

MASSACHUSETTS STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE

USDA-NRCS

Minutes

Wednesday, May 19, 2010

Doyle Conservation Center

Leominster, MA 01453

Present: Christine S. Clarke, STC; John Kick, Asst. STC; Barbara Miller, SRC, Deborah Johnson, Asst. SRC; Aaron Dushku, GIS Specialist, Ruthie Davis, Farm Bill Specialist, Carol Rickless, NRCS; Paul Lopes, UMass Extension; Tina Smith, UMass Extension; Kathleen Carroll, UMass Extension; Dick Starkey, Greenfield Conservation Commission; Dave Welsch, US Forestry Service; Tom Smiarowski, USDA-FSA; Marianne Piche, Mass. Wildlife; Jeff LaFleur, CCCGA; Diane Lynch, F&WS, Brad Mitchell, MA Farm Bureau Federation, Scott Soares, MDAR; 18 in attendance.

Welcome & Opening Remarks

The meeting began at 9:00 am with opening remarks from Christine Clarke, State Conservationist.

Christine gave an update regarding the PL-566 Cape Cod Water Resources Restoration Project (CCWRRP). She stated the project was recently authorized and funded and gave a brief background of PL566 public law authorizing legislation for watershed projects. She explained PL 566 is used to build structures (dams) but is now being used to restore resources on Cape Cod – fish passages, saltmarsh restoration, and fish bed habitats. She made clear that the PL566 CCWRRP is not an earmark. Massachusetts NRCS has been working on the project for 10 years. The authorization to start the project came from Congress in 2010 and NHQ has chosen to fund CCWRRP. The project is approved and will hopefully be funded for a period of 10 years. Chris wanted to clear up confusion on the funding issue due to a similar project slated for the North Shore of Boston which seeks to emulate the CCWRRP. It has been suggested that the North Shore project be funded through an earmark. CCWRRP is a regular funding allocation vs. an earmark. There is a lot of interest in the CCWRRP and other states are looking into the project. Dick Starkey commented on how well he thinks the restoration project on the Cape is going and that the eel grass is coming back due to the efforts of NRCS.

Chris asked for any additions for the agenda - none were added.

Chris told the group that NRCS is adding new staff to support Massachusetts farmers and land managers. NRCS is focusing on field staff and has added an individual to the program staff. She is looking into a Student Conservation Agency (SCA) engineering technician and 2 soil conservation technicians. Also she has moved a staff member to the Barnstable field office to assist with the CCWRRP. Administrative support staff has been added in contract management in West Wareham and NRCS is planning to add another administrative support job in the western part of the state which will allow more time for field staff to service NRCS customers.

Barbara Miller, State Resource Conservationist asked for STC members to review the minutes of the September 2009 meeting. No comments were received.

Summary of 2010 Farm Bill funding

Barb started her summary of 2010 Farm Bill funding by giving a PowerPoint presentation which offered details about financial assistance (FA) dollars in each NRCS program. Massachusetts received \$11.5M in initial funding. She explained that with regional equity funding Massachusetts NRCS has reached its \$15M funding threshold and that we requested additional funding of \$3.6M. The additional funding relates to the level of interest landowners show by signing up for a conservation program. In 2009, Massachusetts received \$16M in FA funds and in 2010 \$18.5 M.

EQIP received most of the Regional Equity funds this year. MA did not request any FRPP Regional Equity funds but instead used the money for EQIP, WHIP and GRP.

The \$97K WHIP funding was utilized almost immediately in 2010. Last year MA used \$1.3M in funding for WHIP projects. This year MA got \$720K for the WHIP NE/NY Forestry Initiative which will bring up the total WHIP funding to over \$1 million.

Table of FA Funding by Program

Program	Initial Allocation	Regional Equity funds	Additional Funds	Totals	Total/Program
EQIP	\$3,450,000.00	\$3,003,019.00		\$6,453,019.00	\$6,672,608.00
WHIP	\$97,622.00	\$227,340.00		\$324,962.00	\$1,044,962.00
GRP	\$186,969.00	\$65,926.00		\$252,895.00	\$252,895.00
AMA	\$110,699.00		\$98,000.00	\$208,699.00	\$208,699.00
FRPP	\$5,500,000.00		\$2,653,800.00	\$8,153,800.00	\$8,153,800.00
WRP	\$2,144,097.00			\$2,144,097.00	\$2,144,097.00
CSP				\$0.00	
WHIP Initiative			\$720,000.00	\$720,000.00	
AgEMP			\$30,000.00	\$30,000.00	
EQIP Organic			\$189,589.00	\$189,589.00	
Totals	\$11,489,387.00	\$3,296,285.00	\$3,691,389.00	\$18,477,061.00	

