

USDA-NRCS Maine State Technical Committee (STTC) Meeting

January 19, 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

Climate Change

USDA and NRCS, along with partners and producers, are leading the way to climate solutions that build profitability and resiliency. Solutions that work for our producers, foresters, and open new market opportunities to build wealth within our local communities. Maine as a state is in great shape; Maine has established the Maine Climate Council and created the four-year climate strategy, “Maine Won’t Wait”, and there is significant legislative interest. At the national level the Biden and Harris administration has called for a whole government approach to have achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. The president also set goals for the whole economy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2030.

USDA climate change strategy is:

- based on partnerships,
- voluntary and incentives based,
- focused on creating new markets,
- and ensures rural America plays a key role in our transition into cleaner forms of energy, and farmer, rancher, forester, and land manager lead.

Maine NRCS has created a subaccount specific to address climate smart practices, the subaccount includes 22 core practices focused on climate mitigation, the agency is still building the climate smart adaption and resiliency plan, more practices will follow.

COVID

USDA federal and non-federal employees must be vaccinated. USDA is monitoring county data daily and changes are being made frequently to field office staffing levels and whether visitors are allowed. The best thing to do is call the field office to see what the status and how best to meet.

The Build Better Back Plan

The Build Better Back plan current includes significant funding directed to USDA. \$4 billion would be to strengthen critical supply chains and transform the food system. Currently the bill includes verbiage to bolster resilience and natural solutions to climate change through historic investment in coastal restoration, forest management, and soil conservation. This directly ties with NRCS. Many unknowns

about the proposed bill, whether it will pass, what form it will pass, and if it does pass what will that means for us here in Maine. We at NRCS stand ready to deliver on whatever is passed.

Personnel Announcements

We have had some staff changes due to retirement, Ricky Hall a Civil Engineering Technician in Bangor, Carl Perry a Program Assistant in Lewiston, and Wayne Monroe the District Conservationist (D.C.) in Scarborough. Maine NRCS is moving quickly to fill vacancies, the final selection is being made for the Scarborough D.C. Carl Perry's Program Assistant position is being moved to Presque Isle, the job announcement is currently open. The Assistant Conservationist for Field Operations has been filled by Brittany Hummel. The State Office Programs Staff position, Brittany Hummel's former position, is currently advertised. Please spread the word about the positions.

Maine Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) Briefings - Carol Weymouth MACD Executive Director

Good morning, all

I'd like to start out with thanking two people who have contributed to the State Technical Committee with their ability to recognize and identify local issues as well as state-wide natural resource concerns on behalf of Maine's Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) for numerous years:

Maine Association of Conservation Districts is so proud to announce the national recognition of Mark Hedrich, State of Maine Nutrient Management Specialist, Knox-Lincoln SWCD Board Chair, and MACD Executive Committee member. Nominated by the staff at the Knox-Lincoln SWCD, the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) has announced Mark's induction into the NACD Hall of Distinction, an award that recognizes district official leaders who work to advance natural resource conservation, support and promote the mission of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and provide leadership through expertise and skills that provide extensive assistance, input, and education. Congratulations, Mark. The NACD Hall of Distinction is available on the NACD website.

https://www.nacdnet.org/hall-of-distinction/mark_hedrich/

In addition, congratulations to Bill Rust for his 55-year commitment to leadership in conservation at the Cumberland County SWCD. Following his recent retirement from the SWCD Board, Bill was recognized by the CCSWCD by naming the Bill Rust Conference room in his honor – a place where he spent many hours offering guidance, common sense solutions, advice, and expertise to promote natural resource conservation and leadership to the District and where continued conservation will be discussed for years to come.

As you all are aware, Maine's Soil and Water Conservation Districts host Local Working Groups to assist the USDA/NRCS in identifying natural resource priorities that impact their service area. What some are unaware of is that the Districts involvement hosting local working groups is identified under Title II of the Agricultural Act of 2014 – the 2014 Farm Bill.

