

USDA-NRCS Maine State Technical Committee (STTC) Meeting

April 26, 2022

Meeting commenced at 8:32 am, giving participants extra time to join the meeting. The STTC was conducted on Microsoft Teams due to the COV'D 19 restrictions.

Introductions and Meeting Housekeeping – Thomas Kielbasa ME NRCS Public Affairs Specialist

Tom welcomed everyone, provided housekeeping rules, and encouraged questions.

Welcome and NRCS Briefing - Matt Walker ME NRCS State Conservationist

Good Morning,

I want to begin by thanking everyone for taking the time to join us today. Now that spring is here, I know we have even more competing demands for our time than typical so it's very meaningful that you're joining us. We have several important topics to discuss today, and we are very interested in your feedback on how you think we should proceed. I want to emphasize that...your feedback is very important. As science evolves, the climate changes, we work more in urban areas, whatever the change may be, we want to make sure that we're continuing to deliver NRCS financial and technical programs in the best interest of the state. And that is why your feedback is so important.

We've been busy obligating contracts and our folks in the field are already working on conservation practice implementation. Susan will provide updates later this morning on where we are with our obligations, and she is going to propose some programmatic changes for your consideration. Tony will be discussing NRCS conservation practices and other technical issues. Our subcommittees will be reporting on items in their respective areas. I ask that as you listen to these presentations that you think about these proposals and how they may impact our producers, our partnerships, and our priorities.

We rolled out two new initiatives this FY: climate smart practices and urban agriculture. The climate smart practices consist of practices that we've been implementing for years, but these were approved nationally as climate mitigation strategies. We'll continue working in the future to address climate adaptation and resiliency through many practices, including irrigation, subsurface drainage, cover crops, no-till, conservation crop rotation, soil carbon amendment, and the list goes on. We also tested the waters with urban agriculture and you can expect to hear more on that effort in the coming months.

I do have one item of concern to share. Covid cases in the County have exceeded our threshold so now we're back to wearing masks in these offices. I recommend reaching out to the Houlton, PI, and FTK offices to see if you need an appointment to stop in before just doing so. This is left up to the local offices' discretion.

We do have an open slot on the agenda for the partner presentation today, so I expect this meeting will wrap up sooner than expected. But you know as soon as I said that, it won't be so...

We have had a few personnel changes. Eric Giberson District Conservationist (DC) in Fort Kent & Laura Satkowski, Soil Conservationist (SC) in Scarborough have resigned.

We have made a South Paris DC selection and are finalizing the SC selections for Presque Isle and Scarborough. We will be hiring an Outreach Coordinator and a Civil Engineer in the State Office. Over the next few months, there will be eight positions coming up two partner positions, one on the easement staff, one on the ecological staff, and four SC in Farmington, Houlton, Presque Isle, and FTK.

I need to drop off this meeting a few minutes before 9:00, but Tony Jenkins can answer any questions for me.

I know that Carol Weymouth won't be able to join us this morning, but I believe we have Andy Reed or Mark Hedrich next on the agenda to represent MACD.

- *Question: Do you want to discuss an in-person State Technical Committee Meeting?*
 - *Answer: USDA-NRCS all supervisors will return to the office on April 18th and all employees will return May 2nd. The best path forward is a hybrid meeting for in-person and virtual option; anticipate this format for the next STTC meeting.*

Maine Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) Briefings – Mark Hedrick MACD Executive Board Member

Mark is filling in for Carol Weymouth.

Good Morning, all ~

Maine's State Technical Committee continues to play a significant role by advising Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and making recommendations in how to implement effective natural resource conservation within the state. Maine's sixteen Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) have played a key role in this effort for decades by hosting the Local Working Group meetings annually. These public meetings provide updated input from local landowners and residents about issues specific to each of the counties in Maine.

While some resource concerns affect the entire state, many priority issues are as individual as the county. Maine's Soil and Water Conservation Districts have a keen awareness that – when it comes to successful natural resource conservation – one size does not fit all. By discussing and highlighting each county's specific needs, the reports from the Local Working Groups offer insight into problems such as the spread of invasive plants and insects, concerns about coastal erosion and flooding, impacts from drought, and the increasing interest in forestry and soil health conservation practices.

