

CT NRCS State Technical Committee Meeting

September 1, 2021 * 9:30 AM – 12:00 PM

Held via TEAMS video conference

MINUTES

Attendees:

Adhir Agrawal - NRCS	Kip Kolesinskas -
Amanda Fargo Johnson - RCD	Christopher Martin – CT DEEP Forestry
Brian Andrews - NRCS	Eric McPhee – CT Dept of Health
Shuresh Ghimire - UConn	Richard Meinert – CT Extension
David Beers - Forester	Thomas Morgart - NRCS
Todd Bobowick - NRCS	Rebecca Palmer - FSA
Abbie Cadman - NRCS	Tanner Steeves - Wildlife Biologist, DEEP
Frank Cervo – CT DEEP Forestry	Lisette Stone – DEEP Drinking Water
Chelsea Gazillo – WLA	Debbie Surabian - NRCS
Chris Sullivan – CT SWCD	Eric Thomas - CT DEEP Watershed NPS
Jenny Dickson – CT DEEP Wildlife	Lisa Wahle - CT DEEP Wildlife (WMI)
Carol Donzella - NRCS	Wayne Woodard – Sunny Valley Preserve
Douglas Emmerthal – CT DEEP Forestry	Director, TNC
Ramona Goode	Nathan Wilson – Acting SED, FSA
Karl Honkonen - USFS	Steven Winnett – EPA NE Regional Ag Advisor,
Jim Hyde - NRCS	NPS coordinator
Kira Jacobs - EPA	Erik Bedan – CT DEEP
Joan Nichols – CT Farm Bureau	Carol Grasis – NRCS
Ted Kendziora - USFWS	

Tom Morgart, NRCS State Conservationist opened the meeting

He provided a brief overview of the state's current staffing plan, with anticipated increase to a level of 54 FTE. He also discussed the potential to expand the NWQI watershed list from current (Broad Brook, implementation; Little River, planning; Farm Brook, planning). Tom asked participants to contact him with suggestions for expanding the NWQI area for future years. All participants introduced themselves.

Rebecca Palmer, Program Specialist FSA gave a presentation about CRP Wildlife and Water Quality zones. These are established within the state at the HUC12 level; cannot exceed 25% of the state's cropland (169,290 acres of cropland; 25% = 42,200 acres)

Wildlife zones reflect areas with decreased habitat for grassland bird species, especially grasshopper sparrow and meadowlark. These areas were determined in consultation with Tanner Steeves (CT DEEP Wildlife) and CT Atlas data. There were questions about why areas in Litchfield county (suitable for bobolink) and the CT River Valley were not included – and Rebecca responded that these areas had higher areas of existing grasslands and the bobolink was not one of the species that was selected to address **because it is already far more common in the state than the other two and is only listed as a**

species of concern in the state, where eastern meadowlark and grasshopper sparrow are listed as threatened and endangered respectively. There was no dissent to the establishment of the Wildlife zones as described.

The Water Quality zones were determined using 2015 303d list information. Steve Winnett, EPA recommended that FSA revise the database to use the 2020 information. The goal of the Water Quality zones is to highlight areas that are impaired by agriculture and which would benefit from a conversion of cropland to perennial grassland coverage. Other than the recommendation to update the underlying data from 2015 to 2020, there was no dissent to the process for establishing the Water Quality zones.

Carol Grasis, ASTC-Programs provided an overview of NRCS financial and easement programs for the 2021 fiscal year. Karl Honknonen asked for more information related to forestry practices – both the type and amount of practices contracted and implemented.

She also announced the Round 1 Batching dates for EQIP and AMA (10/15/2021) and the Round 1 ACEP ALE Batching Date (1/28/2021).

In FY2022, it is expected that the Working Lands for Wildlife initiative will no longer include New England Cottontail, and perhaps the Bog Turtle. CT NRCS will continue to focus funds on these species by establishing state initiatives with subaccounts funded for habitat management/creation for each species. Lisa Wahle, CT DEEP Wildlife, noted that they had sent direct mailings to landowners in western CT. The focus areas will be changed to remove some areas in the eastern part of the state.

Jim Hyde, Agronomist gave a presentation on the phosphorous index – he reviewed the historic use of the P-Index and provided an overview of current index which is being adopted in NY and PA. Connecticut has concerns related to the methodology of measuring Phosphorous in soil, the setbacks that are recommended and the flow distance outside the field boundary as well as the concept of a Cap on Phosphorous application. Large Setbacks could result in acres of land removed from spreading – setbacks should be varied depending on how the manure is applied (injected/incorporated or broadcast)

Soil P Cap – Current NRCS 590 Standard does not allow for additional application of Phosphorous when the P-index is High. CT has more manure than acres available and there are no statewide efforts to balance this through export (such as cowpots or compost). CT NRCS is currently using a P Drawdown strategy in place of a cap.

- Zero P additions if acres available to spread manure or export
- 50% reduction of crop removal if acres available, export
- 25% reduction of crop removal, if acres available, export

Jim is requesting that members of the STAC who are interested in providing input/recommendations to the P Index strategy contact him to work further on the CT policy.

Comments:

- Lillian Ruiz suggested that P-index should be combined with a soil health program to incentive appropriate manure application.

- Kip Kolesinskas stated that there is a need for a national or regional approach for P management, and in CT there is the GC3/Climate Change Initiative group that is working on projects that focus on local organic fertilizer rather than petroleum-based fertilizer.
- Steve Winnett sees the need for a statewide plan to export products, like manure, to alleviate the Phosphorous load.
- Kira Jacobs noted that this conversation harkens back to 10 years ago when she first started attending STAC in CT and discussed briefly Cowpower in Burlington VT
- Steve Winnett also reminded the group that the Long Island Sound Study has money to assist with Nitrogen removal – which could be used to assist with manure management in general.

Carol Grasis, ASTC-p, then led a discussion about the ACEP ALE ranking. CT NRCS had completed an analysis of the ranking questions and identified some that were not providing any points for any parcels over the last two years. There were also questions that needed to be revised in order to remain in line with the new administration's priorities (Climate Smart Agriculture, Urban Agriculture and Increased services to Historically Underserved producers). Ranking criteria will be reviewed by the easement ranking subcommittee, led by Wayne Woodard. There is also the possibility of creating separate funding pool for HU applicants in ACEP ALE.

Carol Donzella, Easement Program Manager, presented the FY2022 Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) which would be used under the ACEP WRE program. CT NRCS will continue to use USPAP appraisals, and the offer would be limited to 90% of the appraised FMV, not to exceed \$5,000/acre for the majority of the state. Priority areas that include habitat for threatened/endangered wildlife species and/or species of concern (such as bog turtle, wood turtle and spotted turtle) would be valued at 90% of the FMV, not to exceed \$8,770. (\$8,770 being the current average cropland value in CT according to USDA NASS). There was discussion related to increasing the species that would be eligible for the higher priority rate. There have been studies related to the New England Cottontail, and their use of certain wetland habitats. The revised focus areas for NEC will include analysis based upon NWI wetland types of scrub-shrub wetlands and palustrine wetlands. The criteria for the GARC will be revised before submitting to include NEC habitat which intersects these select wetland types.