

USDA-NRCS Maine State Technical Committee (STTC) Meeting

October 4, 2021

Meeting commenced at 8:32 a.m., giving participants a few extra minutes to join the meeting. The STTC was conducted on Microsoft Teams due to the COVID 19 restrictions.

Welcome- Matt Walker ME NRCS State Conservationist

Matt welcomed everyone to the 2022 federal fiscal year (FY). He mentioned FY 2022 sign-up application deadlines for programs:

- October 1ST – AMA (Agricultural Management Assistance) & EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) & RCPP-EQIP (Regional Conservation Partnership Program – EQIP)
 - January 21st - 2nd sign-up for AMA Climate Smart Agriculture, EQIP Urban Agriculture, and EQIP CAPs (Conservation Activity Plans)
- November 19th – ACEP (Agricultural Conservation Easement Program) & CSP (Conservation Stewardship Program)

The NRCS- Maine Fact Sheet for FY 2021 Farm Bill Implementation was reviewed:

- EQIP statewide pools resulted in 256 contracts over \$ 4 million in conservation benefit
- EQIP local pools resulted in 192 contracts over \$ 6 million in conservation benefit
 - About 60% of EQIP funding was for local county pools to meet local working group priorities
- Discussed other EQIP initiatives and programs
 - AMA funds were not fully utilized for Maine NRCS, the current economic climate resulted in participants declining contract offers from NRCS
 - Maine NRCS is looking at ways to expand the AMA program for future years
 - CSP almost doubled in growth for Maine NRCS resulting in 18 contracts and over \$500 thousand spent to benefit conservation minded producers

There have been recent staff changes with two new positions and back filling an existing position:

- Art Grindle - Civil Engineering Technician out of the Skowhegan Field Office; new position
- Erin Cocca – Soil Conservationist out of the Ellsworth Field Office; new position
- Bobby Jones - Engineering out of the Bangor Field Office; back filling an existing position

Due to COVID staffing for field offices is limited to 50% except for the Dover-Foxcroft field office, which is at 25% as of this morning, and the state office is still functioning at 25% capacity. Producers are still welcomed to come into the buildings through an appointment to ensure staff are available to meet.

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

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) has hired Annica McGuirk to serve as the North East Regional Representative. She has partnered with various SWCDs and conservation groups and lives in Lisbon Falls, Maine.

Two new staff members have been added to the MACD:

- Medea Steinman – Waldo County SWCD, part time administrative director
- Chantelle Hay- Oxford County SWCD, outreach and education coordinator
- Emma Lorusso- Androscoggin County SWCD, project director

Carol recognized Betty McInnis from the Cumberland County SWCD for her many contributions to MACD and announced her upcoming retirement, congratulations on a respected and dedicated career.

MACD continues to focus on expanding its staff's technical capacity by gaining access to USDA's training portal, AgLearn, through the Conservation Planner Partnership. Lastly, a marketing and promotion training event will be held at the end of the month.

Outreach events for Maine NRCS programs continue to be held throughout the state to focus on producers who may not have worked with federal agencies. Hancock County SWCD held an on-farm 'walk and talk', promoting completed and needed conservation practices. Some events have had to be cancelled such as the CSP presentation scheduled at this year's Common Ground Fair.

The SWCD has held two "Fall Field Days", events available to all high school aged students to participate in outdoor, hands-on events, similar to the Envirothon program. A third field day is scheduled in Orono later this month.

Question:

- Will MACD hold a winter meeting?
 - Discussions are taking place but a virtual option is anticipated

A Novel Shallow Well Technology to Provide Safe, Sustainable Drinking and Irrigation Water- Joseph Ayotte USGS Hydrologist

Joseph and various partners have been working for several years to formulate a shallow well system that is clean and reliable for domestic and agricultural use. Arsenic is a common contaminant in bedrock aquifers throughout New England about 20-50% of wells. Joseph and his team looked at various alternatives to overcome the arsenic issue throughout the aquifer without drilling a new well. Treating existing wells for arsenic is expensive and ineffective due to human error in operating and maintaining the treatment systems. There is an increased interest for water for irrigation systems related to recent drought conditions. A 2019 paper looked at the unsustainable solution of digging deeper wells. Glacial till aquifers compared to bedrock aquifers have the potential storage capacity, however, traditional dug wells have historically had bacteria and yield issues.

