

**Oklahoma USDA State Technical Committee Meeting**  
**Held via Teams platform**  
**November 3, 2021**  
**9:00 am – 12:05 pm**

NRCS State Conservationist, Gary O'Neill

Welcomed everyone and thanked them for joining. We like to meet early in the fiscal year to talk about potential changes for FY 22. We finished up FY 21 and did good work with some of the farm bill programs and conservation activities. We have a full agenda this morning, thank you for participating. I wish we were meeting face to face; we still have restrictions on holding in door events. I hope when we get past this calendar year, we can get into having our next meeting face to face. We plan to have it in late February or early March. We have existing subcommittees, I encourage you, if there is a specific area you have a specific interest in please let us know that you'd like to be a part of that subcommittee. We are establishing a new one today, Urban Agriculture. I think some of you have seen the information that has come out from the USDA on the high priority of Urban Agriculture. We want to establish that subcommittee so groups and organizations can be involved in that activity here in Oklahoma. I think there is some opportunity and want to explore that with some of our partners to see what we can do in the area of Urban Agriculture in our state. We will discuss it later in the meeting. I want to encourage you to reach out to us and make sure you are on a subcommittee because there will be some topics that we will have to make decisions on outside of a full committee meeting.

**Agency Reports**

National Ag Statistics Service (NASS) Troy Marshall

Good morning, we are in the process of going into fall surveys. We have an extensive list of new surveys that will be coming early next spring. One of those will be tied into our partnership with NRCS. We did a pilot that was conducted this past year, those are rolling out to production. We are looking for customer satisfaction for experiences with NRCS. Not so much "Were they able to make the practice happen?" but "Is there some things they can do to change practices?". We do have several other surveys that will be starting up, a producer survey that will be driven around capabilities of the producer, clarifying race and some other aspects. The new Administration wants some facts about producers. We are finetuning the surveys to reflect what we do with the census. In approximately 13 months that will be mailed out and we will collect the data for the 2022 Census of Agriculture. We are laying the groundwork plans to move forward with that. Lastly, we are all operating under a different structure; however, we have been fortunate in Oklahoma, we have seen improvements in response rates as we have gone through this. I want to thank all the partners on the call, especially FSA, our sister agency, for their efforts in promoting response to the surveys here in Oklahoma. We have seen improvements, as good or even better response rates. That isn't happening in a lot of other states. We appreciate you help in promoting them and the importance of a response to those surveys.

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), Scott Alls

Things are looking good this year; 78 percent of work is feral swine related with a big push involving black vultures particularly in the eastern part of the state. The farm bill projects are coming on very well, and we are looking forward to a good year.

Agricultural Research Service (ARS), Sherry Hunt

For the Stillwater location, the Hydraulic Engineering Unit has seen increase in staffing over the past few months. This is primarily due to inter-agency agreements with NRCS as well as the Office of Chief Information Officer within USDA. We have hired on 4 additional term positions, looking to hire 1 more. We have also set up agreements with Oklahoma State University, University of Missouri, Virginia Tech University and NC State. Through two of these agreements, primarily with OSU, we have hired on an additional 4-5 individuals to help with objectives with the NRCS agreement. Our agreement with University of Missouri gave us a base fund increase this last FY21 that allowed us to hire a new permanent scientist, interviews are taking place starting today. It also allowed us to set up an agreement to bring on 7 graduate students into our project plan that just went through our quality scientific review. It came back with some minor revisions that I will have to make but that 5-year project plan is pretty much completed. Along with the staffing through the OSU agreement, we are hiring 4 undergraduate students as well as a graduate student. It has become a very different landscape for my

small unit than it has been for the last 10 years or so. As many of you know, I oversee the Woodard Dam at the ARS location. The design is completed, NRCS completed it for us at the Oklahoma State office. It is working its way through contracting, and we expect it to go out for solicitation sometime after the first of the year as far as bids go.

Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Blayne Arthur

We don't have any updates; we are rolling along as usual. We appreciate being on the call.

Oklahoma Conservation Commission (OCC), Trey Lam

It's a busy time for us, November always is, we have our area meetings going on. We were in Duncan last week and Chandler yesterday. Coming up, if anyone would like to attend one, we will be in Fairview tomorrow and next week we will be in Broken Arrow and Poteau. We go out and meet with our conservation districts in different areas, giving updates on different programs. They are virtual and in person combination type meetings. We appreciate NRCS for participating as well. Some of our biggest challenges are COVID and policy related. Gary and I talk on a regular basis on this subject with access to USDA Service Centers, also with the vaccination mandate and the potential for contractors to be affected by that; the State of Oklahoma receives quite a lot of funding from the federal government, what the response will be and how we will deal with that going forward. That is something we will work on and be in the forefront of discussions for the next few weeks. We just wrapped up our cost share program where we were able to put out 2.9 million dollars in cost share for conservation practices across the state. Hopefully we will be rolling out our next cost share program which will actually be FY24, we usually have 2 programs going at the same time with implementation and applications. We will get the rules out and applications going in December because we had a request from our conservation districts to include grass planting in the practices that need to be done in early spring. We have our Feral Hog Pilot Program going, our traps have been delivered and staff is in place in southwestern and central Oklahoma who have been working with Scott and his folks at APHIS, learning and helping the trappers. They will now have traps on site and will have those deployed while working with APHIS. Oklahoma's philosophy and part of our grant is to have APHIS do the trapping, but we will provide the traps, deliver them, and help set up baiting, landowner contact, etc. really anything we can do to assist APHIS. We want the APHIS expertise for the trapping and eradication.

We also have our Poultry Project RCPP. We are meeting with Tyson and Simons pretty quickly and in a short period of time we will be meeting with some poultry farmers and our partners so we can begin to work on some of our conservation problems around those. Shannon is here today, and she has just received approval on 6 more success stories. We appreciate her working with ODAFF, EPA, and NRCS.

Oklahoma Conservation Commission (OCC), Shannon Phillips

In addition to the Poultry Neighbors Project, we are soliciting input from partners and citizens on good candidate producers and neighbors to work with. Then we can start pulling people together to talk about some of the things we can do to address the challenges of living next to a big animal production facility. Also, to support that we are kicking off a litter transport program that is going to incentivize moving litter out of some of those priority watersheds that have nutrient issues, to places in the state where the litter can have a greater benefit. That program will involve both a payment to the grower to incentivize selling the litter to someone other than their neighbor and to offset the cost of replacement bedding. There will also be a payment to the buyer to offset the cost of purchase. Louisiana is implementing a similar program and we are hoping to make our program like theirs.

Another exciting thing we have going on, we have been working with GRDA on programs to supplement and help people replace failing septic systems. There is not a lot of assistance out there, Arkansas kicked off a program with funding from the Clean Water SRF. We would like to start a program for the whole state of Oklahoma, our pilot project is in the Grand Lake and Lake Hudson watersheds with about \$150,000, we are hoping to expand beyond those next year and see a continued funding for the resource. We are working with many partners including county commissioners, the water resources board, and some other folks on a program to educate and help fund some repairs for unpaved roads. We have started with a pilot program in Lincoln county. We are trying to mimic an effort that the State of Arkansas has implemented with funding from their legislature and the EPA that mimicked a program that began in Pennsylvania. It starts with a 50/50 cost share grant but also some design assistance so county commissioners, on dealing with those unpaved roads,

that really have significant water quality impacts. We have a request to our legislatures, in our state budget request, for next year and hope to make this a long-term project. We hope to address some of those challenges and find some new approaches to those problem areas. We are continuing our soil health program and trying to focus on increased consultation with landowners. One of the things we have heard from our commissioners is they are concerned about some of the challenges that will be faced due to higher input costs. We want to start rolling out some of our programs to help give people alternatives to the high cost of nitrogen and the other chemicals they need in order to maintain sustainable ag programs.

Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC), Kyle Johnson

ODWC hired additional fulltime private lands biologists in 2020. In 2021 we all began to settle into our new rolls and make an active continuous presence in our respective regions. Our total number of landowner visits across the state have increased from 173 in 2020 to 253 in 2021. We gave technical assistance on approximately 109,000 acres. Interest in our wildlife habitat cost share program increased from 70 applications in 2020 to 91 received in 2021. We were able to fund just over 50 of those applications, of those we funded about 60 acres of cedar cutting, 300 of hard wood thinning and 13.7 miles of newly constructed firebreaks.