The \$6.5M in EQIP is already mostly obligated in contracts with the rest of the money slated for contract changes and modifications. WHIP has approximately \$300K obligated and the additional \$720K will be used for a special sign-up for the WHIP NE/NY Forestry Initiative. GRP funding is \$250K and all in rental contracts. No easements for GRP to date. \$200K in AMA which is a small program in Massachusetts that generally focuses on new irrigation. FRPP has \$8.1M this year up from \$6M last year. NRCS partners the FRPP with MDAR's APR to assist in the purchase of permanent easements. WRP received \$2M and NRCS will be asking for some additional funding for this program.

Christine stated that all the \$18.5M Massachusetts NRCS received for the FA funding goes out directly to the farming community.

Barbara explained how the EQIP Organic Initiative funds are a separate pool of dedicated funds. Massachusetts requested an additional \$98,000 in the organic pool most of which will go to organic applications for the new high tunnel practice.

Distribution of 2010 Contracts

Barbara talked about the fund pools and mentioned that at past STC meetings there was discussion about the distribution of money for ranking categories based on resource concerns rather than commodities. In 2010, Chief White chose to distribute the funds based on land use to establish some consistency across the nation--all states distributed funds in a similar fashion. In addition to cropland and forestry pools, the new distribution structure also included funding pools for historically underserved categories such as beginning, socially disadvantaged and limited resource farmers. Barbara added that it is difficult to have one ranking system fit all categories. The theory behind these fund pools is that the people signing up under these categories are only competing or ranked against others in the same category. NRCS tries to discourage multiple applications to discourage landowners from "hedging their bets" in order to get funded. The new pools may reduce the duplicate applications by finding the "best fit" for applicants, but it also complicated administration and fund management due to their sheer number.

Christine explained that although the State Tech Committee has pushed for resource concerns to remain as the base criteria for funding, the bottom line is NHQ chose land use. She reminded the committee that the funding issue is an on-going discussion the State Conservationists raise to the Chief and the base criteria may change next year.

Marianne Piche asked "Is the forest land pool restricted to timber stand improvement or are there any pools that relate to oak regeneration?" Barbara answered mostly all of the practices are available in any of the categories so the landowner can use any of the practices in any of these pools. They have to decide which pool fits their needs best. Barb added that air quality, and greenhouse efficiency pools have limited practices to pick from.

Barbara explained that CAP or *Conservation Activity Plans* are funded through EQIP, and use Technical Service Providers (TSP) to develop the plans. A farmer signs up using a TSP to meet plan criteria. NRCS had a good response with forest management plans and had 15 sign ups distributing 22K in funding.

Barbara added that a subcategory of the cropland pool is for a high tunnel pilot program. She explained that high tunnels are basically greenhouses with no heat or ventilation. High tunnel was the only

practice in this specific fund pool. Landowners would need multiple applications to be funded for other practices. Cropland and Farmstead pools take up the most funding as the practices are expensive to implement.

Scott Soares asked about the correlation between Forestry CAPs and Forest Management contracts. “Is having a plan a precursor to receiving funding through the Forest Management funding pool?” Barbara answered that the Farm Bill policy states in order to get into the Forest Management pool there must be a forest management plan in place. It is the State Conservationist’s discretion to accept the written plan: Chapter 61 FMP, Forest Stewardship Plan, or some other written plan. If there is no plan then NRCS will fund a Forestry CAP as a one year single item contract to create a plan.

Scott also asked if NRCS expects the same kind of volume of response regarding the CAP Forest Management Plans in 2010 as in 2009. Barbara replied that Forest Management Plan volume of 2009 was relatively large but it would be hard to estimate for 2010.

Dick Starkey stated that in Franklin County Chapter 61 plans were small in number, landowners with 50 acres or less usually do not want to put together a forest management plan– he believes that there will not be as many in 2010 due to grants, federal and state funding. Barbara replied that 2010 is the second year NRCS offered forestry plans and practices and is still fine tuning the administration of process and payments. NRCS hopes that there will be more interest from landowners and more funding from NHQ for these activity plans since forest is the largest land use in Massachusetts.

Scott asked if there is rank or priority given to landowners who sign up for a Forest Management Plan. Barb replied that currently all who sign up get funded since they are low cost contracts.