The advice and information gathered from Soil and Water Conservation Districts locally is critical for NRCS, an agency whose mission is guided by their goal of "Helping People Help the Land." Implementing conservation provisions through Farm Bill legislation from the 'bottom up' is an important objective to ensure that technical assistance is best serving local landowners and focusing on local priority needs and concerns.

This partnership between NRCS and the Soil and Water Conservation Districts has benefitted the counties of Maine for over seven decades. During that time, changes in science, technology, conservation practices, and technical assistance

have adjusted the way we view conservation and our awareness in best practices. The voluntary programs offered by ME NRCS help provide landowners with opportunities to contract for site specific practices such as ways to reduce erosion, improve water quality, increase soil health, and more. The Soil and Water Conservation Districts provide leadership, information, education, and technical assistance through their work on projects and programs that enhance or expand conservation guided by their mission.

For those of you who may be new to the State Technical Committee, I encourage you to connect with and use your local SWCD as a resource. The scope of projects, workshops, and technical assistance offered by the Districts is extensive and, as expected, targeted toward local needs. For example, staff in the sixteen offices offer technical assistance, develop, and organize conservation workshops, host the annual natural resource educational competition, Envirothon, for high school aged students, develop wildlife habitat programs such as Ag Allies and Unleaded Loons, run a composting facility for a local farmers market, manage or own demonstration woodlots, aid with on-farm water resources, and more.

Finally, for those who would like to engage further in conservation efforts, consider volunteering at your local Soil and Water Conservation District. Whether participating in a Local Working Group meeting, helping at a plant sale, assisting at an Envirothon competition, or becoming a volunteer Associate Supervisor, there are roles for conservation leaders with Soil and Water Conservation Districts on all levels.

Thank you to Maine NRCS, and all members of the State Technical Committee, for your time.

Carol Weymouth, Executive Director

Maine Association of Conservation Districts

Mark emphasized Carol's point about opportunities to join the local conservation district as a supervisor or associate supervisor, the districts are rolling out new programs and can utilize more help.

NRCS- Programs Update - Susan Arrants Assistant State Conservationist for Programs

Matt is requesting feedback for financial programs decisions by May 13th, but feedback can be given during this meeting. The feedback is for 2023 financial assistance program delivery.

FY22 Initial Program Allocations

The 2022 fiscal year Maine NRCS program allocations were reviewed:

- ACEP: \$721,732
- AMA: \$902,000 were slated for Maine but the national office made an error in calculated funds and the corrected amount sent was \$879,522
 - No additional funds available for NHQ to distribute at this time
- CSP: \$1,415,000
 - Requested an additional \$200,000 in March, no word yet
- EQIP: \$10,810,819
 - EQIP NWQI: \$1,394,819 NOTE: any surplus must be returned
 - EQIP General: \$9,416,000
 - Requested an additional \$5,651,295 in March from the national office, no word yet

FY22 Program Delivery Update

Current Program fund commitment/obligations

- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program:
 - Agricultural Land Easement component - no applications for FY22
 - Will use funds to commit to parcels offered under a FY20 program agreement
 - Wetland Restoration Easement component - no viable application for FY22
 - Will use funds for due diligence and acquisition of an easement applied for in previous year
- AMA: Total commitment = \$636,337
 - Need/Commitment yet to be determined: Urban Agriculture applications ranking deadline 4/29
- Conservation Stewardship Program Renewal
 - 5 eligible applications (were active contracts obligated in 2016) = \$74,510
- Conservation Stewardship Program-Grassland Conservation Initiative – no viable applications submitted
- Conservation Stewardship Program Classic
 - Currently 42 applications
 - Total estimated cost not yet determined the ranking deadline is 4/29
- EQIP: Total commitment = \$7,687,896
 - Need/Commitment yet to be determined: Climate Smart Ag and Forestry, Planning Activity, and EQIP Conservation Incentive Contract applications ranking deadline is 4/29.
- Regional Conservation Partnership Program
 - Easement = \$1,860,700
 - Implementation contracts = \$1,982,485
 - 10-year forest restoration agreements = \$585,623
 - More applications are being processed, need yet to be determined

Assessment of surplus funds in each program will be done this week and result in additional preapprovals. Additional preapprovals in EQIP will also occur if & when requested funds are provided by NHQ. Preapproval determinations in AMA Urban Ag, CSP Classic, EQIP Climate Smart, EQIP planning activities, and EQIP CIC will be made later this month after ranking has been completed.

