

North Dakota State Technical Committee Minutes

September 26, 2019

Bismarck, ND

Jill Howard started the meeting at 9:00am at the Quality Inn in Bismarck, ND. She welcomed everyone and thanked them for being there. The group went around the room and introduced themselves and the entities they represent. Jill introduced Jennifer Heglund, Acting State Conservationist. Jennifer introduced herself indicating Mary Podoll was in Washington, D.C. on a detail. She reviewed the agenda with the attendees. She then introduced Richard Webb, Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations to present the group with a North Dakota NRCS Restructure Update. [NOTE: Mr. Webb's presentation has been provided to the Committee.]

Following Mr. Webb's presentation, a member of the audience commented the plan is a conservative approach to management.

Mr. Webb then introduced Jill Howard to provide a Regional Conservation Partnership Program presentation. [NOTE: Ms. Howard's presentation has been provided to the Committee.] Ms. Howard provided a proposal guide during her presentation to the attendees. She offered to meet one on one with any partner interested in the program or in submitting a proposal. She also added the proposals are five-year project proposals. Ms. Howard provided examples of how projects have differed in TA (technical assistance) funds. She provided the attendees with details for a webinar available for those interested in the program. She had two additional handouts she made available for the group during the break.

Following Ms. Howard's presentation, a member of the audience asked of the 300 million dollars, how much was allocated for ND. She indicated 30 million dollars were automatically provided for project renewals. She indicated we would be unable to say how much would be available in ND because the state doesn't have its own dollar allocation which is a change from the last Farm Bill. Ms. Heglund added a comment about PL566 projects. Ms. Howard added that 12 million dollars went to a ND and MN proposal in a previous sign up which addressed projects in 14 watersheds. A member of the audience asked if the 12 million was all federal, as a follow-up question. Ms. Howard indicated yes, the partner brings match.

A member of the audience asked Ms. Howard what the current six projects in ND are. She responded Medora Grazing District, Cover Crop Project with Northern Plains RC&D, Red River Basin of the North, Bowman/Slope tree establishment, G.F. Prairie Project with UND, and a water quality project with Spiritwood Lake in Stutsman County.

With no additional questions or comments, the group took a short break. Ms. Howard and Ms. Heglund reminded everyone to sign in.

Ms. Howard reconvened the meeting indicating there would be a change to the agenda because Jay Hochhalter with the Farm Service Agency had vehicle trouble and would not be able to make the meeting. [NOTE: Mr. Hochhalter's presentation has been provided to the Committee.]

Ms. Howard introduced Derek Lowstuter, Forest Stewardship Manager with the North Dakota Forest Service to present the committee with information about the Great Plains Biochar Initiative. [NOTE: Mr.

Lowstuter's presentation has been provided to the Committee.] Mr. Lowstuter showed a physical example of what Biochar looks like during his presentation.

Following his presentation, a member of the audience asked a question about applicability to salinity sites. Mr. Lowstuter responded that Biochar definitely has a potential to address soil salinity by mitigating evaporation, smoothing out curves in the flood and drought cycle, and addressing evaporation and water cycle issues by introducing mineral content.

A member of the audience asked if it has been tried or applied in reclamation sites, specifically brine spills? Mr. Lowstuter indicated that yes, NDSU has some plant genetics and experimental sites. He indicated Biochar has lots of promise but has had a disservice done by those trying to make quick economic returns with the product rather than understanding its variability and therefore variability in application.

An audience member asked Mr. Lowstuter how the project handles the volume of windbreaks. Mr. Lowstuter indicated it was a good question and the study found that once they got the product to temperature, it went smooth. However, once a hiccup in the process occurred, whether it be a delay in material being added to the kiln, a root ball with excessive soil, or any other variability from the shelterbelt's removal, they found the product turned to ash instead of char. The study, in part, determined the success very much depended on how the trees were removed and maintaining temperature.

With no additional questions or comments or questions, Ms. Howard introduced Todd Hagel, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs with NRCS in ND, to provide a fiscal year 2019 wrap-up and fiscal year 2020 overview. [NOTE: Mr. Hagel's presentation has been provided to the Committee.] During his presentation, Mr. Hagel indicated caps would return to the Environmental Qualities Incentives Program in 2020. A member of the audience asked why the caps were removed? Mr. Hagel indicated they were removed to reduce the number of contracts funded and reduce workload. He also indicated some neighboring states do not have caps. After Mr. Hagel presented information on GCI. A member asked Mr. Hagel how NRCS was using the program and if it was being used as it had intended it to be used. He answered that eligibility was being determined entirely by the Farm Service Agency's classification of land.

Mr. Hagel asked the Committee to provide feedback on reintroduction of caps to EQIP by October 1, 2019. He indicated five responses had come back from the Committee regarding an increased cost percentage for up to ten practices. He took into consideration seven as the next four were tied. He gave the group until October 1 to provide comment on setting aside zero dollars for special projects.

A member of the audience asked if any Beginning Farmer applications have not been approved. Mr. Hagel responded yes, it is a very popular fund pool and there are Beginning Farmer applications not funded because NRCS runs out of money.

Mr. Hagel further discussed a proposed new system of ranking for local work group funding pools in fiscal year 2020. It is intended to streamline and simplify the process as the pools very much mirror those of the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

A member indicated she has concerns about the size of the funding areas because resource concerns and land use is not the same across the area. Her concern is because of the differences, there would be practices and dollars taken away. She asked why funding pools were not mirroring the CDU boundaries

instead. Mr. Hagel indicated the local work group funding pool is 62% of the budget and it is very difficult to predict outcome. The member further indicated her concern with rankings being skewed by local offices and it not being fair with such a large area. Mr. Hagel responded the new tools should be able to sort by practice and prevent a local employee's ability to skew and outcome. He said the Agency has very high expectations of the tool and they are waiting to see how it works. He indicated he would like to run it with funding pools as indicated on the map in 2020. He told the attendees that Jennifer Heglund, as Acting State Conservationist, does have the ability to change it at this point and asked for comment by October 1, 2019.

A member asked if we still have ability to provide input as a local work group. Mr. Hagel responded that yes, they would at a county or CDU level.

During his comments on the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program-Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) program, he thanked members of the Committee who had already provided comment on the proposed 30 Year Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 in North Dakota. He asked for any additional comments from the group by October 1, 2019.

A member asked about the On-Farm Energy funding pool and if there were no applications in 2019 or no funding. Mr. Hagel indicated there were no applications. The member followed up with additional questions about what practices are funded through the On-Farm Energy pool. Mr. Hagel asked Tracy Dove, Resource Conservationist on the NRCS State Office Program Staff, to comment. She indicated lighting, meter conversion, energy audits, etc. were all practices. She indicated the funding pool was designed toward energy efficiency and not energy production.

With no additional comments or questions, Ms. Heglund thanked the partners for all they contribute to conservation in North Dakota. She thanked everyone for their comments and input provided during the meeting. She invited them to reach out to her and contact her directly while she is the Acting State Conservationist if at any time she could be of assistance. She opened the floor for discussion. With no further discussion, the meeting ended.