Dick Starkey added that a consulting forester would charge approximately \$300 for a 50 acre forest management plan.

Scott noted that MDAR does not want to create a backlog for forest management plans for APR projects due to the requirements of the FRPP program. The 2008 farm bill dictates that forestland going into FRPP needs a FMP under certain circumstances.

Dick mentioned that DCR has funding for Forest Stewardship Group Certification. Barb said that the EQIP funding is there to help do the work and that DCR is helping with the technical aspects and Fish and Wildlife Service is assisting with the wildlife practices. Chris added that NRCS and DCR have been working together while putting together the agreement for the past year and half and that the agreement will be signed end of May 2010.

Barb concluded that due to the new fund pools NRCS could not allocate the funds the same as last year. She emphasized that NRCS wanted to manage the funding in an equitable manner.

Chris again stressed the point that proper distribution of the funds is important in that the agency would be held accountable for misuse of the funds. Documentation is important.

EQIP Distribution - Percentage of Funds by County

Barb showed the pie chart (EQIP funds) breaking down how much each county received by percentage. Plymouth and Worcester were the top two in distribution while Franklin and Berkshire also received a substantial amount. She added that the pie chart is by percentage of funds not numbers of contracts. She offered STC members more detailed data relating to EQIP distribution of funding if they requested it.

WHIP Distribution - Percentage of Funds by County

The next slide was a pie chart (WHIP funds) also breaking down how much each county received by percentage. Barbara stated that ½ of the WHIP contracts were in Berkshire and the other ½ in Franklin County. There are only 10-12 contracts to date. NRCS received additional WHIP funding which is about 3 times the amount of the initial funding amount.

Marianne Piche asked if Berkshire County WHIP funds percentage reflects the monies used on the Cottontail Project in Berkshire County. Barb answered the Farm Bill allows essential habitat agreements with landowners (15 year agreement) for higher cost share. The criteria are it must be a threatened species. So far NRCS has limited WHIP funds to the New England Cottontail habitat designated area.

EQIP High Tunnel Pilot

Barbara told the STC the high tunnel pilot was very popular. NRCS received over a million dollars worth of sign ups for High Tunnels. The original estimate was to fund 20 high tunnels, but at present there are 40 funded through both the Organic Initiative and the Cropland High Tunnel Pilot in EQIP. Two tunnels already are completed and paid for. NRCS had \$370K obligated to High Tunnels. Though popular, she added, there is no guarantee that the High Tunnels pilot program will continue next year.

Barbara asked for any questions or comments. Paul Lopes opened a discussion about land use base vs. resource concerns philosophy in relation to New England states agricultural funding. He said that certain farm operations have no land use base but impact other resource concerns such as energy and water quality. Barb stated that the farmstead funding pool addresses water quality issues and asked Deb Johnson to comment. Deb said that 69% of MA land is forest vs. the small percentage of land in farmsteads, and this fact skews the distribution of funding. To try to correct this problem Massachusetts NRCS documented its allocation methodology, noting the legitimate resource concerns associated with farmsteads in contrast to the limited demand currently for forest management practices. She said NRCS must qualitatively justify taking funding away from one land use to put the funding into another land use. Barbara added that if NHQ sticks with land use base in the future, “creative” divisions of land use to fit the state’s needs may occur. Chris mentioned that the Chief and Washington’s technical staff wants Massachusetts to write a “white paper” to get input on the land use vs. resource concern basis for fund distribution. She added that comments from the state tech committee regarding this issue are welcome.

Scott Soares offered the idea that we could circulate the “white paper” to get input from other New England States. Chris agreed and said that other states outside of New England are running into the same concerns as Massachusetts. She agreed we could get comments from NE states.

Paul added that under the land use basis field staff may work on funded resource projects only and ignore other resource concerns. Jeff LaFleur mentioned the political component and talked about how

the current administration is pushing the small farm agenda and that the larger states are “pushing back” in support of larger farms. Barbara stated that there is a small farm funding pool but there is no guideline or definition of a small farm. Discussion ensued between Jeff, Dick, Barb and Scott about the state definition of small farm vs. federal EQIP definition. With the approval of NHQ, MA NRCS may have been able to use the state of Massachusetts small farm guidelines (acres/dollars) but later decided not to utilize the small farm funding pool in 2010.