Coronavirus Agricultural Relief Payments (CARP)

The CARP completion deadline was extended from December 31, 2021 to March 31, 2022.

Discussion is underway at the NRCS National Office, but no word to date on whether the CARP option will be extended and, if so, if the eligible practice list will be expanded.

Preparing for FY23 Program Delivery

- Payment schedule information:
 - 2023 Payment schedule development is underway: All typical practice costs continue to be regionalized for all practices in 2023
 - Conservation plan activity option (CPA, DIA, CEMA) payment rates are nationalized for 2023, including those related to Forestry and CNMPs
- National Initiatives and State Initiatives

- Anticipate that these current National Initiatives/fund pools will continue to be required:
 - EQIP Organic Initiative-Certified and Transition
 - EQIP On-Farm Energy Initiative
 - EQIP National Water Quality Initiative
 - Beginning Farmer
 - Socially Disadvantaged
- Intended State Initiatives:
 - AMA Urban Agriculture
 - EQIP Climate Smart Agriculture
 - EQIP Aquatic Organism Passage
 - EQIP Conservation Planning Activities
 - EQIP Deer Wintering Yard
 - EQIP New England Pollinator Partnership Project
 - EQIP Water Conservation/Irrigation
- Program Fund Pools
 - The Maine FY23 fund pools were displayed for AMA, EQIP, CSP, EQIP

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ AMA: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Irrigation (both micro and sprinkler) ▪ High Tunnel ▪ Urban Agriculture (New subaccount for 2022) ○ CSP Classic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ag Land traditional ▪ Ag Land BF ▪ Ag Land SD ▪ Ag Land Organic ▪ Non-Industrial Private Forestland (NIPF) traditional ▪ NIPF BF ▪ NIPF SD ○ CSP Renewal (option for active 2018 CSP contracts): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ag Land traditional ▪ Ag Land BF ▪ Ag Land SD ▪ Ag Land Organic ▪ Non-Industrial Private Forestland (NIPF) traditional ▪ NIPF BF ▪ NIPF SD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ EQIP: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Statewide pools: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Aquatic Organism Passage ● Beginning Farmer-focus on soil health ● Conservation Planning Activities (formerly CAPS) ● Deer Wintering Yard ● National Water Quality Initiative (Augusta, Belfast and Ft. Kent FO's only) ● New England Pollinator Partnership Project ● OnFarm Energy Organic (Certified and Transitioning) ● Socially Disadvantaged ● Tribal Projects ● Climate Smart Agriculture (New subaccount for 2022) ● Water Conservation/Irrigation ▪ Local fund pool options: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ag Waste ● Cropland ● Forestry ● Local High Tunnel ● Pasture ● Wildlife ● Unique Local Priority (New subaccount for 2022)
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Information requesting Feedback from the STTC by May 13th:

We are currently preparing for FY23 program delivery, and your feedback is requested by May 13th.

- *Question: What is the best way to provide feedback prior to May 13th?*

- *Answer: Email Tony Jenkins and cc Thomas Kielbasa. Tom is working on a user-friendly format such as an online form with all the applicable tasks and corresponding feedback. More information will be forthcoming.*

Wildlife Fund Pool

- Considering making the local wildlife pool to a statewide pool.
 - Reason for this consideration is that not all field offices (FOs) adopted the local wildlife subaccount so all wildlife related applications in these FOs have been ranked in the local forestry subaccounts. If there is a statewide wildlife subaccount, the local forestry competition will be solely based on forestry related projects.
 - Changing the local EQIP wildlife subaccount to a statewide one would not remove the pollinators, deer wintering, or AOP related subaccounts. These will remain separate statewide subaccounts in FY23.