The USGS patented a new shallow well design for technology transfers. The design takes advantage of a large inflow area, large storage, while reducing bacteria issues. Joseph went on to provide pictures outlining the construction process for this system. Two sites were built in New Hampshire, the sites' temperature and water level were tested every 15 minutes for a whole year. While water levels varied based off use, the two test sites had no issues with yield. Water quality data was also collected bimonthly. The results showed low to no arsenic, uranium, and coliform. The wells did have a low pH, making them somewhat corrosive. One well had a high nitrate level; the well's location was close to a septic discharge area.

Next, Joseph is evaluating this shallow well system for small to medium agricultural operations.

Question:

- What is the cost estimate?
 - The cost ranges from \$2,500 if a person completed the project on their own to \$5,000 if contractors are hired
- Are there recommended set-backs for nitrates and other factors?
 - Location is more concerning rather than distance, i.e. whether a well is downgradient from a septic system is a concern compared to a well upgradient from a septic system
- Is this worth pursuing for a CIG proposal for irrigation?
 - Think it has great potential, and should be pursued
- What is oxic water?
 - Water that has some amount of dissolved oxygen
 - 10 mg/L – Fully Oxic
 - <2 mg/L – Sub Oxic
 - 0 mg/L – Anoxic (Instruments measure this at 0.5 mg/L)
 - Reason why it matters is at different dissolved oxygen levels chemical reactions occur through terminal electronic receptors; anoxic conditions and certain pH levels allow the mobility of arsenic

Bureau of Agriculture, Food and Rural Resources (BAFRR) Overview of Programs and Priorities- Nancy McBrady Bureau Director

BAFRR has up to 140 employees, including temporary field season workers. The bureau is composed of three divisions:

- Quality Assurance & Regulation: focuses on food safety and accurate weights and scales
- Plant and Animal Health: focuses on nutrient management, the hemp program, and investigating agricultural complaints
- Agricultural Resource Development: provides marketing and technical support along with SWCD support

The BAFRR is also comprised of the Maine Milk Commission and the Harness Race Commission. The bureau encourages partnerships and collaborations within the state. There are various initiatives:

- Agricultural Water Management Board: the priority is expanding technical assistance and funding to enhance existing and developing new efficient irrigation systems through state and federal funds
 - All recordings, agenda, and meeting material are available online
- Agricultural Solar Siting Group: the group is comprised of various stakeholders, and is focused on examining the impact of solar energy development on agricultural land to be able to provide recommendations to the legislature, which will protect agricultural and natural resources while continuing solar energy development
 - There is a website dedicated to the group as well as information on the Governor's website
- PFAS (Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances) Response: PFAS has been found on former military installations and in 2016 it was found on a farm in southern Maine. A PFAS Taskforce was created and in December of 2019 provided recommendations to combat PFAS. Maine BAFRR,

DEP, and CDC continue to respond to PFAS concerns throughout the state; extensive testing is completed to find the source. PFAS has been linked to biosolids.

- Healthy Soils Program: will be a clearing house for information sharing and some project funding will be available for improving soils in Maine

BAFRR information is available online under the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry (DACF).

Question:

- What is the status of the State of Maine submitting a Hemp Production Plan to the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service? Currently the AMS website shows that Maine will continue to operate under the 2014 pilot.
 - Maine is still operating under the 2014 pilot, but it may not have made the Maine reconciliation bill. Currently, Maine producers will have to acquire an USDA license.

Developing State Soil Health Initiatives- Tom Gordan Conservation Specialist for DACF

The Healthy Soils Program came from the Soil & Water Conservation and Maine's Climate Action Plan created in 2020 by the Maine Climate Council. There are several priorities within the action plan that overlap with NRCS and the Maine State Technical Committee interests. Tom is reaching out and exploring ways to leverage resources to address the priorities:

- Increased land conservation
- New incentives to increase carbon storage
- Incentive-based carbon program for woodland owners and practitioners
- Education and outreach for technical assistance
- Monitoring and data collection

Tom discussed various deadlines and reports due to the legislature for emerging soil carbon initiatives. Lastly, he discussed various technical and financial metrics that need to be addressed by partners to understand how Maine can implement soil carbon initiatives.

Programs Updates – Susan Arrants Assistant State Conservationist for Programs

Susan reviewed the NRCS- Maine Fact Sheet for FY 2021 Farm Bill. She clarified under the EQIP program section the "Maine Beginning Farmer" statewide fund pool refers to beginning farmer contracts which focus on soil health. Whereas the "Beginning Farmer or Rancher" fund pool under the Historically Underserved Groups section in EQIP is the total amount of contracts related to beginning farmers.

