

Draft Minutes: Local Working Group Hancock County Maine: Dec 1, 2022

In Attendance: Peter Jordan, Shari Latiulippe, Jeff Norment, Mark Whiting, Sandy Walczyk, Ant Blasi, Jennifer Riefler, Andrew Sankey, Erin Witham, Chris Phinney, Erin Cocca.

Meeting began at 5:35 pm, on Zoom.

Erin Witham welcomed everyone, followed by introductions.

Jeff Norment hosted the meeting. He described the history of Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs), and explained how they work closely with each other and with landowners to help landowners achieve agricultural priorities. The local SWCD serves as a liaison between local communities and their needs, and state and federal agricultural agencies. Hancock County Soil and Water Conservation District (HCSWCD) is overseen by a Board of Supervisors. It is neither a state or county agency: 45% its funding comes from the state and county. The rest comes from grants that allow the District to work with local partners such as lake and pond associations to protect water quality and reduce erosion and pollution.

The annual Local Working Group is open to the public, and typically includes agricultural producers, forest landowners, natural resource professionals and the Board of Supervisors. The intent is to gather feedback from agricultural and forestry producers and to make recommendations to NRCS for funding allocations.

Chris Phinney, District Conservationist for Hancock County made a Powerpoint Presentation explaining application levels both received and funded, and funding allocations and pools for FY 2022 and 2023, to help with the LWG's recommendations for funding for FY 2024.

Here is a link to Chris's [presentation](#).

For FY 2022 the funding allocations were

FY 2022 (LWG 2021) Allocation % and Applications (76 total)

Cropland (Local: 35 %) – 23 Applications
Resilience (Local: 15 %) – 18 Applications
Forestry (Local: 30 %) – 12 Applications
Pasture (Local: 5 %) – 0 Applications
AG Waste (Local: 15 %) – 0 Application
CAP – FMP (State) – 15 Applications
Pollinator (State) – 1 Application
RCPP AOP (State) – 0 Applications
AMA High Tunnels (State) – 4 Applications
CSP (State) – 3 Applications

**FY 2022 Funds Obligated and Contracts –
31 Contracts (-2), \$507,603 (-\$162,673)**

Cropland – \$132,654

Resilience – \$77,000

Forestry – \$173,395

CAP – \$64,945

Pollinator – \$3,484

AMA High Tunnels – \$21,903

CSP – \$34,218

**For FY 2023, the funding allocations are
FY 2023 (LWG 2022) Local Pool Allocation % and
Applications (96 total) (+20)**

Cropland (Local: 35 %) – 30 Applications (+7)

Resilience (Local: 15 %) – 27 Applications (+9)

Forestry (Local: 30 %) – 9 Applications (-3)

Pasture (Local: 5 %) – 0 Applications

AG Waste (Local: 15 %) – 0 Applications

CAPs – (State) – 17 Applications (14 FMP, 1 EMP, 2 CNMP) (+2)

Pollinator (State) – 0 Application (-1)

RCPA AOP (State) – 2 Applications (+2)

AMA High Tunnels (State) – 5 Applications (1 IRR) (+1)

CSP (State) – 6 Applications (+3)

Trends (Continue):

Increasing Cropland requests (Resilience)

Decreasing Forestry requests

Low request from livestock producers:

Ag. Waste/Manure Management

Pasture/Grazing

FY22: 18/41 Cropland Applications were Resilience
(~44%)

FY23: 27/57 Cropland Applications are Resilience
(~47%)

Questions:

1. Shari Latiulippe: What about Pollinator projects? Chris explained that funding is available through a state pool, as well as through local cropland and forestry pools, and most generally do well for funding, given the distance around blueberry fields.