Application Screening and Ranking question consideration for FY23

- **Urban Ag** - Considering having specific screening questions for Urban Ag applications in 2023 to prioritize those operations which are completely within the urban ag areas.
 - In 2022, there was no such prioritization, so all operations that intersected with the urban area boundaries were treated equally in that regard, no matter how large or small a percentage was within the boundary.
 - The urban ag map will be posted on the STTC website.
- **Climate Smart Ag and Forestry (CSAF)** - Considering limiting competition to applications which only include the “core” practices identified by the NRCS national office and which are pertinent to Maine.
 - In FY22, many supporting practices were offered in this fund pool. Limiting the eligible practices would provide a very specific pool for like applications to compete. Applications that included CSAF core practices, but also other structural practices would compete in the appropriate statewide or local fund pools (i.e., ag waste, irrigation, etc.).
 - The FY22 CSAF core practices will be posted on the STTC website.

EQIP Conservation Incentive Contracts (EQIP CIC)

- National mandate to deliver as a separate fund pool through EQIP General in FY22, not as a separate program as intended. No word to date about the delivery process for FY23.
- Regardless of how EQIP CIC will be delivered in FY 2023, certain decisions must be made at the State level. Requesting STTC member input on the following:
 - Define the “High Priority Area(s)” –can be specific areas or can be statewide
 - FY22 the High Priority Area was statewide
 - Define the Relevant Land Use or Land Uses
 - FY22 the Relevant Land Use was Pasture
 - Define the Priority Resource Concern(s)
 - FY22 Priority Resource Concerns were:
 - Degraded Plant Condition
 - Concentrated Erosion

- Field Sediment, Nutrient and Pathogen loss
- Define the Core Practices (paid as an annual payment similar to CSP)
 - FY22 these were:
 - 528-Prescribed Grazing
 - 590-Nutrient Management
 - Supporting practices related to the successful implementation and operation of the core practices were also offered.

Application batching period deadlines

- ACEP-Agricultural Land Easement, ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easement, and 2022-1 CSP Classic: Considering November 18, 2022
- AMA general, CSP Classic, EQIP general and RCPP-EQIP: Considering August 26, 2022
 - Moving the application batching period deadline back to August as we had for several years. Provides for more accurate assessments for benchmark conditions. Also provides additional time for initiating environmental reviews and allows for earlier field visits by specialists if necessary (archeologist, biologists, etc.).

Conservation Stewardship Program priority resource concerns

- Resource Concern priorities for 2023 CSP delivery- Use the same as FY22? See below for FY22 resource concerns.

AgLand State Priority RC categories	NIPF State Priority RC categories
- Aquatic Habitat	-Air Quality Emissions
- Concentrated erosion	-Aquatic Habitat
- Degraded Plant Condition	-Concentrated Erosion
- Field sediment, nutrient and pathogen loss	-Degraded Plant Condition
- Pest Pressure	-Pest Pressure
- Soil Quality Limitations	-Soil Quality Limitations
- Terrestrial habitat	-Terrestrial Habitat
- Wind and Water Erosion	-Wind and Water Erosion

- During the previous STTC meeting it was requested to provide the resource concerns addressed in FY21 through the CSP Classic contracts. The resource concerns highlighted in green are the priority resource concerns that were in place in FY21. See below.

