Local Working Group (LWG) Meeting Minutes Oxford County

12/14/22; 10 am, South Paris, Maine

Participants-

1. Andrew Johnson, District Conservationist, NRCS Oxford County
2. Michele Windsor, Project Manager, Oxford Co. SWCD
3. Jade Gianforte, Soil Conservationist, NRCS Oxford County
4. Chantelle Hay, Education & Outreach Coordinator, Oxford Co. SWCD
5. Laurie Thiboutot, CED, FSA Oxford County
6. Kasey Farrington, PT, FSA Oxford County
7. Wheeler Lowell, PT, FSA Oxford County
8. Glenn Kish, PA, ACES NRCS Oxford County
9. Gary Hill, Ox Co SWCD Member; Woodlot Owner, Waterford
10. Richard Piper, Piper Ranch, Buckfield
11. Elbridge Russell, Saco Valley Forest, Fryeburg
12. Christine Parrish, NEFF

*Meeting documents and agenda were distributed at the beginning of the meeting.

Call to Order – Andrew Johnson, NRCS DC began meeting at 10:08am

Introductions and Overviews of LWG

- Attendees introduced themselves
- Andrew explained the role of the Local Working Group. The LWG makes recommendations to the District Conservationist on the local funding priorities for Oxford County.

Overview of Farm Service Agency Services by Laurie Thiboutot

- Delivery of Farm Bill Programs including Loans- operating loans and farm storage facility loans
- Conservation Programs including rental payments on land removed from Ag production
- Disaster Programs for damage caused by micro-bursts & flooding in forests and cropland
- Crop Insurance from natural disasters
- Acreage Reports for program development and program eligibility
- Farm Records and eligibility for FSA & NRCS program participation
- Pandemic revenue loss & Natural Disaster revenue loss programs coming soon

Slideshow of Overview of Rural Development Services by Andrew Johnson

- Business Development Grants
- Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Programs
- Value Added Producer Grants
- Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program

Overview of NRCS Programs by Andrew Johnson

- Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) Program
- Conservation Stewardship Programs (CSP)
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)- Aquatic Organism Passage (AOP) & relationship with New England Forestry Foundation (NEFF)

Overview of New England Forestry Foundation (NEFF) by Christine Parrish

- Partnership role with NRCS to implement RCPP has been renewed for 5 more years. Partnership agreement should be in place by March.
- Outreach for RCPP has already started for the next chapter
- Funding available for wildlife monitoring from implemented projects
- Explanation of RCPP and where it can be implemented

Overview of NRCS State Office Level Easement Programs by Andrew Johnson

- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)
- Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE)

Review/NRCS Summary of FY22 Contracting Season and FY23 Application Season

- Andrew Johnson presented a PowerPoint providing an overview of Statewide fund pools and discussed the details of the Urban Ag and Climate Smart pools
- Andrew explained some new practices that are going to be available this year including a practice for spreading lime as well as tree pruning.
- Jade Gianforte presented a PowerPoint providing an overview of how NRCS programs work locally in Oxford County including review of Local Fund Pools specific to Oxford County. The presentation also provided an overview showing examples of local EQIP & AMA projects including before and after photos of completed projects.
- Andrew provided a summary of actual FY22 allocations vs. the recommended amounts in the LWG meeting. NRCS staff explained the reason why the actual obligated amounts by fund pool were different to what was recommended in last LWG meeting.
- NRCS Local Fund Pool Categories, Percentages and Conservation Priorities from the previous year:

FY 2023 LWG Percentages

Fund Pool	Funding Percentage
Forestry	40%
AgWaste	42%
Crop	5%
Pasture	5%
Wildlife	5%
High Tunnel	3%

- Andrew asked for input from the group for recommendations on FY24 fund pool percentages.
- Laurie suggested due to the recent trend towards drought the past few years that pasture health could become an issue and to change pasture to 7% and wildlife to 3%.
- Richard (Dick) asked that deer fencing be brought back to the practice list to protect cropland. NRCS staff will suggest this to the State Office as a recommendation.
- Wheeler suggested moving high tunnel back to 5% but it was explained that high tunnels have more than 1 funding opportunity due to the statewide pool so it may not be necessary to increase the percentage locally.

FY 2024 Recommended Percentages

Fund Pool	Funding Percentage
Forestry	40%
AgWaste	42%
Crop	5%
Pasture	7%
Wildlife	3%
High Tunnel	3%

Resource concern priorities

- Andrew asked the group for comments and recommendations on local priorities for Oxford County. He reviewed FY23 local priorities:
    - Invasive species control
    - Carbon sequestration
    - Source water protection
    - Soil health
- Laurie brought up the PFAS issue and asked if there were any programs coming to assist with it. As of right now NRCS doesn't have any program for PFAS other than assisting with cost of testing for it and paying to install raised beds in specific situations.
- Priorities could be pests to include deer and insects which would tie into Dick's concern about deer and Elbridge's concerns about the Spongey Moth becoming a big issue in woodlots including his.
- Laurie reiterated her concerns about drought as a priority to battle.
- Christine talked about the lack of workforce in the forestry sector being an issue…the group agreed that was an issue in all sectors right now, as well as the aging workforce.
- Local Priorities Established for FY24:
    - Invasive species control
    - Carbon sequestration
    - Source water protection
    - Soil health
    - Pests including deer and insects
    - PFAS
    - Lack of Workforce

Ranking Questions

- Andrew explained the relationship between local priorities and the ranking questions and how the local ranking questions can be tailored to address the local priorities.
- He asked the group to review the ranking questions and suggest changes or recommendations to either the questions themselves (can change, delete, add new) or the points assigned. Updates (in red) were made as follows:

AgWaste:

- Laurie asked about finding a way to address the issue of too high of a carrying capacity of livestock on farms and whether it should be addressed
- Michele suggested giving higher points to the surface water question.