NRCS is operating under a Continuing Resolution now through December 3, 2021 and anticipates receiving at least a portion of its program's allocation sometime in the first quarter of FY2022. All typical practice costs continue to be regionalized for all practices in 2022. CAP payment rates continue to be nationalized for 2022, including those for CNMPs (Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans). There are changes to CAPs which Tony Jenkins will cover later.

EQIP National Initiatives available in Maine for FY 2022:

- Organic Initiative-Certified and Transition
- On-Farm Energy Initiative
- Water Quality Initiative-
 - Sheepscoot River watershed- Augusta FO

- Cross Lake watershed- Ft. Kent FO

AMA and EQIP Maine state specific initiatives for FY 2022:

- AMA Climate Smart Agriculture
- EQIP Aquatic Organism Passage
- EQIP Deer Wintering Yard
- EQIP New England Pollinator Partnership Project
- EQIP Urban Agriculture
- EQIP Water Conservation/Irrigation

FY 2022 program delivery sign-up deadlines:

- AMA general, EQIP general and RCPP-EQIP: October 1, 2021 (except as indicated below)
 - 2nd round sign-up AMA climate smart specific fund pool, EQIP urban ag specific fund pool, EQIP CAPs: January 21, 2022
- ACEP-Agricultural Land Easement, ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easement, and 2022-1 CSP Classic: November 19, 2021
- EQIP CIC to be determined by NRCS NHQ announcement

The Financial Assistance Program fund pools for 2022 will be:

- AMA:
 - Irrigation (both micro and sprinkler)
 - High Tunnel
 - A climate smart specific fund pool (New subaccount for 2022)
- CSP Classic:
 - Ag Land traditional
 - Ag Land BF
 - Ag Land SD
 - Ag Land Organic (anticipated to continue into 2022)
 - NIPF traditional
 - NIPF BF
 - NIPF SD
- EQIP:
 - Statewide pools:
 - 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
 - On-Farm Energy (to include Energy CAPs)
 - Organic (Certified and Transitioning, to include Transition to Organic CAPs)
 - Socially Disadvantaged
 - Tribal Projects
 - Urban Agriculture (New subaccount for 2022)

- Water Conservation/Irrigation
 - Local fund pool options:
 - Ag Waste
 - Cropland
 - Forestry
 - Local High Tunnel
 - Pasture
 - Wildlife
 - Special local priority (New subaccount for 2022)
 - Gives a field office flexibility when an application does not fit clearly within a given fund pool

The Coronavirus Agricultural Relief Payments (CARP) is a supplemental payment for increased material costs linked to the coronavirus pandemic. The national office completed a national economic analysis and identified seven practices. There is no option for a state to change the seven identified practices. Maine offers six of the seven practices:

- Practice 367- Roofs and Covers
- Practice 430- Irrigation Pipeline
- ~~Practice 443- Irrigation System, Surface and Subsurface~~ THIS PRACTICE HAS NOT BEEN OFFERED IN MAINE
- Practice 468- Lined Waterway or Outlet
- Practice 516- Livestock Pipeline
- Practice 575- Trails and Walkways
- Practice 584- Channel Bed Stabilization

The CARP is available only for 2014 and on EQIP contracts. The practice must be one of the six above and be implemented in the 2021 calendar year. This supplemental payment is not available for cancelled or terminated contracts. The CARP amount for a given practice varies and is calculated on a case-by-case basis. Calculation factors include which practice scenario was planned, the extent applied and the contracted payment rate for the practice scenario.

Subcommittee Reports- Tony Jenkins State Resource Conservationist

Irrigation Subcommittee- George McLaughlin

The subcommittee met on July 7th and discussed historic and current issues as well as historic funding. NRCS has been an active partner for irrigation funding throughout the state. The subcommittee discussed AMA payment limitations and how inflation resulted in a lot of participants declining contract offers from NRCS. To improve payment rates at a national level compared to actual costs the subcommittee suggested willing participants to send billing information to Adam Cattrell, Maine State Conservation Engineer. Also discussed the low flow compliance in Maine compared to drought conditions. The subcommittee requested Tony Jenkins at the next meeting to present information on the environmental evaluation process for irrigation applications. Applicants are not always aware of the permitting process. Tony did stress the need for a thorough irrigation plan, discussed eligible practices for an irrigation application, and documented irrigation history. The irrigation subcommittee discussed

low yield and high yield wells. The subcommittee has no formal recommendations for the Maine State Technical Committee. The subcommittee plans to meet after this Maine State Technical meeting.