Also want to note the interest in our private land's youth hunt program. Around six years ago we were only able to host three youth hunts per year but due to generous landowners across the state we were able to take around 60 youth for a total of 11 youth hunts in 2021. A youth applicant has about a 35-40% chance of drawing out for one of the hunts and many draw out several times before aging out of the program.

- Question-Robert Perez: How many private lands biologist total?
- Answer- Kyle Johnson: We have a total of 5. At one time we only had 2 biologists for the state, one for the East and one for the West. We are thrilled to have 5 now.

Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC), Jeff Tibbets

Hi, I am the OLAP coordinator, and I just want to add additional ODWC information. The current OLAP program which is funded through USDA grant through the Farm Bill is up to 90,000 acres. We are also growing a limited access program to get closer to metro areas like Tulsa, Stillwater, etc. We love to collaborate with landowners who are already enrolled in easement programs. It's great when we can stack programs together.

Oklahoma State University (OSU)-Thomas Coon

Sherry Hunt already mentioned our partnership with ARS, really appreciate that. We had a recent announcement about a large grant with Texas A & M using USDA funding that is focused on adapting sustainable farming and ranching practices across the southern plains from wildlife, soils, cropping systems and grazing. Our share in the grant is 2.6 million. Dr. Kevin Wagner is our lead for that project. He also leads our water resource center that has also had a couple of large grants come through recently. Dr. Scott Sensemen is our new Associate Vice President of the Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station, it great to have him on board. Undergoing a small building project on campus right now, the parking lot that used to be just west of the Noble Research center is now under construction. Our new building for the college will be going in there. Our fundraising for our \$50M goal is going well, we are looking for \$3M more to finish the project. Hoping that will be finished by the end of this year and start the building in 2022.

Regarding the vaccine mandate, our university had interpreted the mandate to mean that all OSU employees must be in compliance, including our county extension staff. That information came out last Friday and we are trying to work with folks to meet the December 8<sup>th</sup> deadline.

The other thing we are trying to do, is to get funding out of the infrastructure program or the budget reconciliation, the bigger infrastructure program, for ag research. ARS has done well to get investments over the last 10 years in order to support improvements in their facilities across the country as needed. We are trying to get similar funding for ag research at our land-grant university.

Oklahoma State University OSU, Dr. Amy Hagerman

We have a couple of things still going in terms of implementation of these different programs. Of course, general education, anytime you have a new program coming out and you want to get some information or communication out just let me know. We have done things like the CRP grasslands and the changes in that program. We have some things going with the GCI and the research associated

with that. We are also working with Troy at NASS on a biosecurity survey for cow calf producers. We are hoping to get out some good biosecurity information to understand their baseline biosecurity practices and how those may change. That is funded under the NAD prep money out of the last Farm Bill.

We are also doing some Emergency Management training for our extension coordinators, again that is NAD prep funds, in collaboration with Leslie Cole at APHIS. With a little of the focus on animal health preparedness but mostly just general preparedness. We are looking forward to working alongside ODAFF and others for the FMD exercise.

When new programs come out please let us know, some of the highest concerns for our producers right now are input costs.

#### Oklahoma State University (OSU), John Weir

From the Natural Resource Management Department Extension folks, we have been busy most of the fall with field tours/ field days that were very successful. We partnered with Quail Forever on one in September that was well attended utilizing our research and demonstration areas here at the university. We also had a field day at the Pushmataha wildlife management area that was also successful.

The biggest thing we have going on right now is partnering with NRCS on the Working Lands for Wildlife, setting up the initial meetings in the core areas, that will begin in December.

We have had a very active fire season, with many of our burn associations across the state and many are still burning now. They are planning burns for next year as well. The prescribed burn association is also working on a project with the US Fish and Wildlife partners program that is a cost share implementation for the prescribed burn association members to get money to help with burns. We are excited about that program and getting it started.

- Question-Gary O'Neill: How do agencies, organization, or groups connect with the work you are doing with Texas A&M? Is that to reach out to Kevin? Will there be opportunities to have input on this project?
- Answer- Thomas Coon: Yes, that is a great idea. I will have Dr. Wagner catch up with you and fill you in. That way you can decide to bring him on the next coordinated committee meeting to talk it through.

#### US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), John Hendrix

Our office is still at 25%, full staff projected January to March in next year. Last year we had a great year with the partners Fish and Wildlife program. We were able to obligate just over \$600,000 in Oklahoma. Our normal budget is about \$400,000. We have two biologists in the field that can physically only put a couple of hundred thousand on the ground. Each year we work with several partners across the state including ODWC, OCC and NRCS. Without these great partnerships, we couldn't secure extra funding to work with our private landowners in Oklahoma. When COVID hit there were several states in our region that just didn't spend their money this past year. A call came out and we were able to secure another \$150,000 knowing we could put these funds to the ground. John Weir with OSU mentioned a little bit about this, we had reached out to do a grant with them for \$50,000 to work with Oklahoma private landowners. There is a change in our policy for prescribed burns though our partners program where we are able to pay for prescribed burns without a red card certified burn boss on site the day of the burn. As a result of that we were able to secure the funding other states didn't spend last year. We were able to write a much larger grant with the OCC, thank you to Trey and Lisa for that, working with John Weir and the prescribe burn associations across the state we had a couple of meetings. This is brand new to our state and we are working on rolling it out so that landowners across the state can get paid for their burns up to \$2,500 per burn. They will have to follow a prescribed burn plan developed by a prescribed burn association original member. This is something new, if you have any questions you can contact me or one of my biologists.

For the ODWC we provided them \$50,000 for the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program.

To Gary and your staff, every year we put 6-9 wetland projects to the ground, we couldn't do that without your staff's expertise on engineering and guidance you provide us for private landowners across the state. We take that information and put it into agreements, and we thank you for that as well.

- Question-Robert: How recent did that change in policy, without having a red card certified person on board? Is that only in Oklahoma or is that in other states as well?

- Reply- John Hendrix: We have worked on that for the last few years at the national level and it was changed literally 6 months ago. Oklahoma is the 1<sup>st</sup> state to use it, and we are hoping it all goes well. Texas is trying to follow our lead; they have reached out a few times. I'm sure other states are going to start trying to do something as well as far as paying landowners to prescribe burn. Just so folks know, our agreements are fairly easy, but it is much easier to work with a partner. Every state is different on prescribed fire; Oklahoma is fortunate that you must follow state rules for prescribed fire. As long as you have a plan developed by a prescribed burn association is how we can do that. So how other states are going to implement that is going to be up to their state laws on prescribed fire.
- Question- Department of Ag, Blayne Arthur: Just listening on the fire piece of this, they may be coordinating with our forestry staff here at the state level. I didn't know if you or John Weir are doing any of that because we love prescribed fire on the ground but on occasion when it sneaks away from people then our forestry guys have to go assist. I didn't know if there was some coordination at the US Forestry level in regard to the projects you all are working on.
- Reply- John Hendrix: No, we haven't coordinated with the State Forestry on that project. We have worked with the prescribed burn associations and we are hoping when we work with their plans, we can contain those fires where they are supposed to be. When this rolls out, they will have to follow the plan and when they do, they will have to contact their adjacent neighboring landowners and follow the state law by putting the plan out to the local fire department and any districts and forestry districts, so they will know and be able to work with them at any point in time. They will be notified prior to the burn. But as far as before that no, it has just been the three of us before that.
- Question- Blayne Arthur: John, Mark Goeller is our state forester, Again, we really like to have fire on the ground, and we like that you all are doing this so we will have more of it done. I am going to loop you guys together just as more of a way to get it on their radar.

#### Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Randall Rush

Early in October we got a new Senior Policy Advisor for Administrator Regan at EPA, an advisor on Agricultural issues, Rob Schnider. He has quite a bit of support for his new appointment to EPA and I have had a chance to meet him a few times and he is very interested in checking in with me, as I check in with NRCS on various ag issues that arise in our region. Next week EPA's Farm Ranch Rural Communities Committee is meeting, they give advice to Mr. Schnider. They are advising him on a developing a holistic agenda on pesticides for the future and supporting inner agency environmental benchmarks on water quality and quantity, as well as food loss and waste. I know that links back to USDA's food loss and waste agenda as well. I will post the link to the meeting in the chat. [FRRCC Website](#) Also, a bigger issue for a lot of your constituents and some of your agencies is our update, ours and the Corp of Engineers, Waters of the US, that began in June. There have been a series of tribal, state, and public forums held in September through October. Now EPA is designing stake holder forums, around echo-regions. There will be about 10 of them hosted virtually in December through January. There is a registration process for that and a call for people who may want to represent industry interest in these echo-regions. The concept is, those who work or farm in the arid west - there is a specific meeting for the arid west or let's say the lower mid-west and such. Lastly, on the farmer-to-farmer grants, the RFP will be out in December of this year. If you recall last year OSU was successful in getting one of those for their virtual fence technology pilot.

