

*State Technical Committee
Minutes
August 29, 2012*

Attendees:

R. Phou Vongkhamdy - NRCS State Conservationist
Richard Went - Northern Rhode Island Conservation District
Marilu Soilieu - Farm Service Agency
John O'Brien - The Nature Conservancy
Rick Pace - Eco Assets
Andy Radin - University of Rhode Island-Cooperative Extension
Tom Abbot - RIDEM Forestry
Paul Brule - Farm Service Agency
Liz Peterman - RIDEM Division of Agriculture
Kate Sales - Northern Rhode Island Conservation Service,
Elizabeth Scott - RIDEM Water Resources Division,
Margherita Pryor - US Environmental Protection Agency
Alan Gillespie - NRCS Acting State Engineer
Brunilda Velez - NRCS ASTC Programs
Chris Modisette - NRCS State Resource Conservationist
Joseph Bachand - NRCS Financial Assistance Program Manager

The meeting commenced at 9:05a

Introductions: R. Phou Vongkhamdy opened the meeting. Mr. Vongkhamdy introduced Brunilda Velez as the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs. She will be in charge of all Farm Bill financial assistance and easement programs for Rhode Island. She is also responsible for the operation and management of the Field Team and Field Operations. Ms. Velez gave a history of her career with NRCS. She is originally from Puerto Rico and has spent the majority of her career in Wisconsin. She was a Soil Conservationist and then a District Conservationist. She has served in a number of details including one at the NRCS National Office where she created the EQIP Great Lakes Initiative for the Regional Assistant Chiefs. All other attendees introduced themselves.

Ms. Velez reviewed the roles of the Local Work Group & State Technical Committee. These can be found in the NRCS Directives at 440 section 501.20 Subparts B and C respectively.

Responsibilities of the State Technical Committee:

- (1) Provide information, analysis, and recommendations to USDA on conservation priorities and criteria for natural resources conservation activities and programs, including application and funding criteria, recommended practices, and program payment percentages.
- (2) Identify emerging natural resource concerns and program needs.
- (3) Recommend conservation practice standards and specifications.
- (4) Recommend State and national program policy based on resource data.
- (5) Review activities of the local working groups to ensure State priorities are being addressed locally.
- (6) Make recommendations to the State Conservationist on requests and recommendations from local working groups.
- (7) Assist NRCS with public outreach and information efforts and identify educational and producers' training needs.

Ms. Velez reviewed the Standard Operating Procedure meeting will be run:

F. Conducting Business

- (1) The meetings will be conducted as an open discussion among members. Discussion will focus on the programs and activities identified in 440-CPM, Part 501, Subpart A, Section 501.0C. All recommendations will be considered.
- (2) The following guidelines will govern meeting discussions:
 - (i) The State Conservationist or his or her designee will lead the discussion.
 - (ii) Only one person may speak at a time. Every participant should have an opportunity to speak.
 - (iii) The State Conservationist or his or her designee is responsible for recognizing speakers.
 - (iv) State Technical Committees are advisory in nature and all recommendations are considered.
 - (v) Members may be polled, but voting on issues is not appropriate.
 - (vi) The State Conservationist, in consultation with those members present, may establish time limits for discussion on individual agenda items.
 - (vii) The State Conservationist will defer those agenda items not covered because of time limits to the next meeting.

The full presentation on the State Technical Committee in the attached power point PDF.

Farm Bill Easement Programs: Ms. Velez provided a final year review for the FY13 Easement Programs.

Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP): FRPP had applications for eight parcels by five entities. Two parcels have been submitted to our National Office for review prior to fund obligation. We are waiting on paperwork from the other entities to submit to our National Office before we can obligate the funds. NRCS is developing a Contribution Agreement for FRPP technical assistance. The agreement will be with one of our partners. **See attached power point for additional information.**

Wetland Reserve Program (WRP): Survey is complete for 1 of the WRP obligations from FY12. We received bids for one other survey but the cost was excessive so we are waiting for an additional survey bid. Materials have been submitted to staff in Massachusetts for the title and closing work on three easements.