- Andrew & Wheeler suggested to include language in the Source Water Protection question so that it only counts if the project is actually near water.

1. Will the producer implement a practice that addresses excessive nutrients, pathogens, or sediment in surface waters? 55 pts
2. Will the producer implement a practice that addresses excessive nutrients or pathogens in groundwater? 50 pts
3. Will the practice be implemented in an area identified as Source Water Protection area and is the project located in proximity to surface water? 35 pts
4. Does this farm have no existing manure storage or stacking sites available? 25 pts
5. If the applicant had a previous NRCS contract, was the contract NOT in non-compliance or terminated in the last 3 years? (Also answer yes if the participant has not previously held a contract) 35 pts

Forestry:

- Laurie and Elbridge suggested giving more points to question 3.
- Group agreed to adjust points to questions 2-5.

1. Will this application include practice 666, Forest Stand Improvement or practices that will increase Carbon sequestration? 50 pts
2. Will the producer implement a practice that addresses sediments in surface waters? 40 pts
3. Will the producer implement a practice addressing invasive species, pest or disease management? 45 pts
4. Will this project include practices that will improve wildlife habitat? 30 pts
5. If the applicant had a previous NRCS contract, was the contract NOT in non-compliance or terminated in the last 3 years? (Also answer yes if the participant has not previously held a contract) 35 pts

Cropland:

- Wheeler & Laurie suggested moving some points from question 5 to question 3.

1. Will the producer implement a practice to improve soil health? 40 pts
2. Will the producer implement a practice to address soil erosion? 40 pts
3. Will the producer implement a practice that addresses excessive nutrients, pathogens, or sediment in surface waters? 45 pts
4. Will the producer implement a practice addressing invasive species, pest or disease management? 40 pts
5. If the applicant had a previous NRCS contract, was the contract NOT in non-compliance or terminated in the last 3 years? (Also answer yes if the participant has not previously held a contract) 35 pts

Pasture:

- The group suggested to include question 4 from cropland to replace question 4 in pasture.
- The group suggested to delete question 2 and adjust points values of questions 1 & 3.

1. Will the producer implement a rotational grazing system following an NRCS approved grazing plan? 60 pts
2. ~~Will the producer implement a practice to improve soil health? 40 pts~~
3. Will the producer be installing fence to exclude livestock from surface waters (stream, pond, lake or river)? 60 pts
4. Will the producer implement a practice addressing invasive species, pest or disease management? 40 pts
5. If the applicant had a previous NRCS contract, was the contract NOT in non-compliance or terminated in the last 3 years? (Also answer yes if the participant has not previously held a contract) 40 pts

Wildlife:

- The group suggested to split question 1 into 2 questions and give higher preference to T&E species.

1. Will the producer be installing practices to provide food, cover or shelter to species of greatest conservation need? 35 pts
2. Will the producer be installing practices to provide food, cover or shelter to T&E wildlife species? 45 pts
3. Will the producer be addressing Aquatic Organism Passage? 40 pts
4. Will the application include a planting for pollinator species? 40 pts
5. If the applicant had a previous NRCS contract, was the contract NOT in non-compliance or terminated in the last 3 years? (Also answer yes if the participant has not previously held a contract) 40 pts

High Tunnel:

- Dick suggested limiting the size of the high tunnels for first time applicants so they can learn how to grow in one before getting a large one.
- Laurie would like to give higher ranking preference to commercial growers who are producing the bulk of our food and making the most impact.
- Wheeler would like to give preference to food desert areas. Also talked about donations to food pantries.
- The group agreed to change the points for the other questions to allow for new questions.

1. Will this be the first NRCS cost-shared High Tunnel installed in this farm? 30 pts
2. Is the participant a beginning farmer? (per CPA-1200) 30 pts
3. Has the property been used to produce any in-ground crops? (not hay) 30 pts
4. If the applicant had a previous NRCS contract, was the contract NOT in non-compliance or terminated in the last 3 years? (Also answer yes if the participant has not previously held a contract) 30 pts
5. Is the project located within a “food desert”? 40 pts
6. Is the applicant a commercial producer? 40 pts

Other Conversation

- Dick Piper talked about the value of putting your farm into a trust and the need for income for farms to survive succession. He talked about the importance of awareness in the community of farm programs to help farms stay viable. He has a lot of concern for who will be taking over his farm someday.
- Andrew mentioned some options for putting farms into trusts.

Meeting Adjourned at 1:30pm by Andrew Johnson.