By hosting these Local Working Groups, and making recommendations on the local priorities, they offer vital area specific information on the unique aspects of natural resource conservation to enable federal funding to be prioritized on practices from the ground up that will improve soil health, water resources, and more. But, as technology improves, and different resource issues are revealed or highlighted, additional adaptations are required.

Climate issues are adding to our local priorities, with drought and invasive pests and plants becoming a challenge not only in the agricultural landscape but in urban areas, as well. Those issues were discussed and identified in more than a few Local Working Group meetings and featured in the reports for the State Technical Committee to review. However, the focus of soil health, clean water, and natural resource conservation are constant and consistent.

One last item that I want to highlight is the National Conservation Planning Partnership – a collaboration of agencies with the goal of advancing voluntary conservation practices. One area that the group is working to improve is the input and information management of the Local Working Groups. By developing software that will allow for inputs to identify local priorities, sources of concern, and natural resource issues, plus broaden the scope of inputs gathered, the project will advance and enhance the ability of local SWCDs to provide targeted information and recommendations to the State Technical Committee, plus additional partners, and entities, in the future.

Thank you, Matt, and all members of the State Technical Committee, for your time.

Carol Weymouth, Executive Director

Maine Association of Conservation Districts

Rural Development (RD) New Director Introduction - Rhiannon Hampson

Rhiannon is very excited to be part of RD, she has championed a lot of RD programs within Chellie Pinegree's office a long with conservation programs to progress climate smart practices as a top priority.

Rhiannon has a pasture based organic dairy farm in Thomaston, she thanked NRCS, specifically Ron and Lindsay in the Belfast field office.

Rhiannon stressed the importance of partner and whole government approach to reach these climate goals.

RD will be standing up processing infrastructure funding.

Question: Rhiannon, can you tell us more about the programs you'll oversee as they intersect with NRCS? Or share a link to a website :) ?

*Answer: <https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/energy-programs/rural-energy-america-program-renewable-energy-systems-energy-efficiency-improvement-guaranteed-loans>;
<https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/all-programs>*

Farm Service Agency (FSA) New State Executive Director – Sherry Hamel

Sherry has worked with FSA for about 29 years, in various roles. She is excited partner the RD Director so heavily involved in agriculture. The climate smart initiatives are coming in strong from this administration, still finding out what FSA roles and programs will be.

Maine FSA 2021 Accomplishments:

- Around \$150 million in program payments and loans
 - \$17 million in farm loan programs
 - \$54 million for the STRP (Seafood Trade Relief Program)

- \$13 million for the PATHH Program (Pandemic Assistance to Timber Harvesters and Haulers)
- \$60 million for the CFAP (Coronavirus Food Assistance Program)
- Even through various difficulties, i.e., low employees, transition to telework

There are a few new programs, Farmers.gov website has the details:

- Organic Transitional and Educational Certification Program
 - Sign-ups are occurring now ending February 4th, 2022
- ELAP (Emergency Livestock Assistance Program)
 - Sign-up Deadline January 30th, 2022
- LFP (Livestock Forage Program)
 - Deadline January 30th, 2022

Sherry expressed her thanks to being here, excitement about new programs, and continued partnership with NRCS and RD.

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

Review of FY22 Program Initial Allocations

- ACEP (Agricultural Conservation Easement Program): \$721,831
- AMA (Agricultural Management Assistance): \$902,000
- CSP (Conservation Stewardship Program): \$1,415,000
- EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program): \$10,275,396

Payment Schedule Information

2022 payment schedules have been released by NRCS National Headquarters and posted online:

[Maine Payment Schedules | NRCS \(usda.gov\)](#)

- All typical practice costs continue to be regionalized
- Conservation plan activity, i.e., Forest Management Plans, payment rates are nationalized

Question: Why would all the allocation money not be spent?

Answer: Not always enough applications or projects to spend money.

