

**MASSACHUSETTS
USDA-NRCS
STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING
MINUTES**

Wednesday, December 5, 2012
USDA NRCS State Office
Amherst, MA 01002

Present: 22 in attendance.

Christine Clarke, USDA NRCS, State Conservationist	Dave Welsch, USFS
Barbara Miller, USDA NRCS, Program Manager	Artie McCollum, US FWS
Deborah Johnson, USDA NRCS, ASRC	Heather Baylis, USDA, FSA
Carol Rickless, USDA NRCS, Secretary	Jay Healy, State Director, USDA RD
Al Averill, USDA NRCS, SSS	Brian Wick, CCCGA
Diane Petit, USDA NRCS, PAS	Dr. Frederick Errington, Trinity College
Kip Kolesinskas, Amer. Farmland Trust	Jennifer Fish, MA Dept of Cons. & Rec.
Jane Peirce, MA Dept. of Env. Protection	Leslie Luchonok, TNC
Maryjo Feuerbach, US EPA	Alan Page, Forester, Green Diamond Systems
Brad Mitchell, Farm Bureau	Marianne Piche, MA Div. of F&W
	Brent Powers, MA Div. of F&W
	Eric Derleth, MA FWS

This meeting was digitally recorded.
Meeting duration: 9:30 A.M. to 11:55 A.M.

Welcome & Opening Remarks: Christine Clarke, State Conservationist
Christine announced there is a new NRCS acting Chief, Jason Weller. Chief Dave White retired effective Dec. 3, 2012.

- Acting Chief Weller wants NRCS to focus on 7 areas.
 1. *Strengthening Business Operations.* How we do business is as important as the business we do. The Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative (CDSI) is crucial; it is going to let our conservation professionals spend most of their time doing what they love to do, what they were trained to do and what we need them to do – providing direct service to our customers. We also have to strengthen and streamline our core administrative functions, like financial management, human resources management, and contracting operations, to ensure the long-term health of our agency.
 2. *Expanding Soil Health Campaign.* We kicked off our new soil health campaign in October and we're spreading the word about soil health and its benefits far and wide – to producers, partners and the public. We've initially focused our attention on cropland and we're going to expand this soil health effort to range, pasture, and forest lands.
 3. *Enhancing Landscape Conservation Initiatives.* Through our Landscape Conservation Initiatives we have pushed the envelope on how we meet local, regional and national

conservation needs. Now is the time to take a look at these initiatives – figure out what’s working and what isn’t so we can improve them.

4. *Increasing Conservation Access for Underserved Communities.* One in six Americans is living in poverty and 90 percent of the highest poverty rate counties are in rural America. We launched the StrikeForce Initiative two years ago to tremendous success in pilot states and it’s time to expand those efforts nationally. Using our financial and technical resources, we can help underserved farmers and ranchers in these communities. We’re not just investing in conservation practices – we’re investing in families, communities and future generations.
5. *Broadening Regulatory Predictability.* In September, we made an announcement with our U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service partners that are changing the paradigm for species conservation. Producers who voluntarily implement and maintain conservation practices that enhance and protect habitat for seven key wildlife species will get regulatory predictability for 30 years. That means even if a species becomes listed, producers can continue working their land and be in compliance with the Endangered Species Act. This is a game changer and we’ve only just scratched the surface; we’re going to expand this model to water and air quality as well.
6. *Harnessing Private Markets.* The Nation’s conservation opportunities are bigger than any one agency, any one budget, or even the Federal government. We are going to use our expertise to harness the private marketplace for conservation. This means engaging private markets to drive conservation-based decision-making by producers and consumers alike.
7. *Deepening Strategic Partnerships to Leverage Outcomes.* Our core partners – Soil and Water Conservation Districts, State Conservation Agencies, and Resource Conservation & Development Councils – are vital to fulfilling our mission. But new partners will also be important, and we will be doing an even better job of identifying our shared priorities, not just for the current year but also for the long term, to bring more resources to bear for conservation.

- In the absence of a new Farm Bill and the uncertain budget, NRCS is operating on a continuing resolution. CR has caused funding for the local working groups to be on hold.
- NRCS will put the Local Working Groups (LWG) Report on the NRCS website for state technical committee members to review. NRCS is reviewing the information in the LWG report so it can see how the agency can better serve the needs of each community.
- NRCS is in the process of some organizational changes that should enhance NRCS’s fiscal and operational capacities.

