

USDA-NRCS Maine State Technical Committee (STTC) Meeting

8/12/2022

Overall Key Points:

- August 26th application batching period deadline for FY23
- Two new subcommittees announced
 - Wildlife
 - Urban Agriculture
- No separate wildlife statewide subaccount for FY23
- CARP (Coronavirus Agricultural Relief Payments) completion deadline extended to December 31, 2022
 - Eligibility still remains for EQIP FY2012-2021 contracts only
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Meeting start time: 8:31 am

Welcome and NRCS Briefing:

Welcome was made by Matt Walker (ME NRCS State Conservationist). Informed attendees that NRCS field offices are 100% open and masking is not required. Reminded audience members that applications are taken year-round and that August 26th is the batching period deadline for FY23 applications. Announced interest in starting two new subcommittees, one for wildlife and another for urban agriculture. Not moving forward with separate statewide subaccount for wildlife for FY23 due to timing. Guidance wanted from new wildlife subcommittee regarding conservation practices, funding and ranking for said subaccount. Introduced NRCS new Outreach Coordinator Charles (Chuck) Penney. Tony Jenkins (ME NRCS State Resource Conservationist) commented that currently most of NRCS wildlife practices and implementation take place in forestry contracts and how to go about differentiating those to apart is something that the future wildlife subcommittee should keep in mind. Next speaker and agenda item announced by Thomas Kielbasa.

Maine Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) Briefing:

Carol Weymouth (MACD Executive Director) spoke about the vital advisory role the State Technical Committee has with the Maine NRCS. The diversity of the committee allows for unique insights and perspectives. Carl explained how soil and water conservation districts are able to see firsthand the effects of drought, erosion, invasive plants, insects, flooding and more, and the effect those environmental issues have on residents and landowners in their area. Soil and water conservation districts also host local working group meetings which provide local information and priorities that inform this committee and Maine NRCS on issues particular to each service area. These local working group meetings are a guiding factor in providing public input on the natural resources needs and concerns expressed by residents and landowners.

Carol also encouraged meeting participants to connect with and use your local soil and water conservation district as a resource.

2022 Census of Agriculture Briefing from USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS):

Pamela Hird the New England State Statistician from the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) gave a talk on what NASS does, her role and the importance of the census. Pamela's role is to represent the USDA and NASS for all six New England states and to educate producers and organizations on what NASS does. NASS captures information and data on anything related to agriculture. Information gathered by NASS particularly around identity for their surveys cannot be shared with anyone. Information is used to help set the farm bill, help set pricing, for insurance payments such as CRP, to help states get funding for agricultural programs from USDA etc. The way information is shared is in a summary format. The census of agriculture is conducted every five years and has been done for 170 years. Participation in the census is mandatory. The census of agriculture is a very important source of valuable information and it is critical to get as many producers as possible to participate.

Programs updates by Susan Arrants Assistant State Conservationist for Programs:

Review of FY22 program obligation to date:

- AMA: Total obligated/committed = 64 contracts for \$1,176,995
 - Irrigation related: 18 contracts for \$507,697
 - High Tunnels: 42 contracts for \$573,990
 - Urban Agriculture: 4 contracts for \$95,308
- CSP: Total obligate/committed = 30 contracts for \$627,710
 - CSP-Classic: 22 contracts for \$500,058
 - AgLand: 6 contracts for \$71,326
 - NIPF: 15 contracts for \$395,776
 - CSP AgLand-Organic: 3 contracts for \$53,144
 - CSP-Renewal: 5 contracts for \$74,508
 - Only still active FY2017 contracts in good standing were eligible to apply for renewal
 - AgLand Renewal: 2 for \$42,979
 - NIPF Renewal: 3 for \$31,529

Review of FY2022 program obligations to date:

- EQIP: \$11,810,819 allocated; Total obligated/committed = 396 contracts for \$11,692,739.
 - EQIP GIGs: 3 applications for \$224,280
 - EQIP NWQI: 9 contracts for \$1,395,102
 - EQIP General: 387 contracts for \$10,073,357

- Ag Waste: 24 contracts for \$4,571,876
- Forestry: 33 contracts for \$793,019
- Water Conservation (Irrigation): 3 for \$730,642
- High Tunnel: 2 contracts for \$30,889

Coronavirus Agricultural Relief Payments:

- CARP completion deadline was extended from March 31, 2022 to December 31, 2022.
 - Eligibility still remains for EQIP FY2012-2021 contracts only
- Eligible practice list was not expanded. Eligible practices remain as assigned by the NRCS National Staff as:
 - 367-Roofs and Covers
 - 430-Irrigation Pipeline
 - 468-Lined Waterway or Outlet
 - 516-Livestock Pipeline
 - 575-Trails and Walkways
 - 584-Channel Bed Stabilization

FY2023 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) payments rates are nationalized for 2023, including those related to forestry and CNMPs.