Question: Does Nationally annually figure out initial allocations based on the states demand?

Answer: Depending on the program, i.e. CSP organic pool nationally will set percentages across the board for all states. EQIP part of the initial allocation is based off a resource funds assessment from the previous 3rd or 4th quarter demand. After the initial allocation the states can request additional funds.

Question: When does the money need to be spent by, in order not send any surplus back for CSP – Organic and EQIP - NWQI?

Answer: The deadline is August.

National Initiatives and State Initiatives

National Initiatives include:

- EQIP Organic – Certified and Transition
- EQIP On-Farm Energy
- EQIP Water Quality – Sheepscoot River Watershed (Augusta Field Office) and CrossLake Watershed (Fort Kent Field Office)
- EQIP Conservation Incentives Contract (CIC)
- AMA Urban Agriculture
- EQIP Climate Smart Agriculture
- EQIP Aquatic Organism Passage
- EQIP Conservation Planning Activities
 - Former known as Conservation Activity Plans (CAPs)
 - Now includes new Conservation Planning Activities (CPAs), Design and Implementation Activities (DIAs), and Conservation Evaluation and Monitoring Activities (CEMAs)
- EQIP Deer Wintering Yard
- EQIP New England Pollinator Partnership Project
- EQIP Water Conservation/Irrigation

Program Fund Pools

Various fund pools are located for a given program. Refer to the slide deck.

Program Fund Pools for FY2022 will be:

<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 and Ft. Kent FO's only) • New England Pollinator Partnership Project • OnFarm Energy (to include Energy CAPs) • Organic (Certified and Transitioning, to include Transition to OrganicCAPs) • 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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EQIP local fund pool options have been consolidated due to internal software limitations. This year the state has offered a “Unique Local Priority” fund pool to accommodate applications that do not in the other local subaccounts, the subaccount is left to the D.C.s discretion if and how to utilize the subaccount.

Question/Statement: Tom has attended several LWG (Local Work Groups) meetings, LWGs struggle with how to prioritize ag waste funding along with other priorities such as forest management or cropland or pasture or wildlife, since the applications that take a lot of money. Hearing that a quarter or third of applications being funding. In the past there has been a statewide pool for ag waste. Requesting to consider more funding directed for ag waste applications at the state level instead of the local level.

Answer: The state has for a few years now has set aside \$1 million for large ag waste applications that cause bottleneck for funding at the local level. The subaccount is available again this year. Maine NRCS will discuss having the ag waste subaccount at the state level for 2023.

EQIP Conservation Incentive Contracts (EQIP CIC)

This funding will be delivered as a separate funding pool through EQIP general, it is not a stand alone program. Funds are 5% from the EQIP general allocation, for Maine it is \$470,800 for FY22. The focus is pasture statewide. The priority resource concerns are Degraded Plant Condition, Concentrated Erosion, and Field Sediment, Nutrient Pathogen Loss. The two core practices are prescribed grazing (code 528) & nutrient management (code 590), payment schedule for the core practices will be paid annually similar to CSP. Supporting practices (structural and vegetative) are eligible for payment as soon as the practice is completed.

Question: Does this include solar land that is leased for grazing?

Answer: This is being discussed at the national level and guidance is forthcoming.

Question: Do all funding streams for EQIP, are there any priorities for profit vs non-profit?

Answer: There is no distinction for entities. The funding has to be directed to private landowners not public entities.

Question: Susan when you say set aside what happens to the funds when they are not spent (for EQIP – CIC)?

Answer: The funds can be shifted to other EQIP fund pools. Most of the unspent funds will be prioritized to local EQIP fund pools and ag waste.

Application Batching Period Deadline Review

- ACEP – Agricultural Land Easement, ACEP – Wetland Reserve, 2022 - 1 CSP Classic: November 19th, 2021
- AMA general, EQIP general and RCPP – EQIP: October 1st, 2021
- AMA Urban Agriculture, EQIP Climate Smart Agriculture, EQIP Conservation Planning Activity (e.g. formerly known as CAPs) – February 25th, 2022
- EQIP CIC – February 25th, 2022

Question: What is the application batching deadline for NWQI?