Review of minutes from May 23, 2012 meeting:

- Last meetings minutes were accepted by STC members.

WOW- Watershed on Wheels: Artie McCollum, US Fish and Wildlife Service

- WOW is a mobile visitors’ center that offers environmental education and interactive exhibits to the community. WOW teaches the importance of preserving the Connecticut River Watershed.

- Artie is a Private Lands Biologist for the Silvio O. Conte Refuge. His position is funded through MA, CT, VT and NH NRCS and the Fish and Wildlife Service. The watershed area encompasses one half of New Hampshire and Vermont, western Massachusetts and some parts of Connecticut.
- NRCS has teamed up with US FWS to create an additional four-sided kiosk. Each panel will discuss a topic including: soils, land use, NRCS programs and US FWS Adopt-a-Habitat Program. The inspiration for the “Soils” panel came from “Dig It” at the Smithsonian. The “Land Use” panel will feature a map set of the watershed and five trilons or three sided interactives that can be turned. Rotating panels show pictures of “problem, solution, and the result” for different land types in the Watershed. The “NRCS Program” panel will have video interviews and stories of farmers and foresters from MA, NH, VT, and CT. The kiosk is designed to be interactive and will have QR codes for visitors to scan using their smartphones. The plans have been finalized and the kiosk should be completed by March 1, 2013.
- The WOW staff has worked with education specialists to create teaching guides for grades 3-5 in schools. The guides and educational materials tie into a state’s educational standards.
- The Watershed on Wheels is available from April to October. The WOW travels to community events, fairs, and schools.
- The Conte Refuge is asking for volunteers to help in outreach efforts. The Worcester Conservation District staff has requested a WOW appearance.
- Link to the WOW website: http://www.fws.gov/r5soc/educational_resources/watershed-on-wheels.html
- See attached PowerPoint presentation for more information.

Soil Health Campaign: Diane Petit, Public Affairs Specialist.

- Diane presented information for the NRCS Soil Health Campaign. As world population and food production demands rise, keeping soil healthy and productive is of paramount importance. By focusing more attention on soil health and by educating the public about the positive impact healthy soils can have on productivity and conservation, NRCS can help farmers and ranchers feed the world more profitably and sustainably. The resources on the soil health section of the national website will “Unlock the Secrets in the Soil” because the website is designed to help visitors understand the basics and benefits of soil health – and to learn about Soil Health Management Systems from farmers who are using those systems.
- The *Soil Health Campaign* also gives soils information through varied methods such as videos on YouTube, flyers, displays, banners; social media and the 2013 NRCS Soils Planner will feature the “Unlock the Secrets in the Soil” theme. The calendar was designed by Massachusetts, Visual Information Specialist, Catherine Ulitsky.
- Ray Archuleta, an NRCS Agronomist, is the spokesperson on the You Tube video, *Soil Health Lesson in a Minute – How Healthy Soil Should Look* and *Discover the Cover*. Ray has done the healthy vs. disturbed soils runoff demonstration for Congress. “*Voices of Soil Health*” was also developed for the Soil Health Campaign. A link to the You Tube videos will be posted on the MA NRCS homepage.
- The transition from single practices to systems of practices to protect the soil are currently geared toward cropland but will be extended to forestry and ranchland in the

future. Kip Kolesinska of American Farmland Trust suggested that NRCS should also look at practices for suburban and urban lands.

- See attached PowerPoint presentation for more information.

Soil Information Resources: Al Averill, State Soil Scientist, MA and VT

- Al described how soils information can assist landowners to make better land use decisions and that the NRCS soil staff can be utilized as technical consultants.
- Al will provide soil information resources to STC members via the MA NRCS website. This information includes the web soil survey site, soil data mart site and the geo-spatial data gateway.
- Collaboration with partners and the public is necessary to determine future priorities in the soils area. Al is asking STC members for their input on how they currently use soil information and what NRCS can do to enhance the use of soils data. How can NRCS help our partners/the public in this area? What needs to be fixed?
- A cut of 15% in funding and redefined priorities have contributed to NRCS Soil Survey reorganization. The MO area has been enlarged and supervision has been redirected from state level to NHQ.
- Nationally, priorities are to complete private lands soil survey work – update soil classifications, edit soil data joins to gain consistency across political boundaries and to begin soil survey work on public lands.
- Regionally, the soils staff will be focusing on S. Penobscot County, Maine, W. Central, NY, the Adirondack, NY area and the White Mountains National Forest.
- Al thanked Christine Clarke, STC for providing the resources needed to finish Middlesex County Soil Survey (2009), Plymouth County (2010), and Franklin County (2012).
- See attached PowerPoint presentation for more information.

