

WRP Subcommittee Meeting

August 2, 2012

Present were Randy Epperson, Brad Soncksen, Ritch Nelson, Alex Daniels, Kirk Schroeder, Andy Bishop, Barth Crouch, Jeremy Bowers, Ted LaGrange and Greg Reisdorff.

Brad opened the meeting.

Fiscal Year 2012 Program Updates

Randy presented the subcommittee with the WRP Program updates.

We are gearing up for a new Farm Bill and it appears that the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) will remain a stand alone program while the Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP) and Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) may be combined. Another update that may occur with the new Farm Bill is changing the seven year ownership to two years. Nebraska has not had any issues with the seven year ownership, most of the waivers were approved. We have had six to eight waivers per year.

A WRP, Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP), and Emergency Watershed Program (EWP) Floodplain Easement Program map was provided to the subcommittee:

- Total Easements/Agreement Acres = 97,500
- Total Easement/Agreement Numbers = 702

The success of this program is a tribute to our partners for all their excellent support in helping to get land into the easement programs. The program has been budget driven. For Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 we were cut back quite a bit, as well as FY 2012. The funds have been steadily going down. The bottom line is how many acres can we enroll? The budget will be tighter in the future. During 2009 we were one of the first states to have Reserve Rights Pilot (RRP) projects and 30 year Contracts with Tribes. We are now looking at projects with a more critical eye because of the tighter budget.

During FY 2012 we were successful with three WREP projects in Nebraska. There were only 17 projects approved nationwide. Thanks to the Rainwater Basin (RWB) for providing such good projects:

- Easement/Agreement Acres = 185.8
- Easement/Agreement Numbers = 5
- Easement/Agreement Dollars = \$461,474

We were also a partner in the five state Missouri River WREP project. This project came about because of the flooding of the Missouri River in 2011:

- Easement/Agreement Acres = 337.1
- Easement/Agreement Numbers = 4
- Easement/Agreement Dollars = \$1,117,026

It was an adventure working with the five states. We were not as successful as we would have liked to have been. Not all of the applications were eligible for the program and some of the offers that were made were rejected by the landowner.

The 2010 RWB WREP project is now in Phase II. This is a three year project. A question was asked if there was funding to continue to Phase III. Plan on continuing like it is going to happen even though the Farm Bill is still up in the air.

The general WRP enrollment received about 40-45 applications. The following was provided via a map to the subcommittee:

- Easement/Agreement Acres = 3,796.2
- Easement/Agreement Numbers = 20
- Easement/Agreement Dollars = \$5,488,326

Some of the offers were rejected. The numbers are down from what they have been in the past. The above information includes the reserve right grazing projects in Holt and Rock Counties.

Easement Compensation for FY 2013

In the past we worked with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) to determine the Fair Market Value and Geographic Area Rate Caps based on land use. The last few years we have had to talk our national office into allowing us to continue without doing an area wide market analysis (AWMA). The new Farm Bill may not allow us to continue without doing an area wide market analysis. The UNL data is very good information and well accepted. This year we put some money aside to do the area wide market analysis. In the past we have not had anyone interested in doing this project, except for one bid for a quarter of a million dollars. Our national Share Point site shows a firm that did about 15 states and they are probably the company we will use. The contract will state that they will do this for four successive years. It will be set up by zones, identical to what UNL uses. We will basically use the same land uses as last year. Will it allow the riparian areas? We will provide guidance to the company, doing the area wide market analysis, to look at properties that are normally enrolled in the WRP program (mainly along the river not up in the hills). Would the riparian areas be added back in? In the past we were using the pasture rates, based on the county wide ag statistic. We will give guidance to the company to look at areas, including pasture land, that is commonly enrolled in WRP.

A question was asked about changing the way the state is split because of the concerns with land values from one county to the next. Do we compare rates across states lines? Yes. Would the bid winner look at the abnormalities? There are a lot of ways to split up the state. The bid we receive will be locked in for four years unless we amend the contract. The UNL uses National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) to determine the location and number of areas. Are the states around us using this process? Yes, Iowa has used the area wide market analysis process and their rates are higher.

Consensus was to use the eight zones in the state that we are currently using.

