

Held by: Waldo and Knox-Lincoln Soil & Water Conservation Districts

The annual meeting of the Waldo, Knox Local Working Group was held in person December 21, 2022, from 2-4 p.m. at the Searsmont Community Center.

Attendees: Total of people attending 17 (see table at end of minutes)

Call to Order & Introductions

Andy Reed, Chair of the Waldo CSWCD Board of Supervisors, called the meeting to order at 1:59PM and thanked attendees for their participation. Introductions followed, with each person stating their name and organization/department/town of residence or land ownership.

Overview

Registrants received via email the meeting agenda, prior year meeting minutes, funding pool categories, percentages, and Local Ranking Questions. Ron Desrosiers, NRCS District Conservationist, Belfast Field Office, explained the role of the Local Working Groups (LWG) in identifying resource concerns and making recommendations to the NRCS District Conservationist on how EQIP cost-share funds might be prioritized to address those concerns. Recommendations coming from discussions at this meeting are for FY 2024. Ron reviewed the purpose of the meeting as a public input process into a specific farm bill program called EQIP. The LWG is advisory, our recommendations are passed on to the State Technical Committee (STC). The agenda was reviewed as well as were last year's minutes. There were no comments or discussion about the minutes.

Program Overview

Ron reviewed the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), which addresses resource concerns in response to existing problems. Maine received about \$10 million last year for EQIP.

Ron summarized other USDA conservation programs available for addressing a range of resource issues. All programs are voluntary

National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI): funded under EQIP and focuses on watershed and water quality programs.

Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) Program: the objective of this program is to reduce risk in agricultural production. Last year Maine received \$1.7 million through AMA

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP): helps farmers to maintain existing conservation practices and to further enhance their conservation efforts by offering financial incentives

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP): Provides financial incentives to restore altered wetlands, functions and values and also offers easements to protect degraded wetlands that have been restored. Not widely utilized in Maine.

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG): a research and development arm of EQIP supporting conservation innovation and trialing new approaches that could eventually find their way into the EQIP program. There is both a national CIG as well as a smaller state version.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP): Projects involve partners, NRCS provides funding alongside partner contributions to tackle shared resource issues and concerns. Fish passage blockages and opening habitat on stream corridors is an example. In addition, there is a western Maine RCPP partnership that is using this program to encourage forest habitat enhancement in an important wildlife travel corridor. There can be an easement component as well.

Urban Agriculture: In our two counties, Camden, Rockland, Thomaston, and Belfast qualify (urban area extends 2 miles out from the city-center). Works at smaller scale, such as school gardens of 1000 sq. ft. This is an emerging area. Maine's State Technical Committee has an urban agriculture subcommittee.

Ron shared the anticipated 2023 EQIP allocation for Maine estimated be \$10,531,000 this was provided to attendees in a tabular handout.

There was a ranging discussion with lots of questions and comments, noted as follows.

Question regarding AMA and public input. Ron responded that the LWG public input process is written into the EQIP rules. AMA input can go to the State Technical committee through our local citizen reps (five of which attended this meeting) or through your elected reps to congress.

Ron explained the Ranking Sheet includes questions addressing national resource issues state questions addressing statewide resource concerns and finally local question focusing on local resource issues that is where your input can shape program delivery in our counties.

Question regarding the Agriculture Census and what has changed year over year with dairy. Ron responded that livestock operations change and evolve EQIP addresses the current need.

Ron shared the anticipated Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding for 2022-2026, pointing out that those numbers were anticipated at the national level. This will likely lead to an additional mid-winter signup period in February for these funds. Unfunded applications from the first cycle may be eligible to compete in this second signup if considered as "climate smart agriculture". Still not sure how much of this money Maine will receive.

Ron reviewed the funding categories and last year's allocation percentages. Last year, he created a unique fund pool for addressing small livestock waste operations that were not getting funded alongside the large Ag waste projects also competing in that pool

Question about Blueberry growers and projects/funding for rock removal, burning vs. flail mowing, IPM for pollinators and selling blueberry land to developers. Discussion ensued on preserving blueberry lands.

Ron asked us to consider conservation needs not being addressed under other programs and that could be considered Climate Smart. Discussion ensued regarding low tunnels water conservation and reduced pesticide use. Discussion ensued regarding the EQIP payments being too low.

Question arose about an eligible program for new irrigation and new water source infrastructure, as well as deer exclusion. Ron explained what projects are covered under other programs.

The first set of questions on the ranking sheet address national conservation issues. The LWG can take local questions and concerns up to the State level for consideration as a state level question.