National Initiatives and State Initiatives:

- Anticipated 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 for FY2023 are intended to be:

- AMA:
 - Irrigation (both micro and sprinkler)
 - High Tunnel
 - Urban Agriculture (New subaccount for 2022)
- CSP Classic:
 - 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):
 - Ag Land traditional
 - Ag Land BF
 - Ag Land SD
 - Ag Land Organic
 - Non-Industrial Private Forestland (NIPF) traditional
 - NIPF BF
 - NIPF SD
- EQIP:
 - Statewide pools:
 - Aquatic Organism Passage
 - Beginning Farmer-focus on soil health
 - Climate Smart Agriculture
 - 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
 - Water Conservation/Irrigation
 - Local fund pool options:
 - Ag Waste
 - Cropland
 - Forestry
 - Local High Tunnel
 - Pasture
 - Wildlife
 - Unique Local Priority

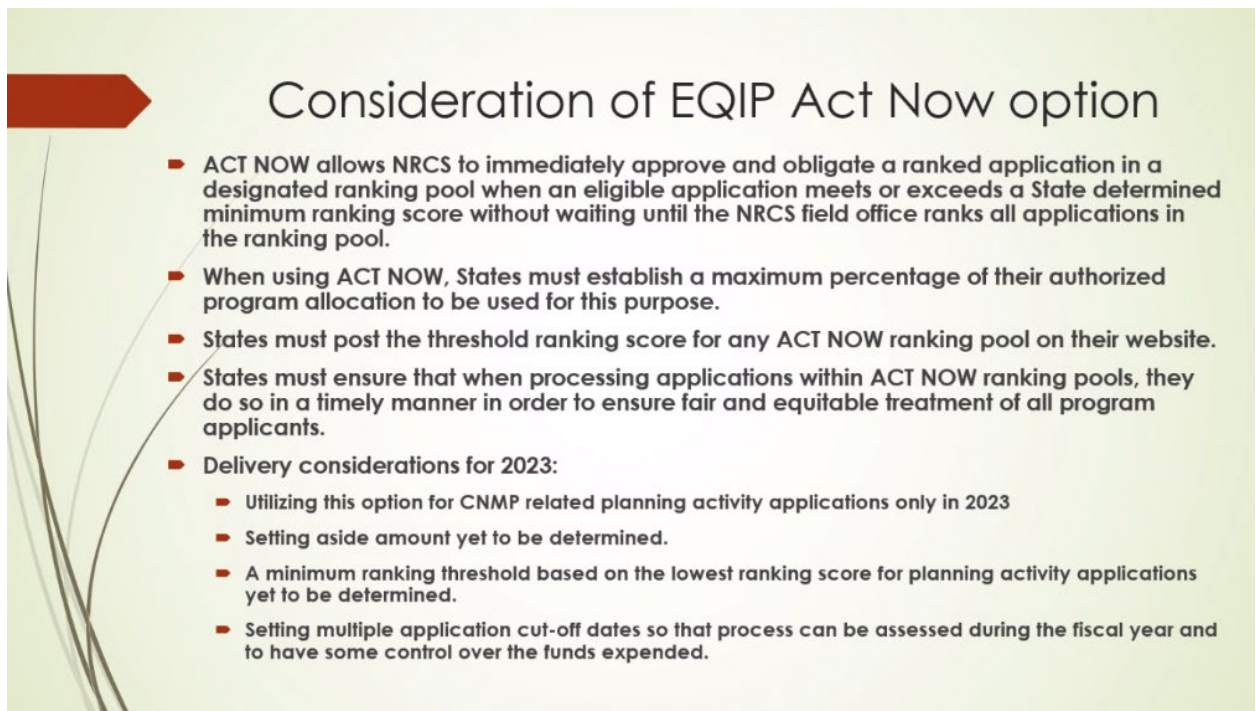
Changes for 2023 that were considered

- Considered changing the wildlife local pool to a statewide pool
 - Decision is to not have a statewide wildlife pool for FY2023. Will re-visit for FY2024.
- Considered having specific screening questions for Urban Ag applications in 2023 to prioritize those operations which are completely within the urban ag areas.
 - Decision is to add a ranking question for the fund pool instead of screening out applications
- Considered limiting competition in the Climate Smart Ag and Forestry subaccount to applications which only included the “core” practices identified by NRCS National Office and which are pertinent to Maine.
 - Decision is to have core practices as primary for Climate Smart Ag, with supporting practices as applicable. Still discussing limiting practices for the Forestry fund pool.
- Considered using the EQIP Act Now option in FY 2023 for planning activity applications (CPAs, DIAs, CEMAs,).
 - Decision is to use the EQIP Act Now option for only CNMP related planning activity related applications in FY2023 as a pilot.

EQIP Conservation Incentive Contracts (EQIP CIC):

- Confirmation received from NRCS National Staff that FY2023 EQIP CIC delivery guidance will mirror FY2022 guidance.
- Decision made to continue in FY2023 as we did in FY2022
 - High Priority area will be statewide

- Relevant land use – Pasture
- Priority Resource Concerns
 - Degraded Plant Condition
 - Concentrated Erosion
 - Field Sediment, Nutrient and Pathogen loss
- Core Practices (paid as an annual payment similar to CSP)
 - 528-Prescribed Grazing
 - 590-Nutrient Management
- Supporting practices related to the successful implementation and operation of the core practices were also offered



Consideration of EQIP Act Now option

- 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 CNMP related planning activity applications only in 2023
 - Setting aside amount yet to be determined.
 - A minimum ranking threshold based on the lowest ranking score for planning activity applications yet to be determined.
 - 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.

