

Vermont USDA State Technical Committee Meeting

hosted virtually on Teams January 27, 2021 from 9:30-12:30

Attendees: from USDA—NRCS-Vicky Drew, presiding; with Joe Buford, Wynea Buford, Obe Racicot, Jim Eikenberry, Amy Overstreet, Greta Steverson, Sarah Larose, Meredith Albers, and FSA- Eileen Powers and Acting State Executive Director Lana Walden.

Guests-Margaret Fowle, Ben Machin, Tracy Zschau, Karl Honkonen, Ron Rhodes, Jeff Carter, Kyla Bedard, Harris Roen, Diana Butler, Tom Berry, Laura Ranker, Peter Beringer, Marli Rupe, Jake Jacobs, Chris Smith, Jill Arace, Eric Perkins, Jenn Colby, Jeff Farber, Dana Hazen, Nina Gage, Elijah Massey, Mark LaBarr, Lauren Honican, Clare Ireland, Alissa White, Kira Jacobs, Dave Adams, Bill Eldridge, Phil Wilson, Lauren Weston, Paul Hamelin, Jeff Sanders, Jennifer Byrne, Kaitlin Hayes, Ryan Patch, Liz Royer, Lilian Ruiz, Krystal Sewell, Sarah Damsall, Dave Adams, Jennifer Alexander, Ben Gabos, Juan Alvez, Dana Hazen, Heather Darby, Monica Przyperhart, and Erica Campbell.

I. Welcome from NRCS State Conservationist Vicky Drew

NRCS updates: The agency is now transitioning b/t administrations, awaiting guidance, and anticipating a larger USDA role related to climate change including an action plan. President Biden has been issuing executive orders, including that federal employees wear masks at all times while working in the office. NRCS acting Chief is Terry Cosby (state conservationist in Ohio) and former acting Chief Kevin Norton is now Deputy Under Secretary covering all of USDA FPAC.

A VT NRCS budget comparison was presented (view [here](#).) VT NRCS received the FY 2021 budget which includes a decrease in EQIP dollars and a significant decrease in technical assistance dollars which typically funds partnership agreements, so this is a major challenge. Marli asked how this impacts NRCS' ability to maintain staffing numbers. Vicky indicated there wouldn't be a furlough but it does impact agreements going forward, but they are funded through this fiscal year.

Vicky thanked the partners who participated in Stakeholder Feedback sessions last month as part of VT NRCS' strategic planning process to create a path forward for the next 5 years. Feedback received is being used to help refine VT NRCS' mission and goals as the leadership team will participate in a two-day workshop this week to embark on that process. Partner feedback has been critical.

II. Updates from the Hill, Tom Berry (Senator Leahy's Ag Outreach Specialist)

Reported that fiscal year 2021 spending bill was issued and work is being done on the Covid relief package which includes support for small business programs –paycheck protection—

and ag business could take advantage of this assistance. FSA's administered CFAP has also helped farmers. Senator Leahy is a leader on the ag committee, and has been since 1975, and chairs Senate Appropriations committee, and is the Senate's president pro tempore. Awaiting confirmation of Secretary Vilsack. Tom reported that Senator Leahy had a quick trip to the hospital but has been released and is back to work today and thanked everyone for their concern.

III. FSA Update, Eileen Powers, Ag Program Specialist

Wendy Wilton resigned as a political appointee, so VT FSA Admin Officer Lana Walden is acting state director for FSA for a short term.

Eileen thanked Wendy for her leadership. See Eileen's FSA update/ PowerPoint slides [here](#).

NOTE: Eileen indicated that the VT CREP Annual Report submitted by FSA to the National Office should be available for viewing soon. Contact Eileen.Powers@usda.gov if you are interested.

IV. NRCS programs and easement update, Obe Racicot, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs

Obe's PowerPoint is [here](#). Reviewed the build-up for 2021, including how priority resource concerns were selected, funding allocations determined, etc. Details are available in the October State Technical Committee minutes [here](#).

Working Lands Update (EQIP/CSP/AMA)

-VT NRCS based 2021 assumptions on a process called the State Resource Assessment (SRA). Requested \$13.1 million

-Actual allocation was significantly less than expected. Received \$9.3 million

- proposed funding pools and then had to do a commensurate reduction, to include areas such as Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) -\$175,000
- Request to State Tech: If we should increase CIG, from where should we take it? State Tech identifies Farmstead as the likely donor
- First pre-approval round for EQIP/AMA is at the end of February 2021

Chris Smith asked, "Do you expect more funds incoming later this fiscal year?" Obe said that instructions have come out to states instructing on how to request more funds. "You have to show you are spending down, ensure obligations are moving along once we start pre-approving practices, the pressure is on field offices to ensure producers sign contracts." Landowners will be given a time to accept contract and if no response, cancellation occurs. There is a requirement to be 60 percent obligated by June 30 which Vicky indicated is a heavy lift.