Answer: October 1st, 2021

Coronavirus Agricultural Relief Payments (CARP)

Available to EQIP participants only that have or will complete the seven identified practice(s) between 01/01/2021 and 03/31/2022. Only six out of the seven identified practices are offered in Maine.

Practice Code	Practice Name
367	Roofs and Covers
430	Irrigation Pipeline
443	Irrigation System, Surface and Subsurface NOT OFFERED IN MAINE
468	Lined Waterway or Outlet
516	Livestock Pipeline
575	Trails and Walkways
584	Channel Bed Stabilization

CARPs can be provided, as applicable, for active, completed and expired EQIP contracts. Not available for cancelled or terminated contracts.

Question: Other practices have been affected by COVID, such as fencing, that are not listed, will funds be directed to those practices.

Answer: The national office identified the seven practices, and the states were not allowed to add to the list. There was a secondary practice list that State Conservationist could raise the payment rate to the highest rates eligible. Maine already has set the payment rates to those levels.

Question: Did NRCS reach out to all eligible EQIP participants to notify them about CARP? Wondering whether I should mention this to the farmers I work with or if they already know.

Answer: Participants are being notified about this option along with the applicable deadline to implement the practice. The availability of the funds are not guarantee. Farmers have the option to accept or turn down the funds.

Input/Concurrence needed from STTC Members

- For 2023 ACEP – WRE permanent easements: Use of individual appraisals instead of developing a Geographic Area Rate CAP (GARC) based on Area-wide Market Analysis?
 - The STTC concurred with individual appraisal method
- What Resource Concern priorities for 2023 CSP delivery – Use the same as FY 2022?
 - Request STTC input for the next STTC meeting. The list of the available choices will be provided.

Question: Are there any resource concerns priorities for CSP overlapping with the Climate Smart Agriculture agenda? How is the Climate Smart Agriculture Initiative rolling out?

Answer: The Climate Smart Initiative strategy is set for this year but is evolving for the upcoming years. It is okay for overlapping priorities between CSP and EQIP, the climate smart initiative is within EQIP, since often the applicants are different. There is an ongoing discussion on what resource concerns to use, existing or to create new ones.

Question: What resource concern priorities were CSP contracts based off?

Answer: NRCS will provide the information with the meeting minutes.

Question: Would you provide the general EQIP fund pool allocations?

Answer: NRCS will provide the information with the meeting minutes.

STTC Subcommittee Reports

Forestry- Jack Hernandez

The forestry subcommittee has solidified members including the Maine Forest Service, Maine NRCS, USFWS, and others to discuss forestry related issues and available programs to distribute information to the local communities.

Irrigation- George McLaughlin

Has not meet since the last STTC. Plans on meeting to review the supply chain issues for equipment acquisition, how participants handle issues when they cannot get equipment in a timely fashion, and whether NRCS payment rates are adequate.

Tony mentioned that the agency's payment rates have not been tested under constraints such as the supply chain issues, inflation, etc. The subcommittee needs to monitor the situation to provide feedback to the State Conservationist to forward on to the national staff.

Susan let George know that NRCS will work with active contract participants when they cannot get the supplies necessary, such as rescheduling contract items.

Source Water Protection- Kira Jacobs

Kira shared a video from the American Water Works to discuss source water protection.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yklUIB68wWU>

Kira is the Source Water Protection Coordinator for Region 1 within the EPA. She covers all of New England. She introduced various partners that assist with source water protection. Ashley Hodge is with the Maine CDC Safe drinking water. Alex Wong is with the 319 Non-point Program at Maine DEP. Sandra Fanciullo is the 319 Non-point Program Coordinator for the State of Maine and the team leader for EPA's program.