Related Resource concerns for FY2021 CSP CLASSIC contracts (Total of 13 contracts; 8 AgLand and 5 NIPF) Resource concerns highlighted in GREEN are the 8 state priority resource concern selections that were in place for AgLand and NIPF for 2021 and carried over for 2022. Other resource concerns can be addressed in the CSP contracts, but each state must identify 8 priority resource concerns for each fiscal year delivery.															
AgLand type --# of contracts addressing each resource concern	Concentrated erosion:	Soil quality limitations:	Wind and water erosion	Air quality emissions	Degraded plant condition:	Fire management	Pest pressure	Terrestrial habitat	Field sediment, nutrient and pathogen loss	Field pesticide loss	Source water depletion	Aquatic habitat	Storage and handling of nutrients	Livestock production limitation	Inefficient energy use
		8	8	8	0	8	0	6	8	8	7	3	5	3	4
NIPF type --# of contracts addressing each resource concern	Concentrated erosion:	Soil quality limitations:	Wind and water erosion	Air quality emissions	Degraded plant condition:	Fire management	Pest pressure	Terrestrial habitat	Field sediment, nutrient and pathogen loss	Field pesticide loss	Source water depletion	Aquatic habitat	Storage and handling of nutrients	Livestock production limitation	Inefficient energy use
		5	5	1	5	5	5	5	5	0	0	0	3	0	0

EQIP “Act Now” Option for FY23

- ACT NOW allows NRCS to immediately approve and obligate a ranked application in a designated ranking pool when an eligible application meets or exceeds a State determined minimum ranking score without waiting until the NRCS field office ranks all applications in the ranking pool.
- When using ACT NOW, States must establish a maximum percentage of their authorized program allocation to be used for this purpose.
- States must post the threshold ranking score for any ACT NOW ranking pool on their website.
- States must ensure that when processing applications within ACT NOW ranking pools, they do so in a timely manner in order to ensure fair and equitable treatment of all program applicants.
- Delivery considerations for 2023:
 - Utilizing this option for planning activity (CPA, DIA< CEMA) applications only in 2023
 - Setting aside \$750,000 same as for 2022
 - Setting a ranking threshold based on the lowest ranking score for planning activity applications in 2022
 - Setting multiple application cut-off dates so that process can be assessed during the fiscal year and to have some control over the funds expended
- Requesting STTC member input on using the Act Now option in FY 2023 for planning activity applications (CPAs, DIAs, CEMAs,), if this model is a success then can consider expanding this option for other practices in subsequent fiscal years.

- *Question: EQIP \$7,687,896 have been committed but another \$3 million or so have not been committed, why the shortfall?*
 - *Answer: Not all EQIP fund pools, 3 pools (CIC, CSAF, CPAs), have had their ranking deadline, which will be Friday April 29th. Also, Programs staff will be reassessing what surplus is available after initial preapprovals as some applications have had changes, e.g. change in cost estimate, applications deferred.*
- *Question: Are there a lot of applications being deferred or cancelled due to inflation and other economic reasons?*
 - *Answer: We have had some applications deferred or cancelled due to material costs and other reasons, but not as many as anticipated.*
- *Question: Are there any options from the national or local level to adjust payment schedule rates when economic swings occur?*
 - *Answer: Applicants providing receipts and actual cost documentation to Maine NRCS staff to pass on the national staff is the best path forward. A statewide option is to adjust payment rate percentages, and another option is to contact the applicable congressional delegate.*

STTC Subcommittee Reports

Forestry- Gerald Barnes

No update, the subcommittee has not met. Two more people volunteered to join the subcommittee.

Irrigation- George McLaughlin

The subcommittee has not met since the last STTC meeting. The County is seeing significant price increases in material and supply availability issues for irrigation components, especially PVC pipe and even 25% cost increases in equipment.

George mentioned potentially gathering receipts and invoices for material and construction costs.

Source Water Protection (SWP)- Kira Jacobs

Kira will reach out to colleagues who expressed interest in joining the subcommittee. The Source Water Protection Areas have been identified; Kira displayed the map from the Maine NRCS website. The next phase is to actively work in these areas with NRCS and partners. Projects within the source water protection areas will receive a higher payment rate.

Kira worked with National NRCS staff to add [Source Water Protection](#) on the national NRCS website.

EPA and Forest Service meeting on June 22 with various partners to launch a “Healthy Forests, Clean Water” for the Northeast.

NRCS Northeast Region and National Source Water Collaborative are meeting July 12th to discuss the Farm Bill 2018 goals and how is NRCS working with state drinking water programs through success stories, opportunities, and areas for collaboration.