Initiatives

Barbara talked about FY2010 as “the year of the initiative”. She said High Tunnels and Ag Energy Plans (AEP) are the newest initiatives. AEP is another Conservation Activity Plan (CAP) for farms to develop an audit and energy plan. NRCS received 30K to be obligated for energy audits for motors, heating, and fans on homesteads – not for cropland. NRCS is working with Berkshire Pioneer RC&D’s Darlene Monds to get Technical Service Providers to do the audits. NRCS is augmenting her program.

Christine talked about the New England Governors Conference which documents issues of concern in our region. Resolutions put together by a blue ribbon panel on conservation were focused in key areas in NE conservation. From the resolutions came an initiative called KFAF (Keep Forests as Forests). Funds are allocated to each NE state under WHIP to support the NE Council of Governors effort. Funding is \$720K in FA to go to community. NRCS is looking to expand stewardship opportunities in WHIP for private forest lands through forest land planning. There will be a new sign up for forestry practices in the near future. The website for the New England Governors Conference is <http://www.negc.org> and a pdf of the NE/NY Forest Initiative document is attached for review.

Marianne Piche asked “Why is the money in WHIP not EQIP?” Barbara answered that the EQIP money was already accounted for and WHIP money was available to use. The practices in this sign up are in the suite of WHIP forest practices. Signup will be through a news release and website. Barb will contact Marianne to discuss how to effectively get the word out about the sign up. In New England \$5M allocated to this effort.

Christine added that, Secretary Merrigan has created the NE Farm and Food Security Initiative. She stated, “The initiative piggybacks on the NE Council of Governors conservation effort. We are seeing actions in NE to support NE agriculture. There currently is a positive energy level in regards to conservation in New England.”

Hot Topics

WRP - Wetlands Reserve Program

NRCS Chief, Dave White, wants NRCS to double the Wetlands Reserve Program enrollment by 2012. WRP is not a large program in MA - Plymouth County; cranberry bogs are the largest area. Not much WRP in rest of the state. NRCS has met with USFWS and DAR to discuss implementation of the program and how to increase participation in WRP. The agencies must identify groups in a separate meeting to brainstorm the logistics and to establish easement compensation values. The 2008 Farm Bill wanted to get away from full appraisals and now requires Geographic Area Rate Cap’s. GARC is now only for active cranberry bogs. Other areas need a full appraisal. NRCS needs market analysis to evaluate wetland easements. NRCS is trying to determine which GARC data set to use - political base or ecosystem based? The State Tech Committee is to create a subcommittee for input on GARC. Barbara clarified the Farm Bill verbiage which says NRCS must offer the a) lower of the landowner

offer, b) the GARC or c) an appraisal. (NRCS will accept a market analysis that can stand in for the appraisal). In a state with high demand for WRP a landowner offer may be the lowest offer. A ranking system in this program will help prioritize to get the best benefit.

Dick Starkey had a question about the Riverways Act – riverfront footage on a property- does NRCS have to take this into account? Barb explained that the Farm Bill is now including protection of riparian corridors degraded by farmland or forest practices. Aaron is identifying protection areas for riparian corridors. State groups can help NRCS fine tune outreach for WRP.

CSP- Conservation Stewardship Program

Available nationwide – only 4 contracts in MA - \$18K. CSP evaluates the stewardship landowners are implementing. Forests are \$7/acre and farmland-cropland \$25/acre. The landowner must do additional enhancements to receive funding. CSP is acreage based. Producers must document stewardship which is a lot of paperwork and CSP is a newer program so Field Offices are just learning how to promote it. The STC must find ways to get the word out about rewarding people for being good stewards and for those who have addressed all their resource concerns. Barbara asked the STC to brainstorm strategies to increase enrollment in MA for CSP.

Hot Topics- Energy/Air Quality

With the advent of 2008 Farm Bill MA NRCS worked with the greenhouse community, dabbled in renewable energy cost share on solar panels, shade curtains, and wind turbines. This year Massachusetts was told not to do renewable projects because energy has not yet been described as a resource concern. Instead NRCS must use approved conservation practices to address the Air Quality resource concern and address a problem the farm is generating. NHQ told Massachusetts to refrain from funding these projects until a national policy is developed. This year Energy Management Plans were rolled out (hopefully due in part) to the input from Massachusetts.