Kira shared the Source Water Protection Map developed for Maine during the summer of 2020, as well, as the HUC 8 drinking water watersheds in southern Maine are eligible for 90% payment rate for practices linked with source water protection.

An applied source water protection project is the recent Crooked River Headwaters easement through RCPP, resulting in 7,700 acres conserved for all time. Kira stressed all the partners involved including NRCS.

Another applied source water protection project is a Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) for chemical and pesticide storage. The project resulted in recommended revisions to the NRCS

Agrichemical Handling practice standard and created standard operating procedures for hand and storing agrichemicals. Kira suggested the CIG participants as presenters for a future STTC.

Question: What is the capacity for RCPP partners, how do we build partner capacity?

Answer: Kira mentioned that RCPP has financial and technical funds. In general, some administrative workload can be used through technical funds, as well as, in kind dollars. Financial funds focus on implementing conservation practices.

Meduxnekeag River Watershed Restoration, Phase II – Angela “Angie” Wolton

The southern Aroostook SWCD has been working with EPA 319 grant to utilize soil health practices to improve water quality. Angie discussed with potato rotations fall cover is not always possible, utilizing other practices such as mulching. The 2021 projects focused on using multi-species cover crops to mimic the natural world. Eight different mixes for eight different farmers.

The projects resulted in discussions with individual farmers about beneficial terminating methods for cover crops and plant regeneration from certain species. Farmers were able to use the new Southern Aroostook SWCD no-tiller seeder. Farmers were able to have farmer to farmer discussions about soil health. Lastly, farmers had a positive experience with multi-species cover crops.

Question: Do you think this will propel soil health and adoption of practices?

Answer: Yes, especially since it has been it has been an ongoing 10 years. Most Southern Aroostook farmers are doing some soil health practices.

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

Congratulations to Mark Hedrick, great resource on nutrient management and very pragmatic for making solutions work for farmers.

Conservation Activity Plans (CAPs) has transitioned to Conservation Planning Activities (CPAs). Maine NRCS has been working on a strategy that will result in products that the client and NRCS need, and the payments are comparable to what they were before. Technical Service Providers (TSPs) are critical to implementing conservation for the various resource concerns.

CSP is being expanded for our state. The program has a lot of potential for forest, but it is available for most land uses.

CIGs funding is around \$250,000 with \$75,000 per project. Anticipate an April or May proposal acceptance deadline.

There are a lot of different fund pools, including the urban and climate smart pools. More specifics will be provided soon.

PFAS (Per and polyfluoroalkyl substances), NRCS is always willing to help. There is still a lot of questions about the species of chemicals and concentration danger levels. We have a few options out there including animal mortality practice and new soil testing practices.

There is a new tech registry for TSPs. Gerald Barnes is working with TSPs to get familiar with the new system.

There are two NWQI watersheds, the CrossLake and Sheepscot. The Sheepscot watershed has been expanded.

Future Agenda Topics to Consider

A review of climate smart practices contracted in 21 would be a good agenda item next time.

STTC Feedback, Agenda Items for Next Meeting, and Wrap up - Matt Walker ME NRCS State Conservationist

Matt appreciated all the questions, discussions, and all our presenters.

Maine NRCS will provide the requested resource concerns, practices, and EQIP general fund pool allocations on the STTC website. Maine NRCS will discuss a statewide ag waste fund pool. Nationally NRCS is required to spend 50% of funds on livestock, and ag waste counts toward the 50% requirement.

Plan on a presentation about the RCPP (Regional Conservation Partnership Program) and ongoing RCPP projects, as well as a presentation from NRCS Soil subject matter experts on subaqueous soils along the coast.

Kira suggested a presentation from the Wolf's Neck farm for Soil Health.

Conclusion – Thomas Kielbasa ME NRCS Public Affairs Specialist

The next STTC meeting is anticipated in April or May. Be on the lookout for all the presentations, requested program information, and meeting minutes to be posted to the Maine STTC website.