Grassland Reserve Program (GRP): Survey of one of the parcels entered into the program is complete. Payment will soon be processed. Survey bid for other parcel was received and is being reviewed. Materials have been submitted to Massachusetts for title and closing work.

WRP and Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) Geographic Area Rate CAP (GARC): Ms. Velez reviewed the GARC for WRP & GRP. By statute NRCS must develop Geographic Area Rate Caps for easement cost per acres for both WRP and GRP. The GARC sets the maximum limit NRCS can pay per acre for parcels purchased through these programs. The State Technical Committee is given the opportunity to review and comment on the GARCs. The GARC was reviewed and approved by the State Technical Committee. **A copy of the GARC is attached.**

Farm Bill Financial Assistance Programs: Environment Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) and Agricultural Management Assistance Program (AMA). Ms. Velez provided an update on the results of the FY13 contract obligations for each program. Total funds obligated for all three were \$2,480,000. Ms. Velez reviewed the number of contracts per program by county. A graph was reviewed for each Conservation District showing the number and type of conservation practice contracted. This information is valuable in determining the type of conservation that is occurring in each District. There were 122 EQIP contracts, 3 WHIP, and 9 AMA contracts obligated in FY13. Northern Rhode Island Conservation District (Providence County) practices are mainly forestry focused, Eastern Rhode Island Conservation District (Bristol Newport Counties) more crop livestock practices, Southern Rhode Island Conservation District (Washington & Kent Counties) Forestry focused, livestock focused. (Presentation is attached)

EQIP Conservation Innovation Grant: Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) is a voluntary program intended to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation

approaches and technologies while leveraging Federal investment in environmental enhancement and protection, in conjunction with agricultural production. Rhode Island NRCS Received 3 pre-proposals during the open application period. We then received two full proposals. Rhode Island funded one proposal. Proposal Funded: Aquaponic Filtration System for Commercial Scale Fish Production. The funded CIG was reviewed. Elizabeth Scott, RIDEM asked if we can get RIDEM involved since received got a grant from US-EPA to deal with polluted discharge from their hatcheries. John O'Brien from TNC state that this is an issue for many small private hatcheries in New England. Discussion was had about opportunities to work with the state. NRCS will set up a tour to see the operation once it is running. (See attached PowerPoint for more information)

FY 2014 Program Financial Assistance Program Delivery: Ms. Velez led a discussion on preparation to deliver FY14 Farm Bill Financial Assistance Programs. She explained that there would be three ranking periods/cutoff dates in FY14. Rhode Island will use a prescreening tool before each ranking to determine the applications priority. All application prescreened High or Medium will be ranked. Application pre-screened as low will not be ranked until they qualify as Medium or High. The pre-screening tool is used to determine if the applicant has all required statutory eligibilities (i.e. they have completed all of their paper work to become eligible in the Farm Service Agency system), they have a fully developed conservation plan, and they can select which conservation practice they would like included in their contract. NRCS wants to avoid entering into contracts with applicants who are not ready to implement the practices. Tom Abbot brought up a concern about Conservation Activity Plans and the different rankings that could occur. It was explained that all CAP will be ranked at 750 points and we will select applications for funding using a tracking number (tie breaker). All CAPS will be funded in this order until the funds are exhausted. All remaining applications will be deferred until the next funding period. Ms. Velez reviewed the Funding Pools that will be used in FY14. These were reviewed by the Local Work Group:

State Funding Pools (EQIP): Cropland, Forestry, Livestock, Pasture, Beginning Farmer, Socially Disadvantaged Farmer, RI Air Quality Ozone (Question are developed in State for both State and Local Questions as part of the Ranking).