Hot Topics

CIG, AWEP, CCPI

There was no Massachusetts funded Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) this year – NRCS had \$6M in FA, \$8-10M in applications. Producers created a large demand for FA dollars so NRCS didn't do CIG in MA. In the future NRCS can devote money from EQIP budget - \$75K per grant or \$200-300K. The downside is that CIG adds to the administrative workload. Berkshire Pioneer RC&D's program started with the CIG grant. Action: Get the word out about who needs CIG funding and what categories we might be interested in.

Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Association (CCCGA) put in an Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) proposal; cranberry growers needed money to fund auto start system. AWEP participants compete only against each other for the money. AWEP has a separate pot of EQIP money for a given proposal – Strictly national funding.

Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) grants come through a proposal from an entity that is willing to match its own money for a project with EQIP money. CCPI money is in its own funding pool for the project. Last year there were six proposals nationally.

State Technical Committee Meeting Schedule

STC general meetings are held twice a year. Discussion ensued to determine the best months to schedule the meetings and get producers to attend. For general STC meetings November and June were agreed to. There will be advance notice to committee members on meeting dates to give time to reschedule if needed. The Doyle Center will be the meeting place in the future due to its central location. Barb asked STC committee members to think about which colleagues or producers may be interested in attending or joining the STC committee. Chris added the meetings are informal, and mentioned the meeting must be announced in newspapers as a public meeting notice available to the general public. The STC meeting can also be a way to support the Conservation District's local workgroup concept.

Scott Soares asked if there is any STC committee membership information available to give to interested parties. Barb responded there is a brochure and updated guidance from the Federal register. The brochure and guidance are attached to minutes.

Barb announced that a STC subcommittee, the Forestry subcommittee, meeting is June 3rd to evaluate forestry practices. Barb will share the minutes to the Forestry Committee meeting to those who are interested.

Great Outdoors Initiative (GOI) – No Child Left Inside

The Great Outdoors Initiative (GOI) was White House proposed and co-sponsored by the Department of the Interior and USDA. Information on GOI is on the White House and DOI webpage. The initiative is meant to convey the importance of Farm Bill activities, DOI programs, environmental issues, USDA initiatives like the Peoples Garden, and children's health. All aforementioned concerns are connected under this initiative. See websites for more information: <http://www.doi.gov/americasgreatoutdoors/> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/04/16/creating-a-21st-century-strategy-americas-outdoors>

State Tech Committee Subcommittees

Marianne asked about STC subcommittees. Barb answered there are currently no official standing subcommittees for STC – they are set up on an as needed basis. Chris clarified that if a standing committee is needed the STC can create it.

Aquaculture

Jeff Lafleur asked about the aquaculture special project. Deb Johnson said that practice standards for aquaculture are being reviewed by NHQ—the general management system is being broken out into 6 or more individual practice standards and the shellfish management standard is being revised to focus on biofouling control and gear management. It was funded under the standing interim practice standard in FY10. There was only one application in Massachusetts this year.

LIDAR

Chris introduced Aaron Dushku who is working to procure Light Detection and Ranging (LIDAR) for MA. The LIDAR device is mounted on a plane and gets precise elevation readings. The New England coastal counties are being flown and USDA is paying for Barnstable County. No engineers or surveyors need to be on the ground using this system. The data will be shared in the public domain. NRCS is working with MA GIS to make it available – ARRA funded.

Scott Soares mentioned that the Department of Environmental Protection would like to see implementation of solid waste management practices around composting and discharge of milkhouse waste. Barb said NRCS must balance small farms needs vs. large composting operations needs. DEP is monitoring some of our pilot projects and meeting with us on nutrient management plans to alleviate the need for ground water permits. NRCS would like to get DEP away from the MOU mindset. Scott said there is a need for MOU for regulatory forbearance. Brad Mitchell mentioned livestock regulations in municipalities are increasing and their Boards of Health must look to NRCS and UMass for guidance.

Christine Clarke adjourned the meeting at 11:00 am.

Recorder: Carol Rickless

ACTIONS:

- NRCS to create a “white paper” document with State Tech. Comm. input regarding land use basis vs. resource concern basis for fund distribution. Ultimately circulate among NE states for comment.
- Create a STC subcommittee for input on GARC
- STC to brainstorm strategies to increase enrollment for CSP in MA
- STC members are urged to get the word out to those who could benefit from CIG funding
- Encourage and promote membership to STC

State Tech Committee members should send comments to:

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Attachments:

STC 5-19-2010 Power point Presentation

NE/NY Forest Initiative Concept Paper – pdf

STC Brochure – 2006 pdf

STC Interim Rule - 2008 pdf

STC Interim Rule - SOP pdf