

MASSACHUSETTS STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE

USDA-NRCS

Minutes

Thursday, December 9, 2010

Doyle Conservation Center

Leominster, MA 01453

Present: Christine S. Clarke, NRCS State Conservationist; John Kick, NRCS Asst. State Conservationist; Barbara Miller, NRCS State Resource Conservationist, Deborah Johnson, NRCS Asst. State Resource Conservationist; Ruthie Davis, NRCS Farm Bill Specialist, Walter Albarran, NRCS District Conservationist – Holden; Carol Rickless, NRCS Secretary; Dick Starkey, Greenfield Conservation Commission; Gary Randall, Plymouth Conservation District; Robert Clark, US Forestry Service; Noreen Vassallo, USDA-FSA; Marianne Piche, Mass. Wildlife; Don Lewis; Mass. Conservation Districts (MACD); Eric Derleth, U.S. F&WS, Doug Gillespie, MA Farm Bureau Federation, Gerard Kennedy, MDAR; Karen Lombard, The Nature Conservancy; Jane Peirce, EPA; Maryjo Feuerbach, EPA; 19 in attendance.

Welcome & Opening Remarks

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

Chris asked for additions for the agenda - Noreen Vassallo of FSA spoke about a new Conservation Loan Program (CL). She distributed pamphlets about the new loan program and said a fact sheet (pdf attached) could be found on the FSA website. The Conservation Loan Program fits in well with NRCS cost share programs and offers more flexibility than other established loan programs.

Chris began by mentioning she emailed the State Tech Committee (STC) partners four questions about NRCS. These questions will be asked nationally by all State Conservationists. Chris let the STC members know she plans on having a discussion later in the meeting to receive input from partners on these questions.

Chris told the group that the budget looks good for Fiscal Year (FY) 2011. She added that NRCS has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Student Conservation Association (SCA). John Kick is overseeing the SCA program. NRCS has hired 7 SCA interns to fill jobs across the state for a period of under a year. There are two soil conservation interns and two Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) program assistants as well as three interns in the state office. In the state office one intern is working on rapid carbon assessment, one is working to scan historic photos to help NRCS archive this information in a digitized format to share with other agencies and one is working with the public affairs staff to catalog the MA NRCS photo library digitally. NRCS is also using the Agricultural Conservation Experienced Services Program (ACES). ACES is a program aimed at utilizing the skills of retired individuals. NRCS has hired one person under ACES to help with information technology needs in Massachusetts. Due to this tight economy, SCA and ACES are mechanisms to hire staff to get work done but not increase the number of federal employees.

Chris talked about the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program's (FRPP) program's budget in 2010. \$8+M were put into an agreement with MDAR to partner with the Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program (APR) to preserve farmland in the Commonwealth. NRCS is focusing on projects that have impact across the board.

Barbara Miller, State Resource Conservationist asked for STC members to review the minutes of the May 2010 meeting. She went over the action items from the May meeting. The following are the action items:

1. NRCS was to create a "white paper" document with State Technical Committee input regarding land use vs. resource concern for fund distribution, and then circulate it among NE states for comment. Land use is the current method and it is harder to manage the funds - multiple fund codes have increased the complexity of allocation. She added that this year NRCS in MA is adjusting to the land use guidance. The white paper has not yet been drafted.
2. The next action was for the STC to create a subcommittee for input on Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC). NRCS is currently relying on appraisals for easement programs instead of the GARC. This action has not yet been completed.
3. The next action was for STC members to get the word out to those who could benefit from Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) funding. NRCS has not had an application for CIG funding in the last few years. Barb explained that CIG is funded through Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and the dollars that could go to CIG are being used to fund EQIP contracts. She added that the Massachusetts (MA) Farm Energy Initiative was funded through CIG and has proven to be a very successful program that is being modeled in other states. Chris encourages the STC members to be aware of the dollars available through CIG that can encourage new technology which can help mediate resource concerns. Chris proposed a new action in relation to CIG: She asked the STC members if they want NRCS to fund a CIG next year? If so, the CIG must fund one of the categories or themes set forth by NHQ. What area of focus or theme does the STC think would best utilize CIG funds? CIG website link <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/cig/>
4. The final action was to encourage and promote membership to STC. A brochure explaining what the STC does was sent out to all STC members with May's meeting minutes. The brochure can be used by agencies and landowners to give information to those who may be interested in attending a meeting. It was noted by Barbara Miller that a core group of individuals and agencies regularly attend. The STC members will continue to encourage attendance of the meetings.