National Initiative Fund Pools (EQIP): Conservation Activity Plans, Organic, Transition to Organic, Energy, Water Quality, High Tunnel, NE-NY Forestry Initiative (Only Local question are developed in State, National provides all other questions for the ranking tool).

State Funding Pools (AMA): Cropland

State Funding Pools (WHIP): NE Cottontail

Discussion by Margarita Pryor from EPA on the WQ initiative. This initiative is a partnership between NRCS and EPA.

Ms. Velez explained that the Local Work Group met this week to develop the Local Ranking Tool Questions. The questions were provided to the Committee. She said the Local Work Group

selected “Water Quality” as their “Priority Resource Concern”. The questions they developed that are pertaining to Water Quality will be given more points. This will give application that address water quality a higher ranking score, for the local questions, and these project may be funded first if they are ranked higher. Local met this week to develop the process for 2014 program delivery, application process, local questions, application process, and pre-screening tool.

The distribution of points for the State Funding Pools was discussed (250 National Questions, 10 percent efficiency score, 65 percent to local and state questions. Rick Pace (Eco Assets) asked why pick a main resource concern. The local work group selected Water Quality as their priority resource concern. This is selected to make priority project rank high so that if funding runs out before all application are processed the higher priority project are funded. Elizabeth Scott and Rick Pace said they were under the impression that there were enough funds to fund all application each year. A discussion ensued about the funding process and the regional equity process. Though Rhode Island gets a significant amount of funds through Regional Equity this does not mean we fund every project. We began using the Pre-Screening Tool two years ago so it is possible that applications will be ranked after we are eligible for Regional Equity (April 1st is the Regional Equity Deadline) and there will be limited funds for any application that are ranked in the 3rd cutoff. Applications that address Water Quality Resource Concerns will get higher ranking from the local questions. This does not mean that other project s will not get funded. Members thought that all contracts were funded and are concerned that some application will not be funded. Ms. Velez explained that the process is there to fund the applications that have the greatest impact on the resource concerns. The State Technical Team would like to be involved in the development of the Local Questions. The Committee was told that it is a public meeting and they will be notified next year. A notice of the meeting was in the Providence Journal. A copy of last year’s state ranking questions was provided. A meeting was set for September 19, from 9 AM-12 PM to review the ranking process, Funding Pools and review and develop the State Ranking Questions.

Ms. Velez reviewed a National Bulletin on “Unauthorized Obligations”. She explained that any NRCS employee or partner employees working for NRCS should be careful not to tell applicants or current participants that they will receive funding for a new contract or current contract modification until a contract or modification is approved by the obligating official. These employees do not have the authority to authorize any obligations.

Working with Marijuana Growers: Ms. Velez reviewed the new policy for working with growers of marijuana. Though the plant may be legal in some states it is still federally illegal so this presents barriers when working with these agricultural operations. We sent questions to the National Office about the process and the rules. What we need to do regarding this issue. Can we create a questionnaire to use when meeting with potential applicants?

Emergency Watershed Protection-Flood Plain Easements (EWP-FPE): Alan Gillespie, Acting State Engineer reviewed the Hurricane Sandy flood plain easement program. November 2nd is last day of applications for the program. Normally for flood plain easement you need to be flooded 2 times in 10 years. For Sandy you need to show that Sandy caused one of the two flood incidents. John Obrien asked about the rules for the FPE program if it stated that impacts from Sandy and potential impacts from future events. Mr. Vongkhamdy said the rules would need to be changed for areas impacted by Sandy and potentially impacted by future events.

Alan Gillespie made a presentation on the General EWP-FPE: See attached PowerPoint. Traditionally EWP is recovery work due to a Natural Disaster. Usually thing like debris removal from streams and repairing degraded stream banks are funded. EWP provides 75% cost share. EWP Floodplain program purchases and restores flood planes to natural conditions. This program provides 100% cost of easement, purchase of property and removal of structures. Alan reviewed the process for Sandy and the rules and the law known as the Stafford Act. Potential applicants need to contact John Richard, DC Kent and Washington, Melissa Hayden, DC Bristol and Newport County. See attached PowerPoint for more information.