Forestry Subcommittee- Michael Richard, District Forester for Oxford

Andy Schultz has retired from the chairman position. Michael Richard is the interim chair. There is no subcommittee report. John Hernandez, goes by Jack, is the new Maine Landowner Outreach Forester for the Maine Forest Service. He is coming aboard from the private sector.

Question:

- Is Gerald Barnes still the state office contact for the Forestry sub-committee?
 - Gerald is on a national detail to get the National Tech. Registry up and running, currently Bob Bills is the acting State Forestry, but the Gerald is still the Maine Technical Service Provider (TSP) contact. Once the forestry subcommittee is up and running, then it will be determined who the NRCS lead will be.

Conservation Activity Plan Revision- Tony Jenkins State Resource Conservationist

The national office has discontinued all CAPs. CAPs are now replaced with Conservation Planning Activities (CPAs). The CPAs have new criteria and payment rates. The implementation and check-out practice codes are anticipated to remain the same.

CAP 106 is replaced with CPA 106 (Forest Management Plan) which does not required the detailed forest stand inventory necessary for NRCS program practice implementation. In order to maintain the Forest Management Plan (FMP) quality needed by Maine NRCS for program practice implementation a FMP application is anticipated to include practices CPA 106 & DIA 165. This has contract payment implications. The tentative payment schedule (subject to change) practice scenario for CPA 106 has a lower payment rate than a CAP 106 but when a CPA 106 & DIA 165 are contracted simultaneously, the combined payment rate is greater than a CAP 106. The state technical committee input is needed for funding priority. This may result in Maine not being able to fund every FMP in a given year, which has been the status until now.

Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans (CNMPs) now known as CPA 102, Tony anticipates the contract will only have one practice with no corresponding DIA practice. Maine NRCS is still assessing the situation. Other CPAs, such as Wildlife Management Plans are anticipated to be single practice contracts, just the CPA practice.

Question:

- Tony is there a draft of what will be required for the CPA or DIA?
 - Not for public distribution yet
- Will a FMP contract continue to be one year?
 - Anticipate it will
- Are there enough TSPs to complete all FMPs in the state?
 - Currently have the geographic capacity to do so

SHMP (Soil Health Management Plan) Criteria and Related Issues, Urban Fund

Pool/Practices/Scenarios, Climate Smart/AMA fund pool- Tony Jenkins State Resource Conservationist

Maine is looking at the SHMP criteria closely, and the corresponding implementation activities such as soil testing and soil carbon amendments. Currently the TSP capacity to complete the SHMP is unknown, some potential vendors are going through the certification process.

An August email was sent out with a pdf outlining the proposed “urban agriculture” EQIP fund pool geographical extent, possible practices, and scenarios. Currently little input has been received. Tony requested additional input.

The August email also requested feedback on the proposed “climate smart agriculture” AMA fund pool practices and scenarios. The fund pool will focus on moisture management. Proposed practices include subsurface drainage, soil health practices, and wells. These are practices currently on the AMA payment schedule but have not been previously emphasized. Tony requested input. There will be a lot of sideboards for subsurface drainage use, such as wetland evaluations, subsurface drainage plans, and required associated conservation practices. A big concern for wells is not affecting other wells and attaining the yield requirements for a practice to meet NRCS standards and specifications certification.

Question:

- DEP requested whether they could provide input for subsurface drainage sideboards in relation to nutrient run-off.
 - Tony will route subsurface drain practice sideboards to DEP, Kathy Hoppe

Conclusion- Matt Walker ME NRCS State Conservationist

Matt thanked everyone for their participation and the guest speakers. The intent of the committee is to assist Maine NRCS with prioritizing technical and financial assistance for the state. He requested that committee members provide input.

The Secretary of Agriculture and NRCS Chief outlined three priorities:

- Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry
- Improve Racial Equity
- Urban Agriculture

Question:

- I'd love to hear more about plans/priorities for expanding CSP (as you mentioned at the top of the meeting, Matt)
 - The focus is outreach efforts, because the program will sell itself; funding will be prioritized for this program

Housekeeping- Thomas Kielbasa ME NRCS Public Affairs Specialist

The next Maine State Technical Committee is scheduled for January. Meeting minutes will be sent out to the committee members. Please notify Tom if someone else wants to be included on the email list.