#### Offices of Partnerships and Public Engagement (OPPE), Sholanda Guy

Here at OPPE we continue to value people, data and build leaders. There are 2 programs, initiative that I would like to highlight today. USDA Equity Commission is still soliciting nominations for the commission through Nov 30, 2021. You have until then to solicit nominations for the Equity Commission, Advisory Committee, and the Equity Commission Sub-committee on Agriculture. The nomination is open to the public so anyone can be nominated for these committees. You can also self-nominate for these committees. We encourage anyone to send in nominations. Dr. Dewayne Goldman continues to head this effort, he is the senior advisor for racial equity. Here is the email address to send nominations, you can also ask any questions. [EquityCommission@usda.gov](mailto:EquityCommission@usda.gov)

The next initiative I want to promote to everyone is USDA has the application period open for the 1890 national scholarship, that is the scholarship at Langston University. The 1994 Tribal scholarship is

specifically for the College of Muskogee Nation here in Oklahoma. If anyone knows of any high school senior or a current college freshman that are interested in studying agriculture, food science, natural resources, computer science or any other discipline related to agriculture please encourage them to apply for the scholarship. The scholarship deadline is January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022. Both the Tribal and National scholarship offers an all-expense paid opportunity to attend college for 4 years, plus employment with the USDA agency. If anyone is interested or knows of someone who needs an application for either scholarship, here is my contact information [shalonda.guy@usda.gov](mailto:shalonda.guy@usda.gov) and 202-536-6441.

Oklahoma State University (OSU), Thomas Coon

We have several grants from USDA through the New Beginnings and another program, that are scholarships available specifically for Native American students. We are working closely with Northeastern Oklahoma A&M. Students can go 2 years to NEO and then matriculate to OSU for their 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year. That is another great grant program for scholarships to assist Tribal students in studying agriculture.

Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture, Robert Perez

I am 3 months on the job, new guy on the block, but I am excited to be working in Oklahoma and Texas. I just retired from Parks and Wildlife after 28 years and have now started my new career with Oaks and Prairies. Many of you on the call I have reached out to individually, I am looking forward to coming to Oklahoma and meeting you, as well as partnering in any way that I can. Thank you Sholanda for all your efforts at the national level, it is fantastic to reach out to historically underserved and addressing equity, diversion, and inclusion issues in Oklahoma and across the nation. Really appreciate you, Sholanda, you do some great work! With that I just wanted to say Hello, I reached out to Connie already to let her know I wanted to join the Wildlife sub-committee. I was not aware of the urban agriculture sub-committee, if there is some interest in addressing pocket prairies, urban prairies, or pollinator plantings in urban settings I would be interested to see how our joint venture could partner with that.

Farm Service Agency (FSA), Janlyn Hannah & Joy Alspach

Janlyn Hannah: At FSA, COVID is continuing to impact our operations, with both outreach and employment. We are limited to 50% staffing in our county offices at this time. Understandably there are concerns with our staff and our county committees about the vaccination mandate procedures. We are still getting that information and several of our staff have filed for accommodations. Those should be addressed in the next month or so. Another hot topic in FSA is the ARPA program, our lending office takes care of that. That program is still wrapped up in lawsuits at the moment and is frozen. With our legislative partners here today, I will give you a little bit of background on that program. Due to the payoff program in legislation, we are not able to do any type of action on borrowers who are delinquent. We do go through the process of mailing letters to notify them of their delinquency and give them options for servicing programs if they need assistance to make their payments. However, we are not foreclosing on folks at this time. I know I have received a couple of legislative and congressional inquiries about that. We just have to go through the process with the servicing packages, but we are not foreclosing on anybody at this time. If you hear of that, please pass them this information. We are having several other issues with leasing, supplies, and construction items at the moment due to the availability of goods and services.

We are waiting for a State Executive Director as well as a State Committee appointment, we are hopeful that it will be filled in the next few months. About 5 states across the country already have their SED and 5 additional states have at least one member of a State Committee. Business as usual for Oklahoma but we are hoping to have those appointments filled to have another hand on deck to assist. Other than that, our programs are standard for this time of year, certification is ongoing. As well as several counties have triggered our Livestock Forage Program from our Drought Assistance. Our PLC is going on as normal.

Joy Alspach: I want to give a run down on conservation but first I want to get an update on where we are in our programs. As far as funding, Oklahoma sits in the lower third of total funding. In 2021 there was a larger portion of funding and the graph shows all payments disbursed \$33,553,047,203, was due mainly to the CFAP Program and some disaster programs. Payments disbursed in 2021 is a little over \$18M so far this year, it will change a little because not all of our payments have gone out just yet.

Existing Conservation Reserve Program Oklahoma enrollment data general and continuous signup: 519,489 acres are currently signed up; \$29.47 average rental rate which has decreased slightly; \$20,463,462.00 payments made for CRP in 2021; 50 counties with CRP. Looking at the future, there are a large number of acres that will be expiring in 2022 as has been the case for the past 2 years. We anticipate having a large workload for CRP as we hope to have a lot of those acres reenrolling in the next sign-up. Some of what we are seeing is those that were in the general CRP program are now enrolling into the Grasslands CRP program because it is a little more flexible on grazing and other restrictions. The average soil rental rate for CRP varies by county, the 2018 Farm Bill stated that for General CRP signup participants, if accepted, would receive 85% of the weighted average of soil rental rate. For continuous practices it is 90% of the weighted average soil rental rate. Because of the decrease in rates, we hadn't been seeing much participation and due to that the leadership decided to add in a 10% inflationary adjustment that was added to the CRP rental payment plus additional incentives for climate safe practices. Which then increased our participation and offers across the US. Recently Zane Fleming reached out via email to discuss the existing Conservation Priority Area, the national office requested we look at our existing area and because we were limited to 25% of the total cropland acres of our state, we had to reduce our existing conservation priority area. The largest change was removing the Illinois Watershed Area. We chose that area due to having no CRP there in several years and no CRP offers in the last decade in that area. It was the most logical way to reduce the acres across the board. This was sent out to the CRP sub-committee via email and approved so it has been sent to the national office. Some of the benefits of CRP is the ability to periodically hay or graze, this is for general and continuous practices. It is also beneficial for wildlife and the health and vigor of the stand of grass. Emergency and nonemergency haying and grazing tend to fluctuate quite a bit depending on drought. We typically see higher percentages during the drought years because the participants are looking for a place to go with their cattle. We don't have a total for 2021 but looking at the numbers we know the percentage of hayed and grazed acres will be lower this year. We had a wet spring and so there was less need for emergency haying and grazing. Also, with so many contracts expiring this year most were not eligible to do non-emergency haying and grazing. They were limited to haying 1 out of every 3 years and grazing every other year with the idea the grass is available and can withstand the practice. Here is a link to the weekly updated counties approved for [Emergency Haying and Grazing \(usda.gov\)](#). Once a county is on this list, they will stay on it for that fiscal year. Please check with your county office to make sure you are approved for emergency haying and grazing. There is a new fact sheet on nonemergency/ emergency haying and grazing and on the web page linked above. There was a huge increase in signups from signup 202 to signup 203. Oklahoma was 6<sup>th</sup> in the nation for accepted grassland offers. The panhandle counties were included this year in 1 of 2 national grassland priority zones. This allowed for additional points and an additional \$5 per acre in those counties. The national office set a \$15 minimum rental rate for grassland CRP across the board so those areas in the panhandle on average went from \$7-8.00 an acre to \$20 with the new priority zones. Quite a bit of funds and activity in a large signup year for Oklahoma. Right now, we are a little over 203,000 acres for the Grassland program. We haven't seen a lot of activity with the new SAFE Area that was approved in the last call for proposals and submitted by the ODWC. We could really use your help as our partners to get that program out there. If you are interested in doing some outreach with us on the SAFE program and with the ODWC we would love to hear from you to make sure that the SAFE program is successful. If you would like to be a part of our subcommittee and haven't been on it before, please email [zane.fleming@usda.gov](mailto:zane.fleming@usda.gov) or [Kimberly.schneider@usda.gov](mailto:Kimberly.schneider@usda.gov) and [connie.fitzpatrick@usda.gov](mailto:connie.fitzpatrick@usda.gov).