2011 Farm Bill Update	
Program	Current Funding
Agricultural Management Assistance -AMA	\$33,327
Conservation Security Program	\$23,737*
Conservation Stewardship Program	\$0**
Environmental Quality Incentives Program - EQIP - General	\$3,180,265
EQIP - Organic	\$269,735
Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program - WHIP - General	\$97,622
WHIP - NE/NY Forestry Initiative	\$700,000
Grassland Reserve Program - GRP	\$186,969
Wetlands Reserve Program - WRP	\$2,358,506
Farm and Ranchland Protection Program - FRPP	\$5,500,000

Agricultural Management Assistance Program (AMA) - Barb started her update of the 2011 Farm Bill funding by giving a PowerPoint presentation which offered details about current funding in NRCS programs. She noted that the funding was not much different from 2010 with the exception of the AMA program. AMA only received enough funding for approximately two projects in MA. The AMA program in Massachusetts is concerned with developing new irrigation systems which protect at risk crops from drought.

Conservation Security Program and Conservation Stewardship Program - Under the Conservation Security Program the \$23K reflects payments for this year on contracts that were developed several years ago. The \$0 amount under the Conservation Stewardship Program is due to the fact that first payments are made this year.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) This year \$3.2M was the initial allocation – if 90% of funds are obligated by April 1, 2011 we will be eligible for \$3M more in EQIP money as a result of regional equity.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) & WHIP NE/NY Forestry Initiative – the initial WHIP allocation was just under \$100K. Additional WHIP funding was also received specifically for the NE/NY forestry initiative. NRCS has broadened its approach to forestry practices this year due to the extra WHIP funding.

A discussion of the differences in using the WHIP program vs. the EQIP program to fund forestry practices was initiated by Robert Clarke of the US Forestry service. Barb responded that NRCS would prefer to use EQIP. Since WHIP is funded this year, forestry practices must be examined to determine the best fit. DCR is assisting NRCS to ensure forestry practices are correct. Explanations of NRCS forestry practices are located on the NRCS website under each program. This year the advantage of

WHIP is higher cost share. Each New England state has a slightly different view on eligible practices but all are moving closer together.

Marianne Piche of MA F&W and Eric Derleth of US F&WS asked about funding for the NE Cottontail Initiative. Barb answered that if the initiative is approved more money will be sent to fund the NE Cottontail Initiative. She added that it is difficult to broadly implement the general WHIP program with only a small amount of funding (\$100K). Barb stated that the funding under WHIP's (NE Forestry Initiative - \$700K) is for non-industrial private forestland. Eric & Marianne voiced a concern about the programs invasives control and early successional habitat practices. They are not benefitting other endangered species. Only five species benefit from the forestry practices. Rob Clarke of USFS had concerns about landowners' reluctance to utilize established practices under their forest management plans such as thinning, patch cutting and clear cutting. Barbara Miller responded these concerns are valid reasons why NRCS wants to split out the practices to EQIP from WHIP next year.

Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) – initial funding is the same for FY 2011 as in FY2010 (\$187K). GRP is oriented toward grazing projects. All of our funding is currently dedicated to rental agreements, not easements.

Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) - (\$2.3M) WRP funding in MA is somewhat less than last year. Chris added that the eastern part of Massachusetts utilizes more WRP funding and asked the STC members to think about how to increase enrollment in WRP statewide.

Action: Get ideas from STC members on how to increase enrollment in WRP statewide.

A question was asked about how money is allotted for the restoration part of WRP projects and the easement part of WRP projects? Barb explained that both the easement and restoration dollars come out of the same pot of funding money. When a new WRP project begins the money for the easement comes out of the pot. The restoration money for the same project is not obligated at the time the easement is. Restoration may occur several years after the money is put aside, so funds may be taken out of the pot and used for other projects while waiting for restoration to start. Alternately, both restoration and easements funding may occur in the same year. Usually, if more money is needed it is made available by NHQ.

Dick Starkey suggested that NRCS contact the conservation commission of towns that could help use WRP funds. In this way towns would be made aware of WRP money. Eric Derleth of US FWS had a question about WRP funding – is there a cap? He added that NRCS could work with our partners to show NHQ the complexity of the WRP projects in bog country which would explain funding needs. Barb answered that Massachusetts has one of the highest costs for restoration/easements and that there is no cap but the requested amount is looked at by NHQ. Chris added that NHQ's view relates to best use of tax dollars spent. Eric Derleth said that US FWS would assist NRCS in supporting the effort of legitimacy of need for WRP funding. Chris and Barb accepted his offer of assistance if NHQ WRP staff visit the state. US FWS and NRCS can outline WRP funding needs.

