

**Natural Resources Conservation Service
State Technical Committee
10:00am Thursday, October 18, 2018
UACES State Office, Little Rock, AR**

Agenda and Handouts attached.

Meeting called to order by Amanda Mathis, Assistant State Conservationist for Partnership.

Members present: See attached sign in sheets

Welcome & Opening Remarks Mike Sullivan, State Conservationist

Mike gave an overview of the success of the cooperative work of the partners, staff and conservation districts

- Arkansas is #2 in financial assistance to landowners for the implementation of conservation practices
- 600,000 acres had conservation practices applied during the last FY
- Around 1 million acres were enrolled in new EQIP, CSP, ACEP contracts
- Feral Swine Initiative continues to grow
- Heirs Property continues to develop
- Soil Health Alliance is a success given is a farmer-driven organization dedicated to a key element in the NRCS mission
- Farm Bill expired but a continuing resolution is allowing some work to continue even if we don't have a clear picture of the future
- FPAC National Business Office – administration portion that serves USDA is currently being stood up
- As NRCS looks to FY 19 the priority will be customer service- soliciting ideas on how to improve.

Recommendations from the spring meeting- Amanda Mathis reviewed the and gave a status update. Handout attached.

2018 NRCS Funding Opportunity – Amanda Mathis gave an overview of the process.

- Announcement went out in February with a 60-day application period
- NRCS funded 35 proposals. Some of them were:
 - Arkansas Agriculture Dept – AFC – Comprehensive review of watersheds based on importance of drinking water
 - U of A CES – Virtual Field demonstrations & education (technology extending the benefits of soil and water conservation)
 - AAD – Development of Feral Swine Handbook
 - The Xerces Society, Inc. – Development of an Arkansas Pollinator Conservation Planning Handbook

- Projects for Direct Technical Assistance to Producers & Special Projects
 - Conservation Districts & East Arkansas RC&D – 27 positions (full & part time)
 - AAD and Crittenden Co CD– Enhancement of NEPA Section 106 Compliance
 - ANRC – Watershed Drainage District Coordinator
 - Pheasants Forever, Inc. – Farm Bill Biologist – State Coordinator
 - Crittenden CD – Special Projects Archeologist
 - Pheasants Forever, Inc. – Arkansas Monarch Coordinator

Amanda reviewed that NRCS expects to offer another announcement of program funding in FY19. Will likely announce early in the FY for projects providing direct TA to producers and then follow later with a more board topic announcement.

Sub-Committee Reports:

Water Quality – Teri Nehls, Water Quality Specialist

Terri showed map of watershed submitted for National Water Quality Initiative

Entire Departee HUC 10 is included

Explained wanted to expand to show forestry practices – Greasy Creek.

Linking other plans/recommendations together (i.e. Cache watershed plan linked with Big Slough increasing implementation of less used critical practices.

Showed practices under contract in Bayou Bartholomew.

Water Quantity – Charolette Bowie, State Irrigation Engineer

The poly-pipe scenario was updated as recommended.

A new recommendation for a cap per Irrigation Water Management scenario instead of one cap for all scenarios was presented.

Forestry – George Rheinhardt, State Forester

CRP – FSA can't take applications until new farm bill is passed

Mid management payments held

Paying only rental payments at this time

Joint Chiefs Project – Very successful

Current project has expired. Have developed a new proposal

\$1.5 million a year for 3 years of FA to landowners plus forest service money equals a total of \$10 million.

Recommendation: Updated Specs to contain language of “average” spacing of 10’ (12’ for hardwood) to help contractors who pull 8’ ripper.

Recommendation: To address the seasonality of some of the practices (i.e. tree planting) the forestry funds codes should be batched more than once a year. George will work with Programs to determine feasibility.

Wildlife – James Baker, State Biologist

A new practice Wildlife Plantings (Practice Code 420) is currently out for review. If adopted it would combine all wildlife planting scenarios under one practice code. Easier planning/reporting

Discussed issues with soil testing on NWSG & pollinator plantings. When you put N out on establishment it causes problems. **Recommendation:** Identified group will work with U of A to get better soil test recommendations for pollinators/NWSG establishment.

Streamlining Efforts – Mike Sullivan

State conservations met in Oklahoma and dug into how they could improve NRCS. Heard from producers and partners. They came up with a list of 50+ items with actions to improve customer service. Some short/medium and long term.

Recommendations have been developed for approval

NRCS is working on 56 items. Seventeen are ready for approval and within NRCS control.

- Planning and Streamlining of Conservation Plan
- Planning and programs – customers applying at different times.
- Field staff using 94 different tools. Working on a new tool to save staff and producers time. CART – hope to roll out a new tool for new Farm Bill. Would be happy to share more if anyone has an interest.
- Use of drones has been approved if done through partnerships
- Technical policies are being looked at to see what could be reduced
- Videos are being developed for education and training for producers and staff
- Strive for continuous improvement Make things better every day. If we do it right we save time, improve efficiency and enhance customer service. Want this mentality at all levels in the organization.

Mike introduced Jena Moore as the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs.

Programs:

EQIP – Corey Farmer, Resource Conservationist

1,474 contracts and \$45,227,096 for FY2018

Showed overall picture of funding by county.

2019 calendar shows two phases for rollout:

1st phase – initiatives – continue what is in existence

Doesn't include general/local led – it will have its own sign-up.

2nd phase – General EQIP/Local Led

CSP – Clyde Williams, Resource Conservationist

2018 – 16 CSP funding categories

711 contracts - 700,000 ac

2019 – format may change due to farm bill discussions

RCPP – Amanda Mathis

Handout showing map of active funding for 2019.

There are two new projects – Carroll County White River and AGFC Northern AR Quail Focal Landscape.

MRBI – Amanda Mathis

Handout showing map of active MRBI for FY19.

Continuation of 5 projects totaling \$2,500,000 in funding available in FY19.

Five new MRB Readiness Phase Projects have been selected- will have watershed assessments done in those watersheds with FA to come in FY20.

CIG – Lori Barker

Lori presented MRBI/NWQI/RCPP funding summary

CIG – handout in packet showed current CIG areas of concern. CIG – State level program - \$75K per project/\$300K total allowance

Lori asked the group for input as to whether there is an area that AR would like to target for CIG. She requested feedback by December 1.

Mike – pointed out that in FY18 we did not offer a state level CIG- did that have an impact? Do we need state level CIG? The request for information will be reformatted and sent out again.

ACEP – Randy Childress

Randy reported AR was #2 in the nation in WRE with 264,274 acres on 689 conservation easements.

New NWTf forester will do forestry work in WRE stands. This new position is in addition to the shared positions with TNC and Ducks Unlimited on board now.

Randy provided a handout of proposed Geographic Area Rate Cap for 2019 for WRE. Non-CRP wooded rate went up in all three regions. Other rates remained the same. No one offered concerns regarding the proposed GARC.

Open Discussion

Mike Daniels – Recommended that NASS to start tracking cover crops. Eugene Young with NASS outlined the process to get something added to the census. If needed a coordinated effort will be implemented to make that recommendation. There was also discussion over current efforts to quantify conservation practice impacts and past efforts such as CEAP.

Closing Comments – Mike Sullivan

AR NRCS is looking for feedback on the State Technical Committee meetings. The sub-committees get everything together and present in the spring meeting with recommendations and proposed actions. Fall meeting is more about where we are going.

Next Meeting will be Thursday, May 9, 2019.

Meeting adjourned at 12:00p.m.