In addition to national, State, and local questions, the GIS planning software interprets resources adjacent to planned practices, for example underlying soil resources are being assessed in terms of vulnerability for groundwater contamination. This background info weighs into the application ranking.

We as the LWG can adjust the local questions to target local resource issues each question can have a maximum point value of up to 200 points. We also can adjust the Local EQIP allocation percentages going into each category.

Question about regarding which category had the largest unmet need. Ron replied that this was in the animal waste category.

Question: was 60% of the funding for agricultural waste taken up by two or three projects? Answer: Yes, those are very expensive projects due to manure handling systems.

Question: Is the small animal waste category set meant to carry over? Answer: No currently this is just for 2023. This can change every year based on LWG input for the 'unique' category.

Comment: large entities are contracting in size due to geographic challenges and proximity to processing plants. This is affecting the blueberry industry. Wondering what will happen to those lands. Blueberries are chasing the price down just as with the Dairy industry.

Comment: we need another program to address human resources, which is the biggest resource concern.

Ron: We make decisions based on current conditions not on predictions.

Ron asked if there were any recommendations for changes to the local ranking questions.

LWG participant comment: EQIP projects related to forestry or climate-smart ag are a shoe-in. Also, for the crop category, maybe blueberry should be put into its own group. Low tunnels will come about as a practice in Maine. Or maybe as exclusion netting, for an integrated pest management (IPM) practice.

Ron said that high and low tunnels may be eligible for climate smart funding due to transportation miles being reduced, as well as urban sourced agriculture.

LWG participant comment: High tunnels may need building permits; it depends on the town. Maine Farm Bureau can help farmers interacting with their municipality on these issues and questions.

Question: Is there room for us to weigh in on what qualifies as eligible for EQIP money? Examples mentioned were deer fencing or irrigation. Ron: That can be passed on to the State Technical Committee as a recommendation. In response to a question regarding irrigation Ron stated that EQIP can address irrigation needs when it results in water conservation. New irrigation is AMA-eligible, but the funding pool is smaller than that for EQIP.

Question: Might this find its way into climate smart eligibility, because increasing drought incidence in Maine

raises need for drought resilience?

Answer: IRA funds will be targeted to several Farm Bill conservation programs not just EQIP.

There was a suggestion that new water infrastructure become an EQIP-eligible program. Also, for deer exclusion to become EQIP-eligible-

Question about spraying. Wyman's bought Allen's blueberry land and surrounds this landowner who asked if any of these programs can help protect their land. Ron explained that Farm bill conservation program participation is voluntary.—One LWG participant recommended contacting the Board of Pesticides Control for additional information.

Discussion ensued regarding LWG meetings not being well known state-wide among farmers who would be interested. Ideas were shared regarding outreach communication and the need for more outreach. Opportunities to improve outreach were discussed.

Question posed: could small animal waste be eligible for climate smart money?

Answer: Not sure

There was a motion to rollover small animal waste for the unique small category again in the coming year. The group agreed that they would like to keep it that way for 2024.

There were comments and questions about Ron retiring and Ron assured them there would be stability at the Belfast office. And he reminded them the February deadline hasn't been announced yet.

Comment: Thought this meeting would be where we weigh in on what qualifies as EQIP. That's decided at the national level, but there's some winnowing at the state level and through the State Technical Committee your input would be valued and should be passed on to the STC.

For State Technical Committee meetings check the state NRCS website.

Formal Recommendation for Consideration by the State Technical Committee: Cooper Funk recommends that deer fencing and irrigation infrastructure qualify for funding under EQIP. Justified based on food miles, i.e., maintaining viability for existing small farms; each year deer pressure is worse. He would like to work with engineers to let in smaller wildlife, but keep deer out, while keeping his farm open to other wildlife that aren't threatening his livelihood.

The meeting adjourned at 4:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:

Medea Steinman and Julie Sells

Waldo & Knox County SWCD's

Funding Allocations:

Resource Concern	2024	2023	2022	2021*	2020
Agricultural Waste	66%	68%	68%	53%	
Animal Waste					53%
Forestry	10%	10%	10%	15%	15%
Cropland (incl. blueberry)	20%	20%	20%	30 %	
Cropland/Hayland					-
Blueberry					20%
Pasture	2%	2%	2%	2%	
Pasture/Crop					12%
Pasture					-
Small AU Producer	2%				-
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: In spring 2020 EQIP programmatic rules changed limiting the number of Local Funding Pool Categories to the following: Agricultural Waste, Forestry, Cropland (includes Blueberry) and Pasture. Percentages were reassigned to fit into the four categories.

