline for obligating funding for this year.
- Have backlog of appraisals from 2007 and 2008. Have review appraiser and have paid about 35 of the easements from 2007 and 2008.
- Match requirement – entity must have or show at least 50% of fair market value of easement to match NRCS.

Wetland Reserve Program (WRP)

- Working on outreach, getting landowners interested.
- Have \$3.2M to spend before Sept 1.
- Created teams in PA for West, NE and SE that will work specifically on WRP implemented in last two weeks – specialists to work on these transactions on daily basis; field people are not taken away from day to day activities and technical assistance.
- Easements on wetlands and restoration projects.
- No match requirement – permanent easement receives 100% of the geographic area rate cap (GARC) rate, 30-year easement gets 75% of GARC rate.
- Held an outreach meeting last week to get more participation.
- Increased funding but application rate stayed same as last year.

Kristen Saacke-Blunk – in the NW area people interested but had difficulty with applications and accessing programs.

Bog Turtle Initiative

- Bonnie Dersham leading and new employee working with NRCS and Fish & Wildlife.
- Targets bog turtle habitat with specific criteria and types of soils.

Comment: hurdle is going to county office to complete applications. Could NRCS employees go to landowner with remote access? Yes – is possible, although compliance forms should be completed at FSA office.

Suggestion: Fish & Boat Commission has access easement coordinator (Jackie Kramer) and has revenues to contribute – recommend meeting between NRCS and this coordinator.

Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)

- Targets forested land in 12 counties in PA, for Indiana bat and Indiana bat habitat (federal endangered species). Forests with specific species of trees where bats roost.
- Will not use GARC rates, but appraisals for each applicant (more time consuming).

- Options are 30-year (75%), permanent (100%), and a 10-year restoration (50% of practice) (practices includes, developing snags, fencing, gated opening to caves or mines, tree plantings, etc).
- Have small amount of funding to obligate.

Grassland Reserve Program (GRP)

- Targets pasture and hayland easements, permanent or rental (10, 15, 20-year contract).
- Habitat requirements for ground nesting birds. Set aside 10 acres of enrolled acreage that would not be mowed or harvested between April and August, or could graze land.
- Had six easement applications and have obligated \$1.2M for three easements. Had \$21,000 for rental contracts obligated this year in several counties throughout the state.

2011 Program Direction:

National ranking criteria (handout):

- Ranking of applications -- CSP has own procedure, but other AMA, EQIP, WHIP, Chesapeake Bay have other procedure. State ranking system changed depending on category.
- National and local questions at 25% of points. Local – started at county level, then on to district/team level. For 2011 will have team level.
- At state level focused on conservation plan, existing CNMP plan. To see which landowners have done tree planting on their own to get ready. Questions at different levels should be different.

Q: If there are irrelevant questions to state or local could that be knocked out?

A: No – would get no points for that. Local – if in county X use this question – cannot get more points than possible. Answer right question per county. Scoring goes with the money (handout on fund categories).

- Ranking is secondary to what is decided to fund. In 2010 we started off with 67 county allocations, maybe some could be lumped together. If kept at 67 counties could have 67 different ranking systems.
- Instead of putting funds out to county level, grouped in 3 or 4, reducing fund categories and ranking systems. Don't think we will have as many stand-alone cases.

Denise C: it becomes too complex when splitting up funding categories to manage the money. By still using local approach, but having counties come together, makes delivery easier and streamlined. This is supported by the National office to keep it streamlined with less variation at the county level.

Hathaway Jones: some entities suggested having more ranking points added for farms already preserved.

Barry Frantz: some did this at local level already. Some don't even have that option, not the same chance for the points. Barry continued with payment schedule (handout) -- what we can offer participant (flat rate schedule). Calculated about 75% of what we think is average cost to accomplish, and added a number of practices since last year (Air Quality, feed management, etc).

- New in 2010 are conservation activity plans, and added the ag energy management plan. Do not need to have the plan to get EQIP contract. Have had interest in getting consultant to do these.

Q: when is a forest management plan required?

A: not required for CSP, although will get more points; in EQIP if funded in forest management must have plan. The Farm Bill is mandating that you need plan for EQIP.

- Have categories, cost list, ranking done by Oct 1, which means local input by the end of July.
- Higher payment rates are offered to historically under-served.
- The Chesapeake Bay executive order and statewide fund categories ensure we are getting this right. If taking on more, everyone gets a smaller piece or cuts out something everyone may be applying for.

Q: Why aren't Chesapeake Bay practices listed on funding codes?

A: Tried last year and did not get much interest. Must decide to what extent assistance would be provided. 2011 would be peak year of allocations, could get more money to fund projects specified in executive order, but have to find landowners who will do this at rate offered and find engineering help to get it done.

Q: does NRCS pay for or assist in the conservation plan, ag E&S plans, nutrient management plans? Need to find a constructive way to get this done.

A: not directly. CNMP plan includes the conservation plan. No way to fund conservation plan development. Could be something to pursue and possibly look at further in 2011.

Funding (handout FY 2008-2009 funding):

- Offering most of these things but not giving extra emphasis is on one over the other. If having interest or comments let Barry know this month.

Q: does PA NRCS get with other states to have funding similar?

A: got together on this last year, specifically for Bay state. Some funding items are very similar. We could be funding things that are not targeted in the bay – looking for comments on this.

Proposing (for 2011) to re-offer funding for core practices in the CB watershed.

Q: when tracking 2010 projects are you tracking by priority in general or by high/low?

A: more by ranking, county-based. Then put in priority/non-priority ranking pool.

Q: even though funding across watersheds, there is a priority to direct to specific bay counties?

A: yes – priority in specific counties. Hired more soil conservationists and technicians to assist in these areas.

Q: VA showed what was obligated and what back-log was. Consider back-log before expanding areas.

A: This would give flexibility. If receive applications that could be funded. Don't anticipate we will put big percentage of money there. A mix of all practices (approx 6000 total to be installed – about 90% done with contracting).

Q: can we re-look at pasture fencing grazing systems (interior/exterior)? Interpretation of federal policy seems to be different for different states.

A: We have not been funding fence if lane is from township road to farmstead (fence on either side). And targeted to stream fencing, keeping animal out of woods, etc., we will review again. Trying to stay in national policy on boundary fencing.

Q: Has anyone talked about Practice 106 (forest management plan) at all?

A. Have been talking with the Bureau of Forestry on forest management plan. Still have the Forest Stewardship Plan and higher level management plans. Will be talking about this in detail -- what kind of plan this is.

Q: Grazing specialists build plan -- could someone get back explaining rotational grazing, to see if these are up and running?

A: don't have automatic follow-up with specialists, could require allocating funds for someone else to help. Will look into this.

Air Quality

- Had \$3.1M targeting for specific counties on map (handout).

CSP (handout)

- Signup ends June 11.
- Handout shows what we are funding, not dollars per unit. Offer funding on conservation cover, per acre funding.

Comment: low priority, crop growers are limited by honey bee situation. The strength of hives has gone down. Benefits for PA fruit growers' is small farms close to wooded acres. Working to determine what bees come to what plants. There are up to 450 species of bees in PA.

Doug Goodlander: could there be an action from group/statement in relation to Dr. Kleinman's presentation that we support initiative that P-index is better overall tool to get job done – hits myriad of issues:

Denise: this puts NRCS between a rock and hard place. Advised that there be open forum and you all be given the info and folks can act on their own as they deem appropriate. NRCS Chief has not made decision on this issue and is receptive to comments; suggest writing to him expressing concerns and comments.

Karl B. encouraged -- Chief has not had opportunity to hear this directly from ARS.