

Piscataquis Local Working Group Meeting
December 6th, 2022, Dover Foxcroft

PCSWCD Supervisor Jensen Bissell called the meeting to order at 1:01PM. The program started right up with a presentation from Jeremy Markuson, USDA NRCS, about the status of endangered bats in Maine, specifically the Northern Long-eared Bat. Jeremy presented bat behavior information and overviewed the timeline of the NLEB going from threatened to endangered. He also mentioned that rules impacting NRCS practices will be coming, as moving forward, we cannot use the 4(d) rule with an endangered species. There were questions from the audience about what can be done on their farms and properties to help with bat conservation - Jeremy outlined the parameters of installing bat houses and participating in State and federal studies.

After Jeremy's presentation, we heard from Jim Ferrante, Maine Forest Service District Forester, with a forest health update. Jim covered all invasive forest pests and diseases on our radar and provided information on detection and reporting.

After our presentations, we went around the room with introductions. Meeting participants included: Seth Jones, USDA NRCS; Kacey Weber, PCSWCD; Jensen Bissell, PCSWCD; Kent Black, PCSWCD; Jim Ferrante, Maine Forest Service; Jeremy Markuson, USDA NRCS; Chris and Wendy Russell, Widdershins Farm LLC; Gretchen & Doug Huettner, Farm in the Woods; Mark Warren, FSA; Matt LaRoche; Sean O'Donnell, Rusted Rooster Farm; Kirby Ellis; Sarah Robinson, PCSWCD; Carl Bickford, USDA NRCS; Ryan Clarke, Marr Pond Farm; Richard Cabot, UMaine Cooperative Extension Piscataquis County; Joseph Roy, Maine Inland Fisheries & Wildlife; Felix Blinn, Haven Farm; Kenny Fergusson, Maine Forest Service; Korah Soll, Rural Aspirations; Dawna Blackstone, Rural Aspirations; and Steph Perkins, AMC. From there, Kacey Weber introduced Seth Jones, District Conservationist from Dover USDA NRCS. Seth provided an overview of what was spent in this current fiscal year and opened the floor for discussion on what everyone was seeing on their farms or in the forest for resource concerns. Seth overviewed the NRCS programs EQIP, AMA and CSP and what has been historically done in Piscataquis County through each program. Seth mentioned that the purpose of the Local Work Group was to hear from folks in the county on what they feel the programs should be targeting, specifically, what percentages of money that comes in do we want to go to what programs? He also asked specifically what do you (producers, TSP providers, resource providers) see as priorities now vs. what might be coming and needing assistance down the road with federal programs. Seth clarified that FSA has programs such as emergency or disaster programs, programs for municipalities, for solar energy, etc.

The discussion on conservation needs started out with feedback from Gretchen Huettner expressing the need for mulching, specifically for blueberries, and that she is seeing this program offered in other counties. She noted that any mulch, not just Biochar and compost, is extremely expensive when trying to apply it at the recommended depth of an inch and 1/2. Gretchen also mentioned the need for fencing for rotational grazing and/or easier access to pasture improvement opportunities.

Wendy and Chris Russell expressed the need for hay field improvement or reclaiming hay fields. They asked about their programs for putting carbon back in the soil, or programs for field soil health. Sean O'Donnell agreed there was a need for that, and asked but how do you quantify the improvement? Seth asked Wendy for clarification on what she meant about reclaiming hay fields and they specifically mentioned rock removal. Ryan Clark asked has there been funding for reclaiming because he is currently trying to turn old Christmas tree grounds into vegetable fields and stump removal and cover crop help is needed. Seth explained that historically, field reclaiming came when soil erosion was occurring OR with battling invasive plants. Several participants asked if there was a program for mitigating bedstraw and there is. Farmers Sean O'Donnell, Wendy and Chris Russell, Felix Blinn and Ryan Clarke all mentioned seeing that bedstraw doesn't like healthy soil or turned over soil. They also noticed an issue with it increasing when synthetic fertilizer was used. Sean has had luck riding fields of bedstraw after using equipment such as no-till drills or speed discs. Participants mentioned use of equipment was cost prohibitive. They also expressed that chemical treatment for bedstraw does not work for organic producers.

Gretchen mentioned the need for programs that address climate change, soil health and was hoping for one that helps with silvopasture. Ryan mentioned, and many agreed, that irrigation continues to be a big need for farmers. He asked can there be funding for creating water sources such as wells or ponds? Participants shared they had participated in programs to get a well for livestock watering. Seth explains the difference between EQIP and AMA irrigation practices. Ryan suggested funding for frost free hydrants for high tunnels, so that irrigation can be accessed in early Spring and late Fall. Seth shared complications for programs for building ponds - they are expensive and more of the yearly funding would have to be designated towards them and the priority would be to remove irrigation systems from public water sources. Matt LaRoche asked if there was movement for programs for ponds to be constructed for fire protection in forests. Seth mentioned that the State Technical Committee was considering that currently.

Kent Black asked about carbon sequestration, mentioning that Piscataquis forest lands are owned by families and are typically less than 500 acres. The big players/landowners have figured out how to tap into carbon sequestration markets and Kent was wondering if there were opportunities brewing for

smaller landowners. Jim Ferrante piped in and said some companies have started targeting small woodlot owners - looking to buy credits or looking to market carbon. Chris Russell asked if there was someone local doing work with this? What can we do to participate? Felix is participating in carbon credits, and it balances out his taxes, so he feels it is worth it. The program he participates in is year to year and his contract specifies what he can or cannot do on his land - certain things don't matter - improvement, crop tree release, etc. Meeting participants agreed that carbon sequestration might want to be a consideration for NRCS programs.

We heard from Joseph Roy of Maine Inland Fisheries and Wildlife about what he sees as the "big needs" when talking to landowners. He mentioned aquatic organism passage, early successional habitat and providing habitat in low soil profile areas. Joe mentioned that anything that addresses species of greatest need is a high priority. For example, practices that enhance riparian habitat, or habitat for grassland birds such as bobolinks and meadowlarks. He mentioned that NRCS funding for delayed mowing is beneficial and anything addressing invasive plants or pests. Joe said his three top priorities are landowner outreach, invasive species, and aquatic organism passage. Jim Ferrante mentioned the Maine Forest Service has an invasive forest practices incentives program where landowners can work with foresters to develop a plan for addressing invasive management and submit that plan for funding. Funding would cover costs associated with chemical and mechanical treatments. Plans can be written to help control honeysuckle, barberry, bittersweet, and buckthorn. Joe Roy asked if NRCS has ever tried linking invasive species mitigation with carbon sequestration? Is there an existing framework to this we can explore?

Gretchen H. expressed the needs for funds for high traffic areas and erosion control.

We concluded the meeting with a discussion of percentages - highest in forestry historically. Ag waste, then cropland grazing, high tunnels (still in a state-wide pool) are some other historically prioritized areas. Seth mentioned there is funding for urban ag and asked do we want to explore that. It was concluded that we will explore having another Local Working Group meeting in March to continue conversations about establishing percentages and looking at ranking questions. PCSWCD Supervisor Jensen Bissell adjourned the meeting at 3:16PM.