Karen Lombard of the Nature Conservancy brought up floodplain forest restoration and hydrologic degradation. She asked if WRP flood plain forest land must have a cropland history or be cropland currently or privately owned riparian corridors located between two protected pieces of wet land - if the

land does not meet cropland criteria. GIS modeling is now being used to identify farm areas or unprotected wetlands that could be eligible under WRP. Much of the WRP dollars have been spent in the eastern part of Massachusetts. Christine would like STC members to come up with some ideas how NRCS can encourage landowners to utilize WRP funds in the western part of the state. Barb concluded that there are many ways that WRP funding can be used to help with large projects that may involve runoff or wetlands.

Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) - had \$5.5 M allocated; the same as last year.

Initiatives

NE/NY Forestry Initiative – Since there was much earlier discussion on the topic there were no additional comments.

Organic Initiative - MA received \$270K for FY2011. The national cut off date is March 4, 2011. Barb noted that the \$270K MA received will be fully utilized.

Air Quality – this is a national initiative and no dedicated funding was offered to MA. NRCS has an air quality fund pool set up as in previous years. Currently under Air Quality, NRCS is offering efficiency projects but, it is a complex process to receive funds. The MA Farm Energy Program is helping NRCS with this initiative.

New England Cottontail Initiative may be funded in the next few months.

High Tunnel – is a 3 year initiative. This is a very popular initiative. Massachusetts had 200 applicants for this initiative in 2010 and funded 70.

Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) – The national CIG announcement has been posted on grants.gov. There was earlier discussion on the topic and there were no additional comments.

New Standards

Bivalve Aquaculture Fouling Control – Deb Johnson explained this new standard. Many North Atlantic states have been doing aquaculture since 2005. The standard is an outgrowth of the aquaculture initiative. It was posted in the Federal Register the week of Dec. 13, 2010. There is a 30 day comment period for the new practice standard. The standard may have a name change and be called *Waste Control*.

On-Farm Equipment Efficiency Improvements are standards for greenhouse and renewable energy projects. In the next few years the focus will be on equipment such as pumps and heat exchangers. This year we are still focusing on basic greenhouse practices and standard solar PV and hot water. Massachusetts NRCS currently is steering clear of biofuel projects since NRCS does not want to duplicate the efforts of Farm Service Agency's BCAP energy programs.

Wetland Reserve Program – GARC Development

Geographic Area Rate Cap Development – A chart of a market analysis of five bogs sold last year in Massachusetts was explained by Barbara. She told the STC committee that NRCS is looking to define a process to decide price or cost per acre. Currently appraisers are used for market analysis.

WRP - Market Analysis of 5 Bogs Sold Last Year (2010)				
Total AC	Total Price	Bog AC	Bog Price	Non-Bog Price
9.51	\$125,000	2.8	\$55,000	\$10,432
52.34	\$1,494,732	38	\$994,726	\$34,868
76.32	\$824,765	27	\$724,761	\$2,028
72.3	\$705,000	25	\$705,000	\$0
92.88	\$1,435,000	40.48	\$1,435,000	\$0

WRP GARC	
Bog Price	\$29,370
Non-Bog Price	\$3,940
80% of Market Value GARC	\$16,375
85% of Market Value GARC	\$17,400
2010 GARC	\$18,250

In MA there was approximately \$29K per acre (bog) and \$4K per acre (non-bog). Other states are using 80-85% of market value with no encumbrances to price bog/non-bog land. In 2011, MA NRCS may use the 85% market value amount. Eric Derleth had a question on the value if the bog is abandoned. Barb replied that the WRP GARC does not include abandoned bogs; they will be assessed by appraisal. NRCS uses state wetland regulations to define an active bog vs. and abandoned bog. There was a discussion about non-bog land. Non-bog is upland or wetland. Upland can be buildable land, which garners a higher land value amount. Landowners usually leave this type of land out of the WRP easement if possible. The landowner’s easement payment amount is (GARC) real estate market driven, while the restoration payments are paid through WRP program procedures. NRCS is currently working with local appraisers to find the best process to determine GARC. NRCS is looking to categorize value by land type. Maryjo Feurbach asked why the bog price declined this year. Barb answered that the total value of all real estate has declined due to the economy as the price of the surrounding land has also declined.

Christine complemented Barbara Miller’s staff and the District Conservationists in MA for taking the lead on the development of the new aquaculture standard. She also commented on how MA was on the cutting edge regarding energy practices in 2009 and how NHQ has recognized the value in these practices.