Maine Forest Service is able to utilize state revolving funds to offer forestry producers low cost temporary bridge crossing and low interest loans for low impact forestry equipment.

The Forest Service has released Forest to Faucet version 2.0 website to measure the impact of water withdrawal impacts on HUC12 watersheds.

Kira will be presenting on the Sebago Clean Waters Project in VT today. The project has many partners including EPA Healthy Watershed Grant funding & NRCS RCPP funding. The project goal is to have 35% of the Sebago and Crooked River Watershed conserved. Kira mentioned asking the director Caron Young to do a presentation about this project at a STTC meeting.

STTC Issues, Input, and NRCS Conservation Practices Update – Tony Jenkins ME NRCS State Resource Conservationist

- Soil Carbon Amendment (Interim Practice 808)
 - Many scenarios, a biochar scenario is anticipated
 - The practice is ending its federal registry date and is anticipated to be fully adopted by NRCS
 - Intent is soil organic matter-building soil amendments and ways to incorporate soil amendments
 - Maine is working on the best way to implement the practice
 - Discussing requiring a soil health management plan to ensure the practice works best for a producer's operation
 - Looking at ways to measure the before and after soil parameters
 - Sharri Venno noted that some biochar trials have taken place in southern Aroostook County
- The Conservation Innovation Grant application period is open right now
- The Maine NRCS Forester, Gerald Barnes, has created new proposed forestry bundles, a bundle is a grouping of CSP enhancements, for CSP and submitted the request to the national office for scrutiny; the need came about because currently there is only one applicable bundle to the Northeast
 - Sugar Maple Bundle – Improve sugar maple stand health through stand management
 - White Pine Bundle #1 – Improve conifer forest health through forest stand improvement and management
 - Forest Bundle #3 – Converting high graded forest stand management health for more productive forest
 - Forest Bundle #4 – Improve forest health for wildlife habitat and pollinator conservation
- Conservation Planning Activities – formerly CAPs
 - This is a national level change; this is very challenging to Maine NRCS and TSPs
 - Improvements are being made for FY23
 - Any questions and concerns please direct to Tony Jenkins
- Carbon Sequestration
 - Maine is the focal for various interest groups, especially since Maine is >90% forested

- Maine NRCS has been looking into what options are available for sequestering carbon, e.g., practices, initiatives
- Maine NRCS will be seeking STTC input

Soil Carbon Amendment

Tony Jenkins is asking the STTC for feedback whether a soil health management plan should be required prior to applicants applying for the soil carbon amendment practice?

Question: Will this be an EQIP practice? And this practice would be ranked with other practices?

Answer: Yes and may show up in the other programs and fund pools. The ranking process will follow the same ranking process that is currently in place.

Question: Will NRCS work with biochar amendment applicators?

Answer: The Conservation Innovation Grant would be a great avenue to conduct this work.

Comment: The Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry along with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife is conducting a legislatively mandated study of soil carbon incentives.

STTC Feedback, Agenda Items for Next Meeting, and Wrap up - Tony Jenkins ME NRCS State Resource Conservationist

The next STTC meeting date will be set, Tony asked for partner presentations.

Rachel Schattman offered her graduate student to do a presentation on human ecosystem services.

The Forest Service is offering a sponsoring series of webinars through the Northeast Carbon Program for Maine landowners to secure carbon stores. <https://www.northeastforestcarbon.org/>

Karl Honkonen offered to contact his colleague Rebecca to present on Forests to Faucet.

Kira Jacobs suggested Chris Brewer to present on the CIG project about chemical & pesticide storage and management on farms.

Andy Whitman offered to do a presentation on the Vital Capital Index for Dairy Ag., a sustainability tool for regional dairy farmers.

Kira also mentioned a presentation on Sebago Clean Waters Program from Maine Farmland Trust.

Conclusion – Thomas Kielbasa ME NRCS Public Affairs Specialist

Tom expressed his gratitude for everyone's attendance and will notify STTC members on the next meeting date and time.