2. Questions about the Resilience Pool:

Chris explained that blueberry field soils do not typically hold moisture well. This is becoming an increasing issue because of the warming climate: blueberry fields are warming faster than surrounding land. In a drought such as the one in this 2022 growing season, early estimates are up to half the blueberry crop was lost. Irrigation planning is fraught with difficulties in the blueberry growing areas. Resilient practices are ones that help retain the moisture in the soil and keep the berries hydrated enough for harvest. One newer practice is mulching the fields; in some cases the bare spots and in other cases the whole field. This also may increase the amount of organic matter. Results are just coming in but look promising. This pool is open to all agricultural producers, not just blueberry producers. Applications in this pool were 24% of cropland applications in FY 2022, and 47% in FY 2023, so there is great interest among producers.

Inflation Reduction Act (2022)

NRCS is asking for public input through a Federal Register request for information on implementation of more than \$19 billion provided by the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will use the investments provided through IRA-funded conservation programs.

In particular, USDA is seeking public feedback on:

- How to best maximize benefits for climate mitigation, including targeting practices and programs that provide quantifiable reductions in greenhouse gas emissions;
- How to maximize, target, monitor, and quantify improvements to soil carbon, reductions in nitrogen losses, and the reduction, capture, avoidance, or sequestration of carbon dioxide, methane or nitrous oxide emissions associated with agricultural production; and
- How to further streamline and improve program delivery to increase efficiencies and expand program access for producers, especially underserved producers.

For more information, see the USDA press release [here](#) or the Federal Register notice (set to be officially published on Monday November 21st).

Urban Agriculture Pool: this is a state level pool. Hancock County has two identified urban areas; Ellsworth and downtown Bar Harbor. Discussions with local groups such as garden clubs have begun.

Survey Results: There were 9 respondents. Under Conserving Natural Resources, respondents identified three priorities. The two top priorities were Wildlife and Water Pollution/Quality of Groundwater.

The group brainstormed ways to increase the number of participants in the survey and in the LWG meeting. Mark Whiting had sent the agenda and survey link to our state legislators. Peter Jordan suggested setting up an incentive to do both. Ideas discussed were additional points on an application ranking if the applicant did the survey. Survey results are still coming in, so we do not yet know the total number of respondents.

Chris commented that someone looking at the survey and at the NRCS priorities for the area might wonder why Wildlife is not a high priority if the public wants it to be. He explained that wildlife practices can and are added for cropland and forestry projects. Forestry projects often include replacing standard culverts on woods roads with bridges or arched culverts that allow for aquatic organism passage. In blueberry fields, mulching reduces siltation going into adjacent streams. Thinning operations are often designed to benefit birds and terrestrial wildlife. Joseph Roy (wildlife; DEP) recommended several practices last year and they have been implemented by NRCS. The CSP Program is also geared toward wildlife and has more applications this year. Chris gave an example of two forestry thinning operations that were identical in most regards, however one included wildlife practices, and that operation would score more points.

Feedback and Comments:

Shari asked about the changes in practices that may be required with the new endangered status of the long-eared bat. Chris replied that, in forestry operations, there is no cutting in June and July already, and that he felt that NRCS should be able to meet new restrictions once they are known.

Peter said that he was glad that a local Cropland Resilience pool was established and sees benefit for blueberry growers applying for mulching assistance, because a lot of growers had already de-rocked their fields and were less competitive against the combined rock removal and mulching projects. He described his observations of his own test field in which he applied different types of mulch at different thicknesses. Berries one foot out from the mulch had retained more moisture. He said that on heavy soil, one inch of mulch might be sufficient, however two inches is needed for porous soil. He used his mechanical harvester on the mulched fields and did not pick up chips with the berries. His flail mower actually worked to break up bigger chips. Most importantly, the soil was significantly more moist under the chips. With climate change, blueberry fields warming, and drought (which impacted the blueberry crop last season), moisture is key to a good crop.

Recommendations for FY 2024:

The two Hancock County Districts, NRCS of Hancock County and Hancock County Soil and Water Conservation District, based on general input from participants, recommend that ranking and allocations for the upcoming year be the same as the previous year, with the caveat that survey results still coming in need to be considered.

Meeting Adjourned at 7:18 pm.