Farm Bill Program Delivery 2012/2013: Barbara Miller, Program Manager

- Barbara went over the powerpoint and showed FY12 contracts by county and percentage of dollars spent for EQIP.
- The new Farm Bill has not been approved. Funding for WHIP may go away under the new Farm Bill, but EQIP can address some wildlife practices. New initiatives may pick up funding for Working Lands for Wildlife practices under WHIP.
- Currently, funding for programs is split up into several NHQ driven initiatives, including the Organic Initiative, Seasonal High Tunnel Initiative, On-Farm Energy Initiative, National Water Quality Initiative, and New England/New York Forestry Initiative. States have less discretion on the ranking criteria for these initiatives; national priorities receive 75% of the score General EQIP, however, is still ranked using a 25% national, 40% state, 25% local and 10% efficiency-score point structure.
- If additional funding is offered through Regional Equity, Massachusetts will try to leverage this money.
- FY2013 Payment Schedules, the amount NRCS will pay for practice installation, determining payment levels for programs, is now developed nationally with regional customization. This will change the types of practice payments and the amounts a participant will receive for this program year. The new payment schedule list of practice

payments is rolled-up into about 600 pages that are available on the NRCS-MA web page.

- National financial audits reflect that conservation is not getting on the ground - producers are not fulfilling their contractual obligations. These audits are compelling the states to get landowners to either complete or cancel their contracts. Obligated funds are just sitting in the treasury and NHQ wants funds to either be paid-out or freed up.
- Low contract implementation rates are addressed in the state ranking priorities, with negative points given to applicants with poor past performance.
- Local priorities are addressed through 25% of the ranking questions for general EQIP funds. Local working group concerns and priorities are selected based on common issues reflected across the state.
- WRP and GRP have not been reauthorized for FY13. There will be no new enrollees. Past contracts will continue to be managed.
- FRPP was funded in FY12 at \$9 million, due to being in position to request additional funds last summer. This is because of the documented need by the APR program. In FY13 initial funding is \$4.7 million.
- The published sign-up periods for producers to apply for NRCS programs in FY2013 are December 21, 2012 and February 15, 2013.
- See attached PowerPoint presentation for more information.

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) – National & Massachusetts: Deb Johnson, Asst. State Resource Conservationist

- CIG encourages new innovations in technology not yet adopted by NRCS.
- In FY12, Massachusetts funded three projects. 1) Berkshire Pioneer RC&D – Massachusetts Farm Energy Program, 2) UMass Cranberry Experiment Station – Cycling auto start irrigation for frost mitigation and 3) –Town of Wellfleet - Harbor restoration and Oyster regeneration.
- FY 2012 CIG funding totaled \$217K.
- If Massachusetts decides to run a state CIG grant opportunity in FY2013, the maximum funding reallocation would be \$115K.
- The NRCS CIG website gives information on previously funded projects. <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/programs/financial/cig>

Other Comments and Discussion:

- Barbara Miller would like STC members input on location and frequency of the state technical committee meetings. Meet more often than twice a year?
- Joe Smith asked the timeframe for obligations on NRCS contracts. Barb responded we only obligate contracts in the FY that money is given to NRCS. NRCS is working with landowners to finish their practices, but extenuating circumstances may cause a contract to be cancelled by the producer or terminated by NRCS.
- Marianne Piche asked about long term practices and inflation. She said that some practices could take 10-15 years to complete. Are the payments indexed to reflect costs going up? Barb will check on this question and respond to Marianne.

Any suggestions from STC members to make the meetings more effective are welcome.

Next Meeting to Be Determined

Adjourn

Attachments:

WoW Express.pptx

NRCS Programs - STC012512

Soil Health Campaign.pptx PowerPoint

Soil Information Resources PowerPoint