We currently have 26 counties administering ECP across the state for 4 different disaster types: flood, wildfire, tornado, and severe storm. Throughout FY21 we paid Oklahoma producers approximately \$1,338,777 to assist with disaster recovery. ECP has a new way of payments. It is streamlined and has a straight-forward program implementation that reduces the opportunity for improper payments. In the past, Oklahoma set rates for the amount a producer could be paid per practice; it took time to collect receipts and pull out the information of allowable cost for ECP. At the national level new rates and practices were set that are equivalent to EQIP in payrate. The goal is to get away from using those receipts to determine the payments for participants. They will be paid on the average cost to install the practice. We are still collecting receipts to document and stay in line with what the actual cost is. The

goal is to create consistency across the agency, the state, and the counties. What this means is we will have more consistent rates with other programs, less time to process payments and less county office errors.

- Question- Gary O'Neill: Joy I didn't see a graph, but I may have missed it, the amount of acres that expired compared to the amount that was re-enrolled in general. Are most of the acres re-enrolled back in?
- Answer- Joy Alspach: Last year was about 50%, this year it was a little higher. Last year it was about 200,000 acres and this year it is closer to 85% re-enrolled. It's hard to tell because we don't know how many went into Grasslands and we would have to pull both CRP general and Grassland to see where they went.
- Question- Gary O'Neill: Can a producer reapply in the next general if they didn't get in or decided not to?
- Answer- Joy Alspach: They can reapply, but they won't get the points for expiring CRP acres, because you have to be in that year to get those extra points. They can apply as long as they hit those cropping history requirements and maintain the cover they can get in under conserving use. If they didn't get in, in 2017, but managed it like it was CRP for the last couple of years, as long as they have 4 out of 6 years under CRP, they would qualify to re-enroll.

#### NRCS State Conservationist, Gary O'Neill

One of our priorities at NRCS, all of USDA, is racial inequity and justice which comes down to increasing our outreach. This is to all of the groups on today's meeting, if you're interested in partnering in outreach activities during the year, we would really like to sit down and talk with you, to see if we can do some different unique kinds of things where we can really make sure we are reaching everyone in Oklahoma. That has become a challenge to us, we have to ramp up our outreach activities. Hopefully we will have less COVID restrictions in the future. Any group, organization or individual that is on here and has ideas and interests in outreach I would love to hear from you all. Please reach out to Connie, Stacy or me and we will put together some opportunities to do some outreach.

#### Extension Assistant Professor at OSU, Master Irrigator, Sumit Sharma

I am in the Panhandle Research and Extension Center where we did a Master Irrigator program earlier this year. This program began in Texas in 2016 and in 2018 they invited Oklahoma along with New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, and Nebraska, to show us what they were doing in the Texas panhandle. It was a success. Colorado adopted the program in 2020, but due to COVID restrictions we ended up doing it in 2021. OSU has taken charge of this program; our team includes Kevin Wagner, Jason Warren, Saleh Taghvaeian, and me. The purpose of this program is the adoption of water conservation technology and water management strategies to improve farm income. The short-term goal is to improve the education of the producers regarding the digital conservation technologies available on the market. The medium goal is to facilitate adoption of these technologies to include them in their operational abilities. The long-term goal is sustainable use of water resources. This is a 4-day training that is spread over a 4-week period. Each day is dedicated to certain aspects of irrigation, for example, soil and water relationship, moisture sensors, crop models, irrigation systems, wells and pumps, or economics. To decide on the topics, we form an advisory panel that includes local producers, crop consultant, NRCS personal, county extension agent all from the area we are implementing the program and of course our OSU team for this program. The first program we had was located in the panhandle and we had space for 25 people. We executed the program in January and February of 2021. We had 21 participants, 15 of which were producers, 2 farm managers, 1 crop consultant and 3 county extension agents. This was a hybrid program; some trainings were done through ZOOM and some were conducted in person. Upon completion of the program the participants are eligible for some incentives aside from the knowledge they gained from the training. These include \$2,000 reimbursement of irrigation conservation technology equipment. They also are provided with free services like well audits and irrigation uniformity tests which is provided from Biosystem and Agriculture Engineering Departments Mobile Irrigation Laboratory. Funding for the reimbursement is provided by the OCC and the Water Resource Board. As well as additional EQIP points for the program graduates. There were approximately 10 producers that used the reimbursement to adopt moisture sensors. We conducted 8 well audits with a few more to do soon. We will be doing the program in different locations across the state. Our next program is going to be in Altus which will cover 5 counties in that region. The



program in Altus will start Jan 31<sup>st</sup>. I would like to thank the panel and the NRCS personnel for their assistance in helping the program to go smoothly. We have other collaborators that have assisted with this program, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma Agriculture Experiment Station, Oklahoma Conservation Commission, Oklahoma Department of Agriculture Food and Forestry, Farm Bureau, Panhandle Irrigators Association (specific to the panhandle program), Oklahoma Water Resource Board, Oklahoma Water Resource Center and of course USDA NRCS. The 2<sup>nd</sup> program is coming up in Altus and for the 3<sup>rd</sup> program we will return to the panhandle again. We are thankful to all of our collaborators for this program.

- Comment-Gary O'Neill: This project is a great opportunity for Oklahoma with water quantity and some of the things we do with irrigators. There are a lot of groups participating in this, NRCS is fully supportive of this activity and it's a good way to work with irrigators on this kind of a program.
- Reply- Sumit Sharma: I mentioned Colorado and Texas in my overview because we collaborate with each other on designing the program and the curriculum. We are trying to learn from each other's experience.
- Comment in Chat- Shawn Lepard: Panhandle Irrigators very much appreciate the support of the Master Irrigator Program

#### Watershed Program, National CMP Pilot Project, Chris Stoner

Corrugated Metal Pipe Pilot Project looked at corrugated metal pipes that are a part of the original construction of the flood control dams. In some cases, it was the whole tower and barrel going through the dam and in others it may have been just a tail pipe going out the back of the dam or a low-level drainpipe going into the reservoir. These are on a lot of our older structures dating back to the original ones built in 1948 all the way through 1977. Some of those are not a part of the pilot since they aren't 50 years old yet. We have 439 dams in Oklahoma that have some kind of corrugated metal, over 100 repairs made by sponsors/OCC over the years. These are major repairs and is not something we consider normal operation and maintenance. With a lot of support from Trey Lam from OCC we secured funding for the evaluation and repairs for 50 dams, all over the 50-year evaluated life of the structure. We selected dams in 20 different watersheds, covered by 14 Conservation Districts, in all 3 NRCS administrative zones. We received \$ 2.5 million for construction and \$500,000 for administrative functions and designs. OCC is partnering on a 65/35 cost share, 65% Federal, 35% State. We were able to conduct field reviews within covid protocols. Our reports on all 50 sites are that 22 need no action at all, pipes that were there had either been repaired or there was no need. I think it is too early to say that 44% of the pipes across the state won't need any action. When we were selecting sites, we picked a wide range of configurations, age, locations, and all of that can impact how the pipes were formed. This may not represent the conditions we may find on other sites as we move forward. We have 6 that need additional evaluation. Designs are complete on seven, one has construction completed and 14 are currently in the design phase. Some of the repair alternatives we are looking at include slip lining and tower replacement. We use a high-density polyethylene (HDPE) pipe that is pushed through the existing barrel from the downstream end and the space in between is grouted to make a good seal within the dam itself. If there is a corrugated tower, we are also replacing those and installing a new tower made with the same material. We will wrap the HDPE tower in stainless steel metal because we have found through other repairs that beavers can chew through the 1" thick HDPE. Some of the original towers were constructed from concrete but the pipe that ran into the pond was CMP and was the filter house that provided a low-level drain. In some cases, those were able to be abandoned and a gate house installed. However, for some of them the tower is embedded in the embankment and needs some kind of pipe structure to get back into the reservoir. Or we are looking at removing the embankment from in front of the tower and supporting that material with a concrete retaining wall and have an open embankment. On some there is a short piece of CMP and we are looking to install a plunge basin, or we will replace the tail pipe with better materials. Finally, to get a full range of cost and alternatives we have two sites we are going to undergo a complete principal spillway replacement. On one we will excavate the old pipe and install a new one, the other will be done by boring and jacking a pipe through the dam and building a new tower on top of it. We are doing this so we can develop the best repair alternatives for the remaining Oklahoma dams as well as others across the country.