Jeff Sanders asked, "If farmstead funds don't get allocated can they go to cropland contracts?"

Obe indicated that if state tech committee is in agreement to reallocate, the answer is yes.

Vicky indicated there was a huge decline in cropland contracts, maybe b/c of payment schedules and reaching their CAP, but we can consider moving money between funding pools if committee members request so. It was also noted that funding is available through [the National Water Quality Initiative](#) through which VT NRCS has \$600,000 for 3 target watersheds and it is possible to move more money into NWQI. Do NWQI funds count against the farmer's cap (EQIP). Answer: yes, BUT 2018 Farm Bill RCPP funds do not.

Ryan Patch commented: 2021 VT EQIP general, comparing previous year b/t grazing and cropland, it's been higher in cropland pool, so based on previous FY, you don't anticipate as many cropland, so what's flexibility bt/ two pools (grazing/cropland)? Obe, yes we can move around in pools and sounds like there is general consensus right now among the committee.

EQIP Incentive Contracts: Sign up for new EQIP Incentive contracts expected mid-March.

Schedule a work group meeting (tentative Feb 19 via TEAMs ([Click here to join the meeting](#)) once guidance is received. These are a stepping stone between EQIP and CSP. We will need to ID watersheds or regions to support these contracts, ID resource concerns, and ID contract length (b/t 5-10 years). This is opp for longer contracts.

Applications deadlines: CSP, 1 million dollars received. Application period likely in April. AMA, \$132,000 received and next app period is March 19 (for irrigation and high tunnels). EQIP application deadline is March 19 and we received \$9.3 million.

RCPP-12 active projects that impact Vermont. 4 apps were reviewed this year and the NRCS Chief makes the final decision on the projects to be funded, and an announcement on new projects is expected in April.

Easement Programs-ACEP ALE, received 3.2 million/WRE, \$720,000/and 15% must go to maintaining existing easements. ACEP sign up is March 19, and WRE is Feb. 5. See the details here:

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/vt/newsroom/releases/?cid=NRCSEPRD1718031>

EWP-Floodplain easements-this program buys out houses on flooded floodplains in partnership with a local sponsor, such as the town. This is an emergency program. Has to have flooded in past 12 months and town has to come forward to initiate MOU. Halloween 2019 storm, Town of Huntington came forward to explore options of FPE. This was a first time experience for us. Looking at 8 properties (estimated USDA cost is 2.8 million). **See fact sheet on EWP-FPE [here](#).**

WRE Valuation Update-Renewing geographic area rate caps, GARC=per acre payment based on land use types and must be approved by headquarters. We have sped up our easement closing process. Wetlands subcommittee to meet soon.

Wetland Restoration Criteria Guidelines (WRCG), Jim Eikenberry, VT NRCS Wetlands Specialist

- The new Farm Bill required each state to create Wetland Restoration Criteria Guidelines that are reviewed and approved by the State Technical Committee
- These guidelines detail information on historical wetland types, wetland restoration conservation practices, ACEP WRE land eligibility, ACEP WRE application ranking, and more
- The Wetlands Subcommittee of the State Technical Committee has already reviewed and provided input and edits on the WRCG to Jim Eikenberry
- Jim Eikenberry will provide the updated WRCG for State Technical Committee review and approval during the afternoon of 1/27/21
- **ACTION for State Tech Committee:** review and approve WRC guidelines, available [HERE](#) by 4:30pm on 2/19/21

Other Easements:

The 2018 Farm Bill authorized new RCPP easement types with eligibility based on project purpose. Therefore, there are new opportunities to enroll lands that we have not thought about before. The 2018 Farm Bill Vermont DEC project has funding for these new easement types and once approved workgroups will be convened to explore opportunities. However, for 2021 there likely will not be any 2018 Farm Bill RCPP easement enrollment opportunities.

V. Resource Conservation Update, Joe Buford, State Resource Conservationist

-Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) is a competitive program that supports the development of new tools, approaches, practices, and technologies to further natural resource conservation on private lands.

- Through creative problem solving and innovation, CIG partners work to address our nation's water quality, air quality, soil health and wildlife habitat challenges, all while improving agricultural operations. Have set aside \$175,000 this year. **[Anticipated Vermont CIG announcement February 15th](#)**

ACTION: Need partner review team, would like partners to join and volunteer to assist us in CIG proposal reviews. Will prob convene April/May. If anyone has ideas on CIG, let NRCS know. Seeking suggestions where a CIG increase should come from--Reduce grazing? Reduce farmstead? Reduce forestry? Think about those decisions if you suggest an increase in CIG. NOTE: CIG cannot exceed 5% of the \$9.3 million in EQIP received in 2021. Ideas and volunteers for CIG review committee go to joe.buford@usda.gov.

