

EQIP/WHIP Subcommittee Meeting

July 19, 2012

Present were Brad Soncksen, Rich Torpin, Dave Griffith, Elbert Traylor, Buffalo B. McIntosh, Jan Windscheffel, Jared McJunkin, Scott Wessel, Bob Bettger, Dick Wiechman, Eric Zach, Kirk Schroeder, Mike Fritz, Lindsey Salestrom, Kent Zimmerman, Duane Hovorka, Dennis Adams, Marcia Trompke, and Ritch Nelson

Brad opened the meeting with introductions. He discussed the local working group recommendations. The recommendations were pretty straight forward and not a lot of changes from last year.

Rich Torpin – we just received \$1.6 million in EQIP funds last week, the numbers are ever changing. The numbers on the PowerPoint do not include this latest allotment of funds:

EQIP 2012 fund obligations:

General	\$25,263,860
AWEP	\$1,246,054
CCPI	\$214,596
9 th highest in the US	

Sixty percent of our money goes to livestock activities. This year we have been struggling to obligate funds to this level.

Initiatives for 2012

AFO		
	21	\$2,055,000
	175 CNMP	\$1,056,000
	Total	\$3,111,000

Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans (CNMP) have to be in place ahead of time.

NWQI formerly DEQ (319). This national program was based off Nebraska's program.

2012 National Water Quality Initiatives Projects
\$875,275

Conestoga Lake (Seward/Lancaster Counties) We were surprised that we did not have more application in this area.

Cottonwood Creek (Saunders County - \$300,000 was spent)

Club Creek (Jefferson County)

Big Indian Creek (Gage County)

There was a short timeframe to accept applications on these special initiatives.

NE Legacy		\$526,646 (funded every application that came in)
Forestry		\$445,126 (funded every application that came in)
Organic (Required)		\$90,000 (funded every application that came in)
Ogallala Special Initiative		\$4,212,216 (eight states in this initiative – goal to protect the Ogallala Aquifer)
High Tunnel	15	\$90,070

2012 CCPI Projects

- LRNRD Available Water Optimizing
- Gracie Creek Ecological Restoration (Prairie Chicken habitat in grazing)
- Shelterbelt Renovation (multi-state)
- Riparian Forest Buffer (multi-state)

2012 AWEP Projects

CNPPID
UBBNRD Ground Water Quality
LPNNRD
MRNRD
LRNRD AWEP Partnership

Ogallala Aq/Platte Recovery Perm Retirement of Irrigation
Ogallala Aq/Platte Recovery Temp Retirement of Irrigation
Ogallala Aq/Republication River Recovery/Permanent
Ogallala Aq/Republican River Recovery/Temporary

2012 Regional Projects (born and delivered in three weeks)

Missouri River Conservation Cover Special Initiatives

This Initiative covered the following state – SD, NE, IA, KS, MO

Cover Crops for Flood damaged cropland. This project was to stabilize sand deposits. Nebraska received \$50,000 in funds, with a quick turnaround time.

Recent additions include Initiatives for areas devastated by the drought and fires.

EQIP 2013

We are switching things up this year. The budget allocation process is evolving and the Chief wants us to allocate out dollars based on needs and opportunity. “To better align NRCS program resources with actual needs and opportunities in field offices to address state identified priority resource concerns.” In the past the Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) could develop their own ranking (national, state and local component).

EQIP 2013 Nebraska Priority Resource Concerns (in no particular order):

1. Soil Erosion from sheet, rill, ephemeral and wind, organic matter depletion.
2. Excess/insufficient water: Inefficient use of irrigation water on cropland.
3. Water quality degradation: Excess nutrients in surface and ground water on cropland.
4. Degraded plant conditions: Undesirable plant productivity and plant health.
5. Water quality degradation: Excess pathogens/chemicals from manure, biosolids, or compost.
6. Degraded plant condition: Excessive plant pest pressure, insects and invasive plants in pasture, rangeland and forest areas.
7. Habitat degradation: Inadequate habitat for fish and wildlife.
8. Livestock production limitation: Inadequate livestock shelter on range.

We will be tailoring the ranking to our resource concerns. The budget allocation nationally is based the on resource concern.