- Question in Chat- Trey Lam: With the increasing frequency of historical flooding events, has the benefit analysis changed on evaluating new construction?
- Reply in Chat-Chris Stoner: One of the big costs is mitigation of loss of stream systems by dam construction.
- Reply in Chat- Stacy Riley: The benefit analysis has multiple factors that are considered, and Chris just stated one of the big factors that impact that analysis.

#### Watershed Planning Activities, Stacy Riley

As Gary mentioned, Oklahoma has been active in the watershed program since its beginning, we want to take full advantage of funding opportunities as they come available to grow our program and make potential changes to other funding opportunities we may receive. What Chris just talked about has been good for the state of Oklahoma and the opportunities that the pilot project presents for future use as well. During FY21 on the rehabilitation side of watershed planning we have completed 24 watershed assessments to find what the needs were of the dams. We have five dams in the planning stages across the state, six more have completed the design phase and have been fully approved, and two are under construction with one awaiting final inspection. In our Watershed Operations we have in planning for new structures/dams: two are in the planning phase and one is in design. In FY22 on rehabilitation we plan to complete 25 watershed assessments, complete plans for the five dams and finish, with approval, the designs on the other dams. In watershed operations for the two new structures/dams, we plan to complete those as well. One thing we should mention is we have noticed that new dam construction, to meet our policy and requirements, is becoming difficult to justify because of the cost to benefit ratio on those sites. We may have to look at other opportunities for budget funding because we just don't know if we can continue down that path. Planned construction to begin on three sites starting very soon on one of them.

#### Oklahoma Top Resource Concerns, Steve Glasgow

We are going to give an update on the top resource concerns. Many of you were part of the ranking process we went through in 2020 during our last face to face meeting. What we look at is input from this meeting and from our locally lead process with our conservation districts, their boards and our staff establish what the top resource concerns are for the state. This helps guide us as an agency as we apply our Farm Bill programs such as where we need to target funding, efforts, and resources. We have been doing this ranking process for about 10 years and the resource concerns typically do not change much from year to year. These top resource concerns were established in 2020, used in 2021 and we will be using them again in 2022. They are Degraded Plant Condition, Soil Quality Degradation, Erosion, Loss of Wildlife Habitat, Water Quality (surface and ground), and Source Water Depletion. Update on our source water protection areas, priority watersheds. The areas were same as last year with the difference being #4 in SE which was added and includes Wister and Poteau River watersheds. We have these due to the Farm Bill, that requires us to prioritize watersheds to use targeted funding or priority ranking and increased payment rates for specific practices in source water protection areas. The first is a ground water area on the Cimarron River, second is out Little Beaver National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) which has 3 more years of funding, we developed a base plan, continue to monitor, and use models to target areas within that watershed. It is the longest water quality project we have going outside of all the efforts in the last 20+ years on the Illinois River Watershed, which is third. We continue to keep it as a priority because we know there are on-going problems and issues there. We want to make sure we are focusing on that especially for those entities and municipalities like Tulsa and others who get their water from it as well as the recreation on the Illinois River and Lake Tenkiller. Lastly, we added the Poteau River/Wister Lake area and the new Spiro Lake in LeFlore County. There are a lot of efforts going on in these watersheds with the Conservation Commission and other groups. We have established these priority watersheds and have been working with the US Forestry Service to put in a Joint Chiefs Forestry Program. Part of the program helps you get funding to target source water protection areas and we wanted to make sure we had those in the eastern part of the state.

### Blue River Watershed- New Water Smart EQIP (WSI), Steve Glasgow

We just heard of this last week, it's a new program called Water Smart Initiative (WSI). Basically, it uses EQIP funds to work with entities that have water smart grants through the Bureau of Reclamation. These water smart grants can be anything from basin studies, drought mitigation, water quantity, etc. The Blue River Foundation received the grant 1½ years ago. NRCS has always had an interest in working in the Blue River area so this is a great opportunity for us. We put the proposal to work last spring with the Blue River Foundation, Chickasaw Tribe, Ok'a Institute, and other groups. We learned last week that the funding came through so we will begin implementing conservation in that watershed over the next 5 years with a little of over \$1M to fund projects in the area. The goal is to use these dollars to compliment the Blue River Foundation, their cooperative watershed plan and help address the resource concerns and issues that they identify. Most have already been identified in a preliminary base plan, so we were able to choose the areas and objectives we want to target like eastern red cedar, recharging those aquifers, repairing degradation along the river and its tributaries is a major contributor, and water quality. Even with WSI's primary purpose being quantity we will be able to address quality as well. It will not only impact municipal waters but also the recreation aspect.

- Chat comment- Shanon Philips: Great news about the Blue River Initiative! Excited to see what the potential benefits could be from those efforts.

### Working Lands for Wildlife-Great Plains Grassland Initiative, Steve Glasgow

Working Lands for Wildlife isn't a program in of itself, it is our agency's approach to look at large scale ecosystem management and restoration or to find ways to restore large scale ecosystems. In Oklahoma we are part of the Great Plains Grasslands Biome or the GPGLI on the programs side to which we will fund and do projects within this area. This also includes the Lesser Prairie Chicken area or LPCI, we don't really have that funding anymore, but we will use this framework to address those efforts in the Lesser Prairie Chicken area because they have the same goals in place. From the last meeting that everyone joined us on we created the framework, between all the states in the Great Plains and all the states that worked with their stake holders to contribute that has set the foundation to develop this strategy for the entire Great Plains. The five state LPCI areas are all located within the multistate Great Plains Grasslands area. Why did we change from LPCI to GPGLI? It is an effort to expand and how we target and look at rangelands throughout the entire Great Plains. It helped expand on working with ranchers, it wasn't just about the prairie chicken itself. We had seen a lot of decline in LPCI and the work going on there caused by the negative connotation dealing with the Prairie Chicken. The LPCI concept developed into the whole Biome area. The same thing happened with the Southwest Fly Catcher and the Sage Grouse Initiative. It is a larger area, but it encompasses what we used to do for LPCI, it still falls under the Working Lands for Wildlife. Whatever happens with the listing of the Lesser Prairie Chicken we will still have the opportunity to work with the service, do our biological opinions, and our conservation measures within this Great Plains area. We used a rangeland analysis platform to develop this plan. The concept is to look at where we already have a good stronghold for intact native grass and rangelands in the state, and we want to protect that core and those acres intact by fighting back the invasion of woody encroachment. We are prioritizing our work in the northwest part of the state, we have been working with OPBA and OSU to get fire on the ground in these areas. We are not starting out funding all five core areas, we are starting in the northwest area which is the old LPCI area. Because we don't have the LPCI funding we are going to inject some from the GPGLI into that area in FY22. We have started the process to develop EQIP ranking. We have established a process to use the rangeland platform in the tools, and we are training our people how to use them for field assessments. A large part of this is outreach and educating producers to the science. A lot of the science is coming from the RAP tool, and what was demonstrated to this group last fall. A big thing we want to do is have these stake holder meetings as John mentioned earlier, OSU and OPBA are taking a lead on that for us. There are meetings set up for the Northwest area as well as the Red Rock area. These meetings are an opportunity for all the partners to come together, lead by OSU and OPBA, to demonstrate the science, talk about the RAP tool, educate the producers on how you need to maintain the core and how best to target invasive species and woody encroachment. It isn't what people typically think of, so we want them to learn and understand it so they can implement it on the ground. We will step in if it is warranted and provide cost share funds to help implement this program. The idea is to protect the landscapes that are already intact or have very few trees, we need to stop the spread or

growth of the trees so they never get to a point in their life where they can produce seed and spread. The strategy has changed, it is based off of vulnerabilities and threat indexes; to maximize distance between intact grasslands and the seed sources to prevent establishment of woody plants, eliminate seedlings to prevent the next generation from repopulating, implement prescribe burns to consume seeds dispersing into grassland core areas and coordinate management across property boundaries. We are targeting through EQIP the practices to maintain the grasslands instead of restoration of the grasslands. The primary goal is to get rid of trees that produce seeds and prevent trees from getting to the point where they can produce seeds. In all of these concepts, one of the major players, is to get prescribed burns on the ground. That is why the partnership with OPBA is important. A lot of our core areas have a strong background of producers that do not like woody encroachment and they like the use of fire. They have local burn associations and ranchers that can get this done.