Conservation Stewardship Program priority resource concerns

- Resource Concern priorities for 2023 CSP delivery-Use the same as FY2022?
 - Request STTC member input. The list of available choices are available on the next slide, along with a summary of the resource concerns addressed in 2021 contracts (FY2022 contract obligations not yet completed.)
 - FY2022 Resource Concerns were:

AgLand State Priority RC categories

- Aquatic Habitat
- Concentrated erosion
- Degraded Plant Condition
- Field sediment, nutrient and pathogen loss
- Pest Pressure
- Soil Quality Limitations
- Terrestrial habitat
- Wind and Water Erosion

NIPF State Priority RC categories

- Air Quality Emissions
- Aquatic Habitat
- Concentrated Erosion
- Degraded Plant Condition
- Pest Pressure
- Soil Quality Limitations
- Terrestrial Habitat
- Wind and Water Erosion

Request State Technical Committee member input by August 26, 2022

- Form will be sent out for STTC members input on CSP resource concerns

Here's a summary of resource concerns addressed in FY2021 CSP Classic contracts. The resource concerns highlighted in green are the priority resource concerns that were in place in FY21 and again in FY22

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	1

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	0

Subcommittee Reports and discussion of possible Wildlife and Urban Ag. Subcommittees:

Forestry- John Hernandez (Landowner Outreach Forester Maine Forest Service):

- Had a meeting on July 27th
 - Reintroduce former members
 - Decided to have more committee meetings during the year
 - Discussed statewide wildlife funding pool
 - Meeting on November 1st 2022
- Karl Honkonen from US Forest Service informed that the landscape scale restoration grant funding opportunity opened on August 10th

Irrigation- George McLaughlin

- Meeting on August 11, 2022
 - Discussed AMA and EQIP to address current inflation, costs, and supplies. A funding increase would help gain more interest and for people to pursue contracts.
 - Committee wants to know of ways to support NRCS to request increase funding for programs and if a letter is needed.
 - Matt Walker (ME NRCS State Conservationist) commented that congressional delegation is aware of low financial assistance rates and for subcommittee to send him letter regarding the topic.
 - Mentioned shortfall in TSP's
 - Blueberry industry needs help and assistance with water management plan development
 - Another topic was to raise the AMA cap per year from 50,000 to 100,000.
 - Matt Walker (ME NRCS State Conservationist) mentioned that the farm bill is due out in 2023. Currently the discussions are going on now and if the delegation and the lawmakers were to be made aware, they might be able to incorporate some of those suggestions when writing the new bill.

Source Water Protection- Kira Jacobs (EPA Region 1 Source Water Protection Coordinator):

- Met on 8/11/2022

Recommendations and questions for the State Technical Committee:

1. Keep the current list of watersheds with no changes for FY23.
 2. Work with the STC and NRCS staff to develop an outreach plan.
 3. Recommend that Maine NRCS develop a Source Water Protection fact sheet similar to what Vermont and NH have.
 4. Update the Maine NRCS website to include the Source Water Protection map and list of priority watersheds in the Water Section (per communication with Tom Kielbasa).
 5. Encourage additional participation in the Source Water Protection subcommittee. The subcommittee will meet before the next STC meeting to focus on how the partners can help implement practices to protect sources of drinking water.
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Discussion of possible subcommittees- Tony Jenkins (ME NRCS State Resource Conservationist)

- Urban Agriculture Subcommittee
 - To look at interim practices to help decided which to adopt
- Wildlife Subcommittee
 - Suggestions have been received to create one
- Meeting participants interested in being part of new subcommittees
 - Wildlife
 - Steve young
 - Molly Docherty
 - Joseph Roy
 - Urban Ag.
 - Charles Penney
 - Pamela Hird
 - Tara King

STTC Issues, Input and NRCS Conservation Practices- Tony Jenkins (ME NRCS State Resource Conservationist):

- CPAs activities
 - Still in flux
 - Getting new activities down the pipeline
 - CEMA for PFAS testing
 - CPA 106 has changed from FY22
 - Aquifer testing activity
- New practices
 - Soil carbon amendments 338
 - Looking to tie that with soil health management plan
 - Various urban ag. interim practices and old practices
 - Hopefully urban ag. subcommittee will help with that

- Amending soil properties with lime (interim practice)
- 383 fuel break practice adding for forestry
- New CSP enhancement bundles for forestry
- CIG's (conservation innovation grant)
 - 3 were funded
 - Forest restoration
 - Biochar addition for blueberries
 - Wood turtle tracking

STTC Feedback, Agenda Items for next meeting, wrap up- Tony Jenkins (ME NRCS State Resource Conservationist):

- Item suggestions
 - Presentations on past CIGs
 - Partner presentations
- Next meeting date will be announced