Certain resource concerns will be addressed in statewide fund pools. “State special initiatives in place in Fiscal Year 2012 will no longer be identified as distinct fund pools, however the resources priorities within these initiatives will now be incorporated into the appropriate priority resource concern.” We will not have initiative per se but the resource concerns fund pools will basically become the initiative.

A question was asked about beginning farmers and ranchers, would there be a separate pool of money? Yes. Would water management be competing with the livestock guys? No, the livestock will be competing statewide. This new process is a work in progress. We are trying to eliminate some of the fund pools, as we currently have over 300 pools. Each Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations will work with the state office to set up a limited resource or beginning farmers and ranchers pool. The District Conservationist will continue to set up LWG rankings.

Some of the funds were leveraged to get matching funds/grants. Wildlife habitat will have a fund code and priority tier 1 species within the legacy plan. If you had partner assistance this will bump up your application.

We can never guarantee funding. If the funds are set aside, it could be used with matching money. We had to go to the resource concern to align with the national budgeting process. We will still fund the same practices that we were funding before. We have goals (nationally) that we have to attach to the practices and estimate how much money for each practice we intend to allocate/obligate. The funds would be allocated into each pool based on our prediction of practices attached to a resource concern. The Local Working Groups gave recommendations that some of the practices need to be moved to different fund pool

The producer can apply in any available fund pool they want. NRCS will educate them on which fund pool would be best for them to sign up for. It may not be to their advantage to apply to each pool. There is an opportunity for the producer to apply in a couple of different pools. We have to take the application, determine if they are eligible. When the producer comes into the office, the staff will help determine the primary resource concern and determine the practices he/she would be eligible to apply for.

There was concern that the forestry practices could not compete with other practices. The forestry practice is one of the resource concerns and would rank out OK. For Fiscal Year 2013, we need all of our practices to be in one of the fund pools. Does not mean we can't have other fund pools, we want to keep them as small as possible. Historically underserved and beginning farmers/ranchers pools will be maintained on an area level. We have work to do to set up the fund pools correctly and get the practices in the right place.

Local Work Group Subcommittee Recommendations

During this meeting we will bring forward the information that is appropriate to this group from the Local Working Group Committees. We will bring forward your recommendations to Craig Derickson, the Nebraska State Conservationist.

Allow additional fund pools within the priority resource concerns. Local Working Groups feel single rankings increase ranking effectiveness, example, sprinkler vs. subsurface drip irrigation (SDI) vs. irrigation water.

Does the SDI (ex) get more points? That would be at the local ranking. LWG could establish the amount.

Marsha – we have more SDIs then we can fund. Subsurface drip irrigation is generally on smaller acres and change the efficiency by quite a bit. You pay about \$495 an acre. We can treat more acres with center pivots. We have allocated a certain number to the SDI to fund some and leave it mobile so it can be moved to another area if the SDI is not approved. It works well for us to divide the money within the NRD.

Rich – we have had more NRDs wanting a separate fund code.

Duane – is this the main one that the NRDs want. His concern is providing broad flexibility within the NRD without having too many fund codes. Rich – so far this has not been an issue.

Is the group OK with this? Yes.

Consider paying for old terrace removal in new upgraded systems.

This is the same issue across the state. It is a large expense to the producer to remove the old terrace. It costs as much as building the new system. Part of the cost of removing the old terrace is included in the payment. They want to have two payments – one to install and one to remove. Bottom line, they want another payment for removing the old system.

Subcommittee recommended:

Leave it as it is – no payment for remaining old terraces.

Consider paying for perimeter fencing on native grasslands to prevent conversion to cropland.

Ritch mentioned that we can pay for perimeter fence using EQIP funds if there is a change in land-use. An example is when CRP expires (previously cropland) and the producer decides to keep in grass and implement a grazing system. At the point that it expires from CRP, it is eligible for perimeter fence through an EQIP contract. Another example would be someone who converts existing cropland to grazing land by planting permanent grassland cover. We could pay for that type of perimeter fence too.

Leave it as it is.

Recommend Pigeon – Jones Watershed be considered if any water quality initiatives are funded.

A request was sent to our National Office, but it was denied.

Support this issue.