- Question- Robert Perez: I have been to some Great Plains Initiative presentations, including the range analysis platform tool, it is great stuff. It's good to see that not only Oklahoma but other states are looking towards adopting practices that are getting to the middle instead of to the right where it is degraded and already gone. My specific question, you mentioned Working Lands for Wildlife management, the historic LPCI, that is not available anymore but, in these updates, I didn't see an update for Working Lands for Wildlife Monarch Butterflies that is one of the areas in Oklahoma as well. Being new to this I am not aware if projects have gone to the ground in the past in Oklahoma using the Monarch Butterfly Working Lands for Wildlife. I am asking specifically about that program.
- Reply- Steve Glasgow: Yes, we still have that program. We didn't give an update because there haven't been any changes going forward. We've had a lot of success with that program, we have it in 50 or 60 of our counties, and its still part of what we are doing going forward.
- Question in Chat-Shawn Lepard: Have you looked at the Rita Blanca National Grassland in the Texas and OK Panhandle?
- Reply in Chat-Steve Glasgow: Shawn: not specifically related to WLFW. This effort focuses on private lands, but the RAP tool can be used by the federal land managers the same as we are using.

#### Easement Activities FY22, Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) Stacy Riley

Each year in Oklahoma we choose to establish Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) because we don't have the same kind volume that allows us to do the things some of our adjoining states are able to do on how they establish the rates they pay for easements. We establish the GARC's using fair market value and then get individual USPAP (appraisals) on each property we take in. What the cap does, is it sets the limit we are willing to pay. A year or two ago we increased our GARC to \$2,000 an acre. That means any easement we take in can not exceed \$2,000 an acre to the landowner regardless of what the appraisal rate is minus 80% of its value that is paid to the customer. We changed it because we have seen a significant increase in land prices in Oklahoma. As we go through this process, we look to see what other states are doing with their land prices, we get their information, and check adjoining counties because it is set per county. We have done that before, and northeast Texas has had some rates go up, which could impact Oklahoma. So far, we have seen, in doing our appraisals, and anything we have tried to take in, we are not getting close to the \$2,000 cap. We recommend that we stay at the \$2,000 cap for FY22. The average appraisal conducted for FY21 in Oklahoma ranged from \$1,000-\$1,900 an acre. The \$1,900 per acre is in our Floodplain Easement potential in LeFlore County that had the major flooding in 2019 which destroyed some prime farmland along the Arkansas River. Specifically, for our WRE, our appraisals come out to \$1,000 per acre and the highest was approximately \$1,300-\$1,500. This is our recommendation unless we get a lot of backlash when we finish the process. To finish this process, we have to coordinate with our adjoining states to make our recommendation to the National Office for their approval. We are still in the process of getting the information from other states. Keep in mind, everything we do is based off of an individual appraisal on piece of property. The GARC is the limit not an entitled amount.

#### ACEP-WRE Ranking Priorities, Stacy Riley

For WRE, Wetland Reserve Easement program, we have a new ranking process that started in 2021. We worked with our subcommittee on how we were ranking and evaluating applications to be potentially accepted into this program. We were able to make some offers on some land that historically

has not had a lot of activity in that part of the state. We reached a goal to get some of our more western counties involved in the WRE process, to get some acres to really change how we are establishing some wetlands in the state of Oklahoma. Ultimately these are the priorities that will receive extra points when we do the ranking process. Cost of restoration is always a top priority; we have policy, and it is also a part of the federal statute. We have to have a 1:1 ratio, meaning it can't cost more to restore than it cost to put it under easement. Then, how many acres are we taking in that have restorable hydrology? What is the farmed wetland condition; what percent of it is currently being farmed? The goal is to take in something that is going to have the biggest impact. It goes back to managing our taxpayer dollars, how much is it going to cost to operate and maintain the restored wetland? Also, the resulting hydrology, is it going to be a playa, a seasonal shallow or a temporary shallow of water? These do get extra points based on those. Lastly, if that site is adjacent to an existing WRE/WRP, Wildlife Management area or something in that nature, the impact is greater. You can make larger locations for wetland recharge and wildlife habitat. This is our plan for FY22 when we start evaluating applications for next year.

- Question in Chat- Shanon Philips: Stacy- Great information about the ACEP WRE Rankings. If you're not already using it, OCC and OSU have developed a tool for identifying potential restorable wetland sites that could help in the ranking process.
- Reply in Chat-Jeff Tibbits: Is that tool online? I would like to see/use if possible. Within OLAP, we are paying \$10/ac for undisturbed playas, which has generated a fair amount of enrollment interest in Beaver County. Those landowners may be agreeable to conservation easements
- Reply in Chat-Steve Glasgow: Shanon, no we don't currently use it.
- Question in Chat- Robert Perez: Jeff, what is OLAP acronym?
- Reply in Chat-Josh Richardson: Oklahoma Land Access Program, the VPA-HIP grant from USDA to OWDC.
- Question in Chat-Shawn Lepard: What does the "Statewide Irrigation" category include?
- Reply in Chat- Shanon Philips: It's not necessarily online, but we could certainly sit down with your team and explore how it works. It's not a complete replacement for on-the-ground assessment, but it helps identify areas that were likely historically wet and understanding how your individual site could relate to other historical likely wet areas in the region. Dan Dvoretz (dan.dvoretz@conservation.ok.gov) or 405-365-2276 is a contact to reach out for the restorable wetland tool. I'll give him a heads up that you're interested.
- Reply in Chat-Jeff Tibbits: Thanks, Shanon, I will reach out to Dan.
- Reply in Chat- Steve Glasgow: Thanks, Shanon, we knew this was being developed but just have not seen the final product or knew what all went into it.

#### ACEP-ALE Ranking Priorities, Stacy Riley

I didn't talk about this program last year, the Agriculture Land Easement program (ALE), we have to work with an entity on this program. We do not do contracts with private landowners; everything goes through the entity as a sponsor of the program. While we contract with and do all of our work with the entity, we still have to have rank these applications. What we chose for our ranking priorities in fiscal years 20, 21, and 22: are these prime, unique, important farmlands? This is critical. We are taking in agricultural land to stay in operation as agriculture forever, the whole point of this program is to preserve the land for working agriculture and it can never be turned into a subdivision or shopping malls. Next, does it have historical or archeological significance? Are we protecting the grazing use? Where is the location of the offer? What are the decreased farmed acres in the county? What is the percentage of population growth in the county? What is the population density of the county? These all factor into the impact, how we are trying to protect and keep the land in agricultural operation. Another high priority, is their grasslands of special environmental significance? We have several locations in the state of Oklahoma that fit this criterion, based on national criteria, these will always get special consideration. Last, we will always work to protect our threatened and endangered species and these working lands will do that better. Our intent for the general application deadline on funding for both ACEP-ALE and ACEP-WRE is January 7, 2022. Everything isn't completely finalized but this is our intent for these two programs to have this deadline. We will finalize the information, make a public announcement, and get everything out in the near future. If any of you are confused about what I am

talking about, please reach out to me individually and I will try to update you the best I can on any of the programs I am talking about.

#### Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), Stacy Riley

I like to call EQIP our flagship program. As most of you know, we have been operating EQIP since the 1996 Farm Bill. Every year adjustments are made at the national level and it trickles down to the state and local level. Our plan for FY22 is to offer this list as our fund pool. Some of these are statute required, some are nationally required, and some are just what the state of Oklahoma needs. Some of our categories are beginning farmers and ranchers, SDA, AFO/ CAFO, Cross Timbers Restoration. This wildlife fund pool became active because of STAC several years ago and it will be offered again this year. Tribal Strike Force has been offered for a couple of years. It is a fund pool that had been limited to tribes in specific counties but is now open to all tribes in the state of Oklahoma. As well as forestry as one of our state initiatives, and it will mirror some of the activities that we hope to implement with our joint chiefs' application we have with the US Forestry Service. Robert asked about the Monarch Butterfly, that has been a separate fund pool for about three years now. It is a popular fund pool that has a lot of interest, it has eligibility in approximately two thirds of the state. Steve just talked about some of the new fund pools like the Great Plains Grassland Initiative and the Water Smart. Those two programs will only be offered and available in the counties that are eligible for it. NWQI was also mentioned, it is available again this year, and it has its own fund pool. Our field offices are working with the local work groups in a locally lead process to identify what their top resource concerns are, how they want to prioritize their funding, ranking and what they want to do. Each team in the state of Oklahoma will have their own fund pool, which can even go as small as by county. Another opportunity is they can also submit proposals for any local area emphasis projects. It should be small in scale, it can cross county boundaries, or be a whole county. Some of the things we have done historically with this is non-panhandle counties got some irrigation work done down around Lugert in Harmon County where they are trying to improve irrigation. We had several different conservation districts submit proposals that we funded related to increasing the awareness of soil health and adopting the soil health principals and practices specifically in crop land. Eastern Red Cedar has had several different practices over the years trying to eliminate them. We are still seeking proposals, decisions haven't been made yet, but we hope to have it finalized within the next 3 weeks. Here are the highlights of the ranking criteria for FY22. Each fund pool will have up to 3 top priority resource concerns identified. Land located in the Source Water Protection Area will receive additional points in any fund pool. Assessments of existing conservation efforts will be compared against planning criteria thresholds to determine the level of effort needed to address the resource concerns. Cost-effectiveness of the proposed conservation plan. Lastly, individual questions regarding the impact to specific identified resource concerns in each fund pool.

#### EQIP-CIC (Conservation Incentive Contracts), Stacy Riley

NRCS introduced a new program that was going to be offered from the 2018 Farm Bill, we thought it was going to roll out nation-wide in 2021 and then our national office stopped the program and offered it as a pilot in six states. We do believe this program will be offered in FY22 nation-wide, but final decisions have not been made on how this program will be implemented in FY22. What we know as of today, we must identify watersheds, land uses and priority concerns, up to three, within the state. The contract lengths will be 5-10 years, we will only pay for management practices, they will only receive an annual payment like CSP, and it will promote conservation systems. What we think CIC is going to look like is a simplicity between EQIP and CSP. The priority is to promote management changes with our customers. The benefit of this program over our classic CSP is our customer can identify and sign-up specific tracts of land or specific farms. They don't have to do their whole operation. It can be as small as a specific land use. They may only sign up 400 instead of 14, 000 acres of their crop land which will give them an opportunity to try some new management, adopt some new practices, on a small scale and not be committed to something they can't live with financially or within their own management skill set. We are excited about this program even though we don't know a lot about it. We fully intend to implement it in FY22, and we will share information with this committee as we receive it. I would highly recommend if you have an interest in something like this, that you sign up for our EQIP subcommittee. If we need a fast decision on information received about this new program, we will run it through this subcommittee. Likely we will have another STAC meeting and won't have the CIC finalized before then.

### EQIP-CIC, Gary O'Neill

One thing about CIC, we have carved out a piece of our EQIP allocation to make sure we will have funding for that program. We don't want to make a big effort to roll something out and then not have the funds. We are trying to estimate what we want to hold back for CIC.

- Question- Robert Perez: Thank you for your presentation Stacy, I had a question about your funding 2022 pools. Did those include both national and state pools? Was that a mixture of fund pools?
- Answer- Stacy Riley: Yes, those will be all the fund pools that will be offered in 2022. The way our funding is received, we have few things that are earmarked anymore but we are required to offer certain thing nationally. To be honest we are not required to offer the National Monarch Butterfly Initiative but because Oklahoma has such a significant interest in that we use some of our general allocations to offer it.
- Question- Robert Perez: One thing I noticed that wasn't on the list was the Oklahoma/Texas RCPP. I think it is in the final fiscal year, I was wondering where that was on your radar.
- Reply- Stacy Riley: That is an RCPP program that is through the GRIT program. It is independent, it is not offered under regular EQIP. It has different sign-up periods, different ranking, and criteria. We will need to get with you actually, to establish those sign-up deadlines. Part of the requirement of that is you guys make the announcement and we follow along to ensure our staff can handle what you bring to us for evaluation and potential contracting.
- Question- Robert Perez: So, are you the point of contact for that program Stacy?
- Reply- Stacy Riley: RCPP is actually Steve Glasgow but we run the program side of it. And yes, it is in its last year for EQIP.

### Urban Agriculture Initiative, Gary O'Neill, and Joseph (Joe) Heller

Gary O'Neill- This is a priority for the current administration and the agency is putting some emphasis on it. We have a little bit of it happening here in Oklahoma, but we believe there are more opportunities. We have partnered with the OCC and certain conservation districts, but we think there are a lot of other organizations and groups that have interest and missions aligned with what we want to try to do in urban ag. Joe Heller is working on this nationally and he is going to tell us about the opportunities and what is going on in other states and what we could be doing in Oklahoma along with the funding opportunities with this program.

Joe Heller: Thank you for having me. I have been with NRCS for just under 20 years, working as an RC&D coordinator as well as a District Conservationist and Resource Conservationist. I have done a broad range of conservation planning work from working with livestock producers, large scale veg growers, 14,000 acres of muck soil and my experience working in urban agriculture which has led me to working for the USDA Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production. Hearing everything that has been talked about I am impressed by the work you are doing in conservation. Due to the pandemic, we have heard that people are moving from urban areas to rural areas, seeking these locations. Your work in ALE is extremely important, as it relates to urban and suburban agriculture and the future issues you may see coming to your particular region. Urban agriculture takes place in a variety of ways, subsistence growing and recreational community gardens, small urban/suburban farming and large-scale commercial enterprises that are growing food indoors. In the USDA Urban Agriculture Program, we are looking at how food waste and compost can be utilized to improve opportunities for urban farmers to have access to healthy fresh soils. The interagency effort is important, Dept. of Ag is trying to reduce food waste from the kitchen, to get people to work with the Food Nutrition Service, how to purchase, prepare and store foods properly. Statistically 40-50% of the food that is produced goes to waste in this country. How do we prevent it from getting into the compost pile in the first place? This office was established in the 2018 Farm Bill and we are in our 2<sup>nd</sup> year. Although we are housed with NRCS, we are a USDA office, and 17 USDA agencies are working in tandem with us to carry out these programs. The Federal Advisory Committee is a way that the public has an opportunity to provide input on how the Secretary of Agriculture will be administering this program. The recommendations have been sent to the Secretary and we should expect an announcement with in the next few weeks. There are 11 Urban and Suburban county committees that were created. Five committees across the nation were the pilot project in FY20, six more have been added in FY21. How are these committees able to introduce new relative resources from USDA to our communities? How will they relate to food policy

councils, municipal policies, coordinating with local food banks, as well as technology. We are seeing large corporations investing in these innovative growing systems, which can be retrofitted into these rustbelt factories that are no longer occupied. Brooklyn Grange in NYC has mapped out all the places across the nation that have buildings that could support the infrastructure to grow food indoors. There are 2 ways to get funding, Community Compost and Food Waste Reduction Cooperative Agreements (CCFWR) and Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production Competitive Grants (UAIP). The CCFWR pilot program is only open to local city or township governments, county governments, Native American Tribal governments, special district governments like soil and water districts and state governments. It is urban/rural neutral, so I encourage you to look at this program as it grows. The UAIP grant program eligibility is open to more groups like nonprofit organizations, units of local government, tribal governments and schools that serve k-12 grades. When we were looking at USDA and assisting NRCS in terms of a definition of urban agriculture we needed to be cautious because Organic and USDA took 10 years to find the definition and some people felt alienated by it because they were doing organic and then the guidelines created by the government said they weren't.