-Practice Payment Schedule- Each year, NRCS re-evaluates the amount of financial assistance available for each practice in each state. These evaluations consider the current costs for material and labor within the state, and also the fair marketplace compensation for opportunity costs that may arise (e.g.

conversion of productive land). **Fiscal year 2022 practice payment schedule development starts Friday January 29th, 2021.**

- VI. **Farmed wetland label determination hydrology indicators review, Jim Eikenberry, VT NRCS Wetlands Specialist.** National Bulletin 19-21-6 came out on December 4th requiring action by 1/29/21 on each State's plan to adopt or not the Nationally provided template hydrology indicators for the identification of Farmed Wetlands
- NRCS staff received training on this bulletin on 12/15/20 and then requested to be on the State Technical Committee agenda to cover this topic
 - **ACTION for State Technical Committee: State Technical Committee Partners received a GovDelivery on the afternoon of January 27 requesting review of this document with any objections or concerns due to Jim Eikenberry no later than 4:30pm on 1/29/21.**
 - Jim recommends the State Technical Committee adopts the National template for Farmed Wetland (FW) hydrology indicators when an area is not a playa, pocosin, or pothole.
 - The adoption of this template is only for providing hydrology indicators to place a wetland label of Farmed Wetland (FW).
 - Without adopting this template we would be required to use either a State Offsite Method, which we do not have, or some intensive and expensive hydrology monitoring, which isn't practical.
 - The hydrology indicators allow for one to differentiate between Prior Converted Cropland or Farmed Wetland labels. All definition criteria for those two Food Security Act wetland labels are the same except for the hydrology criteria.
 - Jim's technical review is that Vermont does not have pothole, playa, nor pocosin wetlands in Vermont. If Vermont did think that we had pothole wetlands in Vermont, then that would lead to any new Food Security Act wetland determinations of what we had previously labeled Prior Converted Cropland instead being labeled as Farmed Wetland since that would then require only seven days of inundation or 14 days of saturation in the growing season. I believe that doing so would not be technically correct, would lead to confusion with USDA customers, and has significant potential to be considered arbitrary and capricious, and thus illegal under the Administrative Procedures Act.

VII. **Source Water Protection, Diana Butler, VT Rural Water Association and Laura Ranker, VT Dept. of Environmental Conservation**

This video was displayed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPEdoWgc4Gg>

You can view this PowerPoint on the topics below [here](#).

- Public Water System Definitions and Classifications (details are included in the PowerPoint)
- Vermont Specific Water Systems
- Source Water Protection
- Delineations & Definitions
- Vermont Water Supply Rule Requirements Implementation

Vicky asked what is being done for outreach in these areas that are prioritized as source water

protection areas. Maybe work with conservation districts. Karl H commented, “forests are an integral part of SWPA, and I think riparian forest buffer is important, and we should focus on this and he advocated for upland forest stream management for private landowners.” Vicky asked Joe to take note of this and work with partners. Obe: “10 practices get 90% in the SWPA areas.”

From Kira Jacobs: “Vicky helped us develop the NRCS & Source Water Protection Toolkit some years ago: <https://sourcewatercollaborative.org/swp-conservation-partners-toolkit/> I encourage our partners in VT to use it! Any questions, please talk to Laura, Diana or me: jacobs.kira@epa.gov or 617-918-1817”

VIII. RCPP Partner Reports

-Accelerated Implementation of Ag and Forestry Practices in the Lake Champlain Watershed of VT and NY, Marli Rupe, VT DEC. [PowerPoint is here.](#)

-Long Island Sound Watershed, Jenn Colby, UVM Extension and Lilian Ruiz, CT Council on Soil and Water Conservation [PowerPoint is here.](#)

-Connecting the Connecticut River Watershed TNC RCPP, Ron Rhodes, Conn. River Conservancy. CRC has hit our \$450,000 EQIP cap limit, so we can't sign any more contracts until a new Farm Bill in 2023. [PowerPoint is here.](#)

-Cold Hollow to Canada Woodlots, Lauren Honican and *Monica Przyperhart*, [PowerPoint is here.](#)

-Young Forest Initiative, Dave Adams, VT Fish and Wildlife - (*no PowerPoint*)

- ✓ 7 Total Projects -
- ✓ 105 acres Young Forest Habitat Created
- ✓ 60 Acres of initial and follow up treatments for invasive plant control.
- ✓ All funding exhausted for FA to landowners in FY20.
- ✓ Final project completion date (after all follow up Brush Management treatments) is fall 2022.
- ✓ Thank our partners in this project – Wildlife Management Institute; VT NRCS; VT Audubon; Ruffed Grouse Society; LandVest Consulting

-Accelerated Conservation Planning in the Lake Champlain Watershed and Beyond, Jill Arace, VACD [PowerPoint is here.](#)

End note from Marli Rupe

Recently released DEC Performance report, that shows the value of state funding toward water quality in Vermont. Thanks to VAAFAM for input and assistance on this. You can view it here:

https://dec.vermont.gov/sites/dec/files/wsm/erp/docs/2021-01-15_CleanWaterPerformanceReport_SF2020-FINA-PDF-A.pdf

Next Meeting: May 12