Meeting/Project Name	Knox-Lincoln and Waldo Soil and Water Conservation Districts LOCAL WORKING GROUP MEETING		
Date of Meeting	12/21/2022	Time	2:00 PM to 4:00 PM
Minutes prepared by: Medea Steinman, Julie Sells		Location: Searsmont Community Center	
Attendance at Meeting			
Name	Department / Division	Name	Department/Division
Ron Desrosiers	District Conservationist, NRCS Belfast Field Office	Christina Breen	Angus King Local Representative
Medea Steinman	Waldo SWCD Administrative Director	Ryan Gates	Coastal Mountains Land Trust, Stewardship Program Director
Andy Reed	Waldo SWCD Chair, Board of Supervisors	Ryan O'Neill	Coastal Mountains Land Trust
Drew Laughland	Volunteer; Waldo SWCD	Gloria Pearse	Searsport Resident
Mark Hedrich	Knox-Lincoln SWCD Chair, Board of Supervisors	Frank Altimore	Searsport Farmer
Julie Sells	Knox-Lincoln SWCD Office Manager	Nanne Kennedy	Knox livestock producer
Diane Schivera	Knox-Lincoln SWCD Vice Chair, Board of Supervisors	Caleb Goossen	Maine Organic Farmers & Gardeners Association; Organic Crop & Conservation Specialist
Sy Schotz	Farm Manager--Knight's Pond Farm, Small Farmer's Journal	Garrett Linck	Maine Farmland Trust, Land Steward
Cooper Funk	Farmer, Door Yard Farm, Knox County		

Recommendations and Comments to the State Technical Advisory Committee Waldo-Knox Local Working Group Meeting

12-21-22 Submitted by Frank Altimore, a beginning (3rd year) small-scale farmer on a 50 acre farm in Waldo County located on Nickerson Road in Searsport.

I do not have enough background to be very specific, so the first section is more of a "big picture" list of priorities and some may be beyond the scope of this meeting and covered by other programs like the American Renewable Act. However, I do make recommendations for local EQIP funding in the second section, and state level feedback in the last.

PRIORITY RESOURCE CONCERNS AND GOALS

Food economy that reliably provides healthy food to a growing local community
Self-sustainable, renewable, farm management practices.
Farm practices that protect and conserve water, soil, air and other natural resources.
Programs protecting existing farmland and at risk farms from non-agricultural development.
Responsible climate-smart agricultural practices resilient to climate, supply chain, and market disruptions.

SPECIFIC EQIP PROJECTS TO BE PRIORITIZED

This may not be very helpful because, after reviewing the material from Ron, I was pleased to see that, with the exception of irrigation projects, most of these components are already funded in the 2023 fiscal year EQIP budget.

Water Quality

Fund new and improved cattle barns, improved manure storage and composting, improved wetland buffers. Fund organic practices to reduce hazardous runoff, and renewable on farm water and irrigation management programs.

Soil Health

Fund practices that reduce soil erosion such as high tunnel crop production and planting cover crops. Fund programs that Increase plant, animal and insect diversity on farms and in forests to be carbon neutral. Reward designated green space and woodlands to improve soil health and carbon sequestration. Fund fences for rotational stock grazing and wetland protection.

Protect and Restore Valuable Farmland

Fund programs to help small scale operators obtain the infrastructure necessary to execute a successful climate smart business model. Fund programs that can restore fertile overgrown pastures into production.

Self Sustainable and Renewable

Fund self-sustainable energy projects such as solar and other renewable programs to generate on farm energy and water. Fund energy efficient infrastructure, lighting and HVAC.

STATE LEVEL FEEDBACK

Based on my water quality priorities, I would like to go on record in agreeing with the comments made by Connor that solving drought problems should be eligible for EQIP funding, and that the irrigation projects that qualify for EQIP funding should be expanded at the state level to include irrigation to increase drought resiliency.

Based on my protection of farmland priority, I would like to go on record agreeing with the comments made by the land trust reps that we are relying too much on private land trusts to step up to the plate and protect at risk productive farmland and that policymaker at the state level should increase priorities to protect farms.

Finally, I also would like to go on record agreeing with Nanne Kennedy that the cost sharing prices paid for components of a projects need to be updated at the state level.

I would also like to go on record agreeing that improvements in next years meeting schedule are necessary. I would support scheduling the time, date, and location for the meeting one year in advance. For example schedule and publicize the details of the 2024 meeting during the 2023 meeting and include the 2024 meeting schedule in the minutes from 2023.