2012 Ranking Worksheet

The Ranking Worksheet was passed out to the subcommittee for review and comment. If you have any comments, please email to Brad or Jeremy. The Nebraska Game and Parks commission contacted their people for feedback and they are ok with the rankings, seems to be working fairly well. This year Randy and Ritch met with four of the seven wetland teams, in the field, to provide a level of consistency and guidance. Some of the meetings were with NRCS staff and some were with the whole B team. They discussed ranking factors, issues they had going on, computer training, restoration, etc. It was recommended that this type of training be conducted yearly and possibly SWAT training, as well.

A question was asked about an opportunity to add extra points for land that is adjacent to another WRP (key roundout). Could extra points (five or six) be added to the ranking worksheet for this situation? Since these types of wetland are small in size it may require a waiver to meet NRCS guidelines. Craig Derickson, Nebraska State Conservationist, can grant a waiver if the wetland to upland ratio is not high enough.

Andy brought up revisiting the prioritization of the Nebraska Wetland Complexes (page 7 of the ranking worksheet) scoring based on ecology regions. As a group we felt that the ranking helped to bring better easements into the program. The RWB had a couple of nice projects that came in late in the second round and both had land ownership issues, i.e., less than seven year ownership.

How do we get funds for playas? Is there an opportunity for a playa wetland complexes program for Nebraska? There are 200,000+ acres in the Ogallala Initiative. This issue has been discussed. We need to come up with programs that are compatible.

A request was made to have the Appendix B (Threatened or Endangered Species) map on page 10 updated. We could do an analysis of this and make it more current. Ritch will work with Kelly Klenke to update this map.

Easement management

A WRP Subcommittee meeting was held on July 18, 2012, to discuss the management of WRP easements. The individuals attending this meeting were a diverse group. The group reviewed two or three wetland complexes. We are now at the point where we can start to develop a draft guidance document. Ritch Nelson volunteered to take the lead on this. The WRP teams will review this document and provide input. The easement management issue is high on Craig Derickson's priority list. We currently have IDIQ to manage the easements, as well as landowner agreements and Compatible Use Agreements.

Drought

The Secretary made an announcement about streamlining haying or grazing because of the drought conditions this year. We have provided guidance to our partners. Compatible Use Agreements will be used to allow haying and grazing if it is beneficial to the easement. The process will be expedited this year because of the drought conditions. Ritch Nelson worked with Ted LaGrange (NE Game and Parks Commission) and Kenny Dinan (US Fish and Wildlife Service) to get a summary whereby we could assume that under certain conditions haying and grazing could be done, but with caveats. We wanted to be consistent with the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) guidance with some caveats added. The Compatible Use Agreements will be for one year or less.

The RBW and Nebraska Cattlemen are trying to match up people with grazing land and people who have the cows. This is a win-win situation for both groups. They currently have five individuals who will be spokespersons for this endeavor. The goal is to see cows back in the basin.

Contract Specialist

Andy Bishop has the clearance to hire/do an interagency agreement for a contract specialist. Randy submitted the request and received the approval for funding the interagency agreement, but our deadline for completing this project is short. All states are dealing with this same issue of not having someone available to do the contracting. Our obligation date is September 1, 2012. Ritch Nelson volunteered to take the lead on this.

Playa Lakes Presentation (PowerPoint)

Ann Bartuszevige and Alex gave a PowerPoint on the Playa Lakes. We have moved on to the second phase of planning. Our goal is to drive effective playa conservation. Nebraska is now talking about playa restoration. We identify clusters of playa (water fowl movement) and large isolated playas that provide connection between clusters. We are working with the RWB. We want to develop a tool consistent across the state and guide conservation the best way we can. Phase I – baseline prioritization – what playas are high value for conservation action.

A questionnaire will be/was sent out and needs to be returned by August 17, 2012. After that date, we will have a webinar and talk about the information submitted.

Haying and Grazing Grassed Waterways

The Nebraska State Technical Committee – Wildlife Subcommittee met on June 21, 2012 to discuss CRP emergency haying and grazing. CRP grassed waterways were sacred until yesterday with the Secretaries' announcement. During the June meeting they covered CP 25, 23, 27 and 28 but did not discuss grassed waterways. Incidental grazing is available with payment reduction – 10 percent this year.

Ritch asked the subcommittee if anyone had concerns about allowing haying and grazing of grassed waterways in Nebraska.

The subcommittee supports haying and grazing of grassed waterways.

Karen Kelty
Recorder