Chris Modisette/Alan Gillespie -Technical Assistance: Engineering and Resources will be creating tools, job sheets, checkout sheets for all practices. There will be draft conservation practices for review coming out very soon. Notices will be going out to the committee for review. The technical staff is working on conservation planner certification for a consistent New England procedure. Resource and Engineering is working on Job Approval Authority for our field staff. Resources will be working with FSA to have a joint process for HELC and Wetland Conservation review. Posted some updated seeding dates to our Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) for use in New England. Culturally significant plants were posted to FOTG. We are currently updating conservation practice lifespans. These will be posted to the FOTG. Chris Modisette discussed the practice life span. When a participant installs a practice they must maintain the practice for the lifespan. Usually from 1-20 years.

Alan Gillespie provided an overview of the Field Office Tech Guide Website.

Section 1: General Reference

Section 2: Soils and Site Information

Section 3: Conservation Management Systems

Section 4: Practice Standards and Specifications

Section5: Conservation Effects

How to access: Alan went to the actual site and reviewed the sections. The FOTG is specific to RI. Check FOTG for updates. (see the attached PowerPoint for more information)

Partnership Reports:

EPA: Working on the National Water Quality Initiative. EPA worked with RIDEM and NRCS on the initiative. Should we use the initiative watershed in the State Questions? Need to develop a way to share information between EPA and NRCS. RI is hosting April 2014 the Regional Non-Point Source Conference. Request for abstracts for Conference. May want to have a presentation on the roles of State Technical Committee.

No FSA updates

URI CE: URI will be searching for Associated Director of Cooperative Extension. Try to coordinate all university outreach. One goal will be to forge a better connection with the Conservation Districts. Similar to the agreements between NRCS and the Districts. Andy working on the beginning farmer network and developed a survey. A lot of interest in having an education program for beginning farmers on what opportunities is available to beginning farmers for funding projects.

RIDEM Forestry: Incident command training between U SDA forestry, APHIS on what to do if invasive pest comes into RI and how to react. Develop an action response plan. RIDEM Forestry has a review by US forest service. Report will issue finding and recommendations.

Elizabeth Scott RIDEM Water Resources: RIDEM is updating the States Non- Point Source Management Plan. Will be part of the State Guide plan. There will be an agricultural component. NPS management plan is required for federal funding. The plan lays out broad policies for addressing all NPS pollutants. Once part of guide plan local comprehensive plans must follow this guidance. Ms. Velez discussed the Wisconsin NR 151 implementing the EPA Clean Water Act. What farmers had to do to comply and meet the Act in Wisconsin?

John O'Brien-TNC-No report

Northern District- Updating the Ag Tech agreements. Hire a new watershed outreach coordinator, will be expanding to city of providence, working on small scale forestry operations bmps. District is close to getting a rental agreement for Dame Farm. Goal would be to lease parcels to local farmers.

Eco Assets: Working with New Urban Farmers and African Alliance on several parcels. Would like to have these folks meet with the District on outreach. Farm Fund has been incorporated to

look at parcels to make urban farms and improve existing farms. Have on food enterprise in which they working on food development. Working on CIG to retrofit practices for Small and Urban farmers. Working on 10-15 practices. Will work on identifying resource other than NRCS to help pay urban farmers for benefits they create on their farm since sometime the resource concerns they can address as limited.

Dick Went-NRICD: National Conference will be in Newport next year. Soil Health initiative will be rolled out soon. District funded a young farmer network. NRDC asked the Resource Management Agency to reward farmer for improving protecting soil health.

Farm Bill may be approved in the near future.

Had a discussion about the EQIP oyster restoration and the impacts to not allow growers to pay for setting spat on shell and growing out the oyster.

Meeting adjourned 12:10p.