Oklahoma is looking at how an Urban Agricultural program could evolve, New York State looked at their urban census. They chose population density of 50,000 with a 2-mile buffer. What we realized is that although there were a lot of urban farmers and community gardeners many of them didn't have a farm tract number. There hadn't been any outreach in particular to them, even though extension and other partners kind of knew who they were, there needed to be a lot of outreach and reconnaissance to meet them, understand what their conservation needs are and how we can better serve them. Florida State chose population density of 25,000 and plans to increase later. Projects have even been funded in Hawaii and that seems rural to me. There is a liberal response to the definition, I believe Jimmy Bramblett came up with this one. Urban is used when land is managed for food and/or fiber production within a landscape predominated by resident, commercial, industrial and transportation. We need to have a good perspective on where we can utilize these resources and funds creatively in areas that may not be visibly urban. Urban areas that have low access to food have a disparity as far as 20 miles down to 2 miles. So, if you have to spend \$10-20 on fuel to go round trip to get food, that can dig into your budget if you only make a few hundred dollars a week. How can we make sure that our food supply can have some abundance of local and regional foods that people can purchase without having to travel a distance to get it? As state conservation planners have been asked and tasked with doing some urban programs, my recommendation is to take the first year and meet with the people, understand what their needs are. What is the landscape scale issues in an urban area? Is it water quality and quantity? How can NRCS support an urban farmer in those areas with irrigation? Like storage or access to water. Maybe lean on our US Forest Service Partners if they want to take a look at community greening and greening infrastructure. They have an Urban and Greening Forestry Program. We have a lot of resources across the USDA, and we have to do a better job on how this initiative is rolling out making sure our field staff have an easy path to relaying where they can get other resources. We are working on an urban agriculture tool kit that will be web-based resource as well as material for field staff to use when they are working with producers one on one out in these urban areas. Contact information [Joseph.Heller@usda.gov](mailto:Joseph.Heller@usda.gov) [urbanagriculture@usda.gov](mailto:urbanagriculture@usda.gov) and [www.farmers.gov/urban](http://www.farmers.gov/urban)

- Question in Chat- Randall Rush: Mr. Heller can you share your contact info? I also do Urban Water Program at EPA with locations of New Orleans and Albuquerque. Our partnership at these locations has an interest in promoting urban ag. Would like to explore connecting locations with your pilots at these locations?
- Answer in Chat- Joseph Heller: Food and Nutrition Service Forest Service
- Comment in Chat- Amy Hagerman: OSU has a Master Composter program, and our Oklahoma Master Gardener is very active with our urban and suburban food producers.

Gary O'Neill

We have some opportunities here in Oklahoma, one of the maps showed two counties that were highlighted, Oklahoma and Tulsa county. I think we are going to do our pilot in some of those areas where it is a big urban area, but we also think there are other opportunities around our state. A lot of the discussion you provided was on food and locally grown food and production, obviously we have to have other groups and organizations involved in this; it can't just be NRCS, we are really focused on conservation. I want to stress to this committee; I know there are certain organization that need to be at



the table when we talk about urban agriculture, I encourage you to reach out so we can get this subcommittee established so we can pull that group together and start working on a strategy to start working on a plan for Oklahoma. It is a new committee, I would like AMS to be a part of it, the tribes would be great resources and partners in this effort. OSU Extension, conservation districts, and OCC have been involved at some level, but I believe that are a lot of groups represented at this table that could be a player in this and we need everyone to join together if we are going to make this a success. I appreciate the information and there are a lot of grant opportunities. I know NACD has had some of those, we will continue to explore opportunities through NACD and OACD for grant opportunities for urban activities that can help us establish and grow this program. A few years ago, Oklahoma did a special initiative project where we went out to conservation districts and tribes and offered community gardens, seasonal high tunnels and also pollinators. It was roughly successful, we may look at that, see how we can tweak it on the management and do it a little differently. That was one way that we did start trying to do some community garden projects. Once we have our first initial meeting of the urban ag subcommittee we will reach back out to Joe.

#### Climate Smart Ag, Gary O'Neill

Some of the climate strategies that have been talked about, the agency is now in the process of developing a Climate Adaptation Resiliency Plan. They believe that will be developed by February 2022. While we don't have the information yet, we do have the framework of what is being looked at in that climate plan. For our programs in 2022, again we don't have the guidelines yet, we think our soil health activities align with this plan. Also, the EQIP incentive contracts that were discussed will align with some of the management practices, adopting technology and changing managing styles. Some of the things that are being looked at in this plan that NRCS is putting together are identifying existing and new technologies. That is going to be a big part of it, there are new things out there that we need to be looking at that align with some of the climate activities. The agency has identified 29 existing practices that have some impact on climate. Those practices along with any new technologies will be where we focus some of our efforts when working with producers on climate adaptation. Something different will be integrating climate strategies in our planning process as we have always used average annual rainfalls, weather events, average temperatures in our planning process. They are working hard using NOAA data and climate stressor considerations to build that into our planning process. Maybe a planner will consider drought and wet cycles within a year, suitable cover crops and soil health. Some of those things that are impacted greatly by extreme weather events and somehow build that into our planning processes. We aren't sure how it is going to work but it sounds good and makes sense. We just need the strategy so we can build that in for our planners. We are anticipating how that might change some of the data we use when developing our conservation plans. Another component is education and training, obviously for our staff but also for our producers. Also, developing new measurement methods to calculate progress. I think something we are going to see, coming out of this, is what we have been doing for years in soil health and soil health systems, we haven't been measuring outcomes on climate near as much as we could or should have done. I think developing some metrics that can be used with some of our practices and systems will be a big component on how we show the impacts. Next improving services to urban and vulnerable communities, where are our most vulnerable customers when it comes to drastic climate changes? Sometimes that is some of our smaller producers or our limited producers. We need to make sure our strategies include that as well, then engage stakeholders and strengthen partnerships to implement the climate strategies. It is going to be a big change on some things, and we will need our partners and to collaborate with different groups to move forward with it. I wanted to mention Climate Smart because it is all over the news and NRCS is going to be in the middle of it due to our relationship with private landowners. It is all about getting our producers that right kind of equipment and strategies to mitigate some of those climate adjustments we see. We look forward to that coming out in February so maybe at our next STAC meeting we will be able to talk a bit more about it. Hopefully, we may be able to have a guest speaker come on that can provide some insight on the planning process and how that could impact us moving forward in Oklahoma. We have had to make decisions on our programs for Fiscal Year 22 and we haven't built any of that in, but we do think our soil health activities and what we do with our core partners on soil health with the conservation commission and conservation districts, Noble Research, and other groups already line up with what we will be doing in the future for the climate.

- Question in Chat- Randall Rush: The USDA Climate Adaption Resiliency Plan to be developed, will it be at a national level or developed for each state?
- Reply verbally- Gary O'Neill: This will be a national plan that is being put together and I don't know if each state will then develop a tiered plan under that, but we will have strategies that align with the national plan.
- Question in Chat- Shawn Lepard: Would irrigation engine conversion from gas to electric be a possibility under the climate adaption plan? We're looking at electric conversion with Conservation Commission using ARFA funds.
- Reply verbally-Gary O'Neill: That's a good question, I don't know how to answer that, I think it could be part of a strategy within a state to look at that. I don't know that it will go to that kind of detail from a national plan, but it could be something we could look at. I know some states like California have done some of that. When we get that plan, we will look and see if that is something that can be looked at.

We have gone through the agenda, we have covered a lot of things this morning, but I want to emphasize again, we need to make sure we have everybody around this table that we need, if you know of somebody that is missing, we need to reach out to them and get them to be a part of the STAC. Also, if your organization is having a change with who the contact needs to be please get that to Connie. We send a lot of emails out with information, asking for input, checking to see if you are aware of stuff and we need everybody's email that needs to be included in our State Technical Committee. This is an important group that we like to keep informed and communicate with. I can not stress enough on subcommittees, if you are interested in any of them please reach out and join one. Get signed up so we can have meetings outside of the large group and make some decisions quickly with the subcommittee. On the Urban Agriculture, honestly what NRCS, the Conservation Commission and the districts have focused on in the past is really on the conservation side. We do have seasonal high tunnels for growing local food and it's been very popular. We can help with the practices but when it comes to the expertise of growing the food and marketing the food, we have to have other folks at the table to help pull some of that together.

Lastly is outreach, I mentioned it earlier, we are wanting to ramp up our outreach this year and I know we have had challenges in the last two years with COVID. We will make it work and we hope some of the restrictions will lighten up when we get into 2022. If your organization has some interest and ideas, on out of the box thinking, with how we can outreach to folks that aren't aware of our services for NRCS and all USDA agencies, I'd love to sit down and talk about that to see if we can put something together and partner on those outreach activities. Gilbert Guerrero [gilbert.querrero@usda.gov](mailto:gilbert.querrero@usda.gov) is our point of contact for our outreach plan. You can reach out to him or myself and we will discuss some outreach opportunities.

Thank you all for joining us today, our next meeting will be in March and maybe, hopefully it will be in person. Have a great day.