

Montana State Technical Committee

Minutes: April 11, 2023, 9:00 am to 12:30 pm Missoula, MT



Attendance:

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS): Tom Watson (state conservationist), Kyle Tackett (assistant state conservationist for partnerships), Kelley Barkell (assistant state conservationist for financial assistance programs), Justin Meissner (assistant state conservationist for easements), Keri Bilbo (assistant state conservationist for operations – Bozeman area), Kale Gullett (state resource conservationist), Rob Molacek (state conservation engineer), Alex Dado (state soil scientist), Mindy Gauthier (assistant state conservationist for operations – Missoula area), Brad Holliday (state community agriculture specialist)

Farm Service Agency (FSA): Maureen Wicks (State Executive Director), Elisa Gaboury (Public Affairs)

National Center for Appropriate Technology: Jeff Schahczenski

Ducks Unlimited: Bob Sanders

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation: Stacey Barta

American Public Land Exchange: Mark Sommer

Fort Belknap Indian Community: Peggy Doney, Kyle Stiffarm

Intertribal Ag Council: Craig Harry, Zane Not Afraid

Blackfeet Nation: Craig Iron Pipe

Montana Land Reliance: Brad Hansen

Five Valleys Land Trust: Eric Greenwell, Martin Oakland

Northern Great Plains Joint Venture: Catherine Wightman

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks: Heather Harris

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners: Greg Neudecker

Heart of the Rockies: Jim Williams, Gary Burnett, Nathan Owens

Gallatin Conservation District/Montana Association of Conservation Districts: Mike Hansen

Intermountain West Joint Venture: Joy Morris

Montana Department of Environmental Quality: Mark Ockey

Bitter Root Land Trust: Natalie Moses

National Wildlife Federation: Erin Farris Olsen, Shelby Weigand

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation: Matt Arno, Jamie Kirby

Opening Remarks

Tom Watson, NRCS State Conservationist

Tom welcomed everyone and thanked them for their participation.

Maureen Wicks, FSA State Executive Director

Maureen introduced herself and thanked attendees for showing up and looks forward to interacting with the group.

Maureen's bio can be found here: <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/state-offices/Montana/sed-biography/index>

Community Ag

Brad Holliday introduced himself as the NRCS Community Ag Specialist. NRCS Montana created a Community Ag Strategic Plan in 2022 and Brad was hired in late 2022 in his new role. NRCS has a community ag signup this year for EQIP. Brad is traveling the state assisting field offices and meeting with new partners. Brad will bring more information to the July State Technical Committee (STC) meeting for the group to provide input on.

A question was asked regarding the opportunities to protect small agriculture soils because we are losing our productive soils to houses. There may be opportunities in the easement programs here.

Easements – Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) Partnership Project Proposals and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) – Agricultural land Easements (ALE) Priorities for FY23

Justin Meissner, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist – Easements

- Justin discussed ACEP WRE ranking questions.
- A robust discussion was held around the minimum deed terms in ACEP ALE as they relate to Appendix A and the no-till language.
- Justin unpacked the challenges associated with the species of concern ranking questions for ALE and the lack of separation in applicant rankings based on the question. Justin will work on new questions and provide them prior to July meeting to the STC Wildlife Subcommittee.

Financial Assistance Programs

Kelley Barkell, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist – Financial Assistance Programs

- Kelley presented on the Climate Smart Ag and Forestry (CSAF) practice list as it relates to the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding.
- NRCS Montana is seeking input from STC on practices that may be missing from the list that should be submitted to NHQ for consideration.
- Kyle will send out the CSAF activities list for input following the meeting.
- Discussed timeline for budget increases over next several fiscal years.
- Discussed staffing strategy, including partner capacity opportunities.

Organic Management Practice 823 and Soil Carbon Amendment Practice 808

Kale Gullett, NRCS State Resource Conservationist and Alex Dado, NRCS State Soil Scientist

- Kale shared the new announcement regarding the Organic Transition Initiative (<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/news/nrcs-announces-75-million-to-assist-producers-transitioning-to-organic-as-part-of-usdas>)
- Alex discussed the Soil Carbon Amendment Practice 808 and Jeff Schahczenski indicated that he had some suggestions to the practice. Alex and staff will review Jeff's suggestions that he previously submitted and consider them for inclusion.
- Discussed recent announcement of the Organic Transition Initiative

Engineering

Rob Molacek, NRCS State Conservation Engineer

- Rob briefly discussed the Western Water and Working lands Framework.

Next Meeting July 18th in Great Falls, SpringHill Suites

Adjourn: 12:30pm