Recommend if local allocations are not used within one resource concern these funds be transferred to another local resource concern and not returned to the state pool.

We have statewide goals that we are expected to meet. If we allocate funds out to the pools, it will be based on our goals. Sixty percent of the funds have to be applied to livestock. This year because of all the initiatives we were not able to meet the livestock goal. If we cannot meet the state goal then we may have to move the money to another area.

Nebraska EPA allows their people to move up to 10 percent of the funds. A suggestion was made to allow the NRD to move funds up to a certain amount/percentage. This would be a nice flexibility. There was reluctance to allow NRDs to move large amounts of money. There are also concerns of moving the funds from cropland to wildlife.

Recommend the High / Medium / Low priority system be modified within the Ogallala Initiative.

Dave gave a presentation on the Ogallala Aquifer. The aquifer is almost 112 million acres in eight states. We had to develop a science based process to direct funds to areas across eight states that will provide the most benefits to water quality and water quantity in the Ogallala aquifer. It was decided to use a USGS map of water vulnerable to ground water and water level changes. It was decided to use townships instead of HUC codes. We obligated \$4 million in funds this year to the high priority areas. He explained the process for deciding the high and medium priorities.

One of the problems we have had is that we have not been able to get to the mediums. If the group would want to reconsider the process, we could make a recommendation to Tom Christensen our Regional Conservationist.

After discussing this issue it was decided to leave it alone until next year.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

Rich discussed the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) now referred to as Working Land for Wildlife. The program is now targeting species instead of giving general dollars to the states. WHIP funds have been getting reduced each year. We did not have any target species for Fiscal Year 2012. Next year we will probably have two target species, the Bob White Quail and Greater Prairie Chicken.

Ritch – For Fiscal Year 2013 we worked with our partners and developed a list for the central regional. We steered away from endangered species. They expect the states to select a core area, not larger than 2-4 counties, where we could do enough work to make a change in that county. We have two areas with Bob White Quail which are in parts or all of Harlan County and Howard/Furnas Counties. The Greater Prairie Chicken would be in parts or all of Knox, Antelope, Wheeler, and Holt Counties as well as Pawnee, Johnson and Nemaha Counties. We are currently waiting on feedback from headquarters.

The next Farm Bill includes language that five percent of EQIP funds are targeted to WHIP, i.e. wildlife. There may still be flexibility at the national level, but that is yet to be determined. Working Lands for Wildlife was a late addition. We did get some WHIP application but no funds, so we created a new fund code in EQIP enabling us to fund the WHIP applications.

State issues

Jan – Irrigation water savings. The points on the state ranking are very small. Can we increase the point value? Could a statement be added that if there was a 40 percent savings more points would be added?

Rich stated that in the past the Local Working Groups decided the points.

Marcia mentioned this would bring the drip irrigation to the top. The issue is that the drip irrigation would use all the funds. Turnaround time for quotes on drip irrigation is lengthy. The NRD has found that sometimes it takes too long for the quotes to come in and the money has to be turned back to the state.

Consensus is to leave savings at 20 percent after more discussion and consideration, **add a statement of 40 percent in over appropriated basin areas.**

The subcommittee would like to review the updated State Ranking.

If you have concerns or questions, send a note to Rich or Brad. They want your feedback. We still have work to do to be sure practices are in the right locations. We are moving forward with the understanding there will be a new Farm Bill. Landscape initiatives are very popular. This is the last year for the ranking process. Next year we will be using the Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative (CDSI) instead of Toolkit.

Scott mentioned that he attended a few Local Working Group meetings and most people were comfortable with the new pools. The Conservation Reserve Program gave additional priority points to expiring contract to go into grazing.

Eric discussed CAP 142 and making these funds available. A discussion followed and it was felt CAP 142 was not needed as the Farm Bill biologists are currently doing most of the planning. He also discussed increasing the ranking for biological unique landscape (BUL). Wildlife will be a separate fund pool. Local Working Groups did give points to BULs.

A question was asked about State goals and how they are determined. Our goals are set nationally. They are determined by past performance and resource concerns. It is up to the state to manage the dollars to meet the goals.

There will not be a Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) subcommittee meeting this year. The CSP ranking is set nationally.

Karen Kelty
Recorder