The final item was a request from Chris to discuss and comment on the four *State Resource Conservationist Questions*.

State Resource Conservationist Questions

- What is working well?
 - What is not working well?
 - What needs to be fixed?
 - What should NRCS be doing in the future to better serve our clients and resource base?
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- Marianne Piche began by saying that public lands are not eligible for WHIP and she views this as not working.
 - Dick Starkey added that NRCS needs more outreach to help students, conservation commissions and the general public learn about NRCS programs. He suggested that the conservation districts could utilize Earth Team volunteers to do outreach.
 - Dick Starkey views The High Tunnel Initiative as working. Promotion and outreach worked well which in turn is a boon to the expansion of local farmers markets and the marketing of local products in New England year round.
 - Marianne Piche questioned whether NRCS sends out information to partners and the general public about programs. She said she would like to see more detailed information such as specific dollar amounts on the website. Announcements from NRCS called eBlasts are sent out by the NRCS public affairs specialist. Dick Starkey suggested NRCS utilize the Conservation Commission website, MA Land Trust Coalition and MA Woods newsletter to post announcements about NRCS programs and projects.

Action: Add State Tech Committee members to eBlast distribution list.

- Karen Lombard stated there is a maintenance issue with the funding for invasive species control through WHIP. There is not much funding available for longer term projects (WHIP funding is only 5 years). She added large sums are not needed to do the maintenance but another issue is the long term funding needs could continue forever.
- Dick Starkey believes that NRCS forestry practices are working well through the EQIP program.
- Eric Derleth suggested that the State Tech Committee should create formal subcommittees for program delivery and outreach issues (specific topics targeted). He believes input by STC members is needed.
- Eric added that it is hard to get resource dollars to remove old dams. There is a \$50K limit on private dam removal under WHIP. He used the example of the Briggsville Dam in Western MA. He noted that partners must work together and use multiple programs to

fund the dams and emphasized that the agencies must get together to strategize ways to unlock funding for projects.

- Maryanne summarized what is wrong with WHIP is the \$50K cap. She added WHIP work is only limited to listed species.

Action: Tim Smith of Apex Orchards asked why some contracts are not being implemented in Worcester County. Walter Albarran will contact Tim with EQIP implemented rates and answer his questions. Chris added NRCS NHQ stresses funds be de-obligated if practices are unlikely to be implemented.

- Jane Peirce of the EPA complimented NRCS for working with the cranberry industry to address water quality issues. She mentioned the DEP, NRCS and other agricultural organizations should create a partnership to work on non-point source pollution issues. Our agencies should meet to swap information on a regular basis. She said that the \$2M Eel River/Cranberry Bog Restoration project worked well. The town did a good job of pulling resources together and in the future our organizations should continue to communicate and educate each other about new projects. Jane stressed that she (EPA) is often in the dark about many of the projects NRCS is involved with that also have an impact on EPA work. Jane also wants the soil conservation districts and RC&D's strengthened. Don Lewis of MACD and Jane Peirce of EPA were encouraged by Chris to meet to discuss ways to enhance the Conservation Districts.
- Chris commented that lack of funding from the state has weakened the Conservation Districts in Massachusetts. Chris encourages STC members to work with the active conservation districts on their projects.

Action: Chris stated that she wants a meeting scheduled on a regular basis (physically or by phone) with EPA's Jane Peirce. Chris suggested that a Conservation District representative should also be involved in the meetings.

Action: Assist the Conservation Districts who must develop resource assessments for their areas of responsibility in the state.

Action: Barb requested statewide resource assessments by the agencies who attend the State Tech Committee meetings. She would like to discuss Massachusetts resource needs from STC members point of view at the next meeting.

Action: Eric Derleth asked to create a sub committee to discuss water quality issues.

Action: Chris motioned to create subcommittees as requested.

Action: Christine and Jane Peirce suggested that they meet after 6 months for a status check to see if any of the strategies are working.

- Marianne Piche brought up the fact that MA Fish and Wildlife can not share info on habitat management though they partner with NRCS. She added a geospatial database with information on projects such as non point source pollution is unavailable. WHIP data is unavailable that could help F&W with their projects. Agencies can not see which practices were used as well as the polygon data. Don Lewis noted that in the 2008 Farm Bill, Section 1619 language dictates what data NRCS could share.

Action: Create a geospatial database subcommittee to explore information sharing issues.

- Marianne Piche would like to see later implementation of practices under the essential habitat agreements. She thinks some practices would be better implemented later (cottontail). Barb said that there is some flexibility but a practice must be completed in the first year.
- It was agreed that targeted subcommittees are a good idea to inform and to address issues between agencies, landowners and organizations. This will help with outreach as well.
- Maryjo Feurbach of the EPA said that the EPA requires reporting of detailed information (for example TMDL pollutant budgets) on successfully completed projects. She asked how NRCS's conservation practices reduce pollution in target areas that EPA has been working on. She wants to obtain this information from NRCS. Chris responded that NRCS has Conservation Effects Assessment Project (CEAP) which is national in scope. CEAP data shows the impact of NRCS's conservation practices on the lands resources. Web link for CEAP: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/NRI/ceap/>

Action: Christine Clarke to share CEAP data links with EPA and NRCS national contact information.

- Maryjo also mentioned that EPA wishes to target the best use of program funding and again suggested NRCS join with EPA to assess program practices, etc. EPA needs partners like NRCS that work with the agricultural communities.
- Chris welcomed Maryjo and Jane to call NRCS District Conservationists anytime. The EPA can also call NRCS to ask for resources and can utilize the expertise of its staff.
- Maryjo commended NRCS for support on a strategy to control nitrogen releases. A discussion ensued about the Buzzards Bay National Estuary Program, TMDL and the CEAP study. Barb added this topic could be a potential CIG. Find ways to mitigate nitrogen?
- MA F&W is pleased with their partnership with NRCS concerning the habitat projects in the state.
- Gerard Kennedy of MDAR added that he believes the relationship MDAR has with NRCS has improved and the relationship is very positive. ACPP and AEP have been effective programs.

Chris concluded the meeting by asking STC members for more feedback to the State Resource Conservationist Questions. She requested that the members send her the feedback directly through email. Type in the subject line: Partner Feedback. She added to continue with feedback throughout the year.

She also noted she will put together a list of subcommittees that STC members suggested.

Christine Clarke adjourned the meeting at 11:45 am.

Recorder: Carol Rickless

ACTIONS:

1. If STC members want NRCS to fund a CIG next year; the CIG must fund one of the categories or themes set forth by NHQ. What area of focus or theme does the STC think would best utilize CIG funds? <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/cig/index.html>
2. STC members to generate ideas on how NRCS can encourage landowners to utilize WRP funds in the western part of the state.
3. Action: Add State Tech Committee members to eBlast distribution list.
4. Action: Tim Smith of Apex Orchards asked why some contracts are not being implemented in Worcester County. Walter Albarran will contact Tim with EQIP implemented rates statewide and answer his questions.
5. Action: Chris stated that she wants a meeting scheduled on a regular basis (physically or by phone) with EPA's Jane Peirce and a Conservation District representative. District Conservationists will help encourage the conservation districts to attend.
6. Action: Barb requested statewide resource assessments by the agencies who attend the state tech committee meetings. She would like to discuss Massachusetts resource needs from STC members point of view at the next STC meeting.
7. Action: Create a sub committee to meet to discuss water quality issues.
8. Action: Christine and Jane Peirce suggested that they meet after 6 months for a status check to see if their meetings are reaching their objectives.
9. Action: Christine will share CEAP national contact information with EPA.
10. Action: Five subgroups will be established under the State Technical Committee. The subgroups and NRCS contacts appear below. If you would like to participate, please email the identified person indicating your desire to be a member of that subgroup. Each NRCS contact will develop draft charters (attached) and coordinate the meetings.

Five Subcommittee Subgroups

- 1) Data and data sharing – Aaron Dushku – aaron.dushku@ma.usda.gov
- 2) Programs – Deb Johnson – deb.johnson@ma.usda.gov
- 3) Forestry – Kate Parsons – kate.parsons@ma.usda.gov
- 4) Target species and pollinator – Beth Schreier – beth.schreier@ma.usda.gov
- 5) Outreach – Diane Petit – diane.petit@ma.usda.gov

State Tech Committee members should send comments to:

Christine Clarke, State Conservationist

USDA-NRCS

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Amherst, MA 01002

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Attachments:

STC 1219-2010 Power point Presentation

FSA Conservation Loan Fact Sheet.pdf

Draft Charter- STC Date subcommittee.docx

Draft Charter – STC EQIP subcommittee.docx

Draft Charter – STC WHIP/WRP subcommittee.docx

Draft Charter – STC Forestry subcommittee.docx

Draft Charter – STC Outreach subcommittee.docx