

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

The **Local Working Group** meeting of the Waldo, Knox Local Working Group was held via Zoom on **December 4, 2023** from 2:00 pm – 4:00 p.m. An informational session was held at 1:00 pm via Zoom.

**Attendees:** Total of people attending = 26 (see table at end of minutes)

### **Call to Order & Introductions**

Knox-Lincoln County SWCD Office Manager, Julie Sells, called the meeting to order at 2:00 PM 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 and funding pool categories, percentages and Local Ranking Questions. Peter Abello, 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 discussed at this meeting are for FY 2025.

Peter reviewed the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), which addresses resource concerns in response to existing problems and other NRCS programs. He provided an overview of some other USDA conservation programs that may be used to address resource issues:

**Agricultural Management Assistance Program** –The objective of this program is to reduce the risk in agricultural production. Examples of how funds have been utilized in the past have been new irrigation systems and high tunnels.

**Conservation Stewardship Program** – This program rewards a high-level of stewardship while providing assistance to further enhance conservation efforts. This is the highest funded program and requires good record keeping and documentation from the landowner.

**Regional Conservation Partnership Program** – This program engages private conservation groups to address commonly shared resource issues. This program requires a 50% match or services in lieu of money. An example of a project is Aquatic Organism Passage, which addresses interrupted waterflow due to blockages, such as a high culvert.

**Agricultural Conservation Easement Program** - The objective of this program is to restore wetland function and value where human activities have altered wetlands and is also used to purchase floodplain easements. This program also protects high value farmland from development by helping to offset the cost of development rights as part of a conservation easement.

Peter noted the EQIP program in Maine is well-funded. Approximately half of the funds received by the state are designated for state-wide initiatives and the other half is applied to the locally led programs. The Local Working Groups recommend the percentages of the distribution of these local funds. Peter reviewed the allocation percentages from the previous year and examples of projects funded. Implemented EQIP projects from 2022-2023 included 8 manure management systems; 30 acres of mulching on lowbush blueberry fields; 210 acres of forest stand improvement in 15 woodlots; and 4 grazing systems that included fencing livestock out of surface water resources.

Peter reviewed information on the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) that will provide funds toward Climate Smart Ag and Forestry areas.

A question was posed regarding what size of farms are eligible for NRCS program funding? Peter explained there is no minimum acreage or size of farm. The criteria is based on a minimum of an Adjusted Gross Income over 3 years to be no greater than \$900,000. It was noted that the Farm Service Agency has a Conservation Compliance Requirement that no wetlands were removed when creating farm acreage and if the farm has highly erodible lands, they must follow a conservation plan to reduce soil loss below threshold for particular soils on the farm.

Peter posed the overall questions to the attendees of: 1) What are the top three resource priorities, and geographical area and 2) What would need to happen for this to not be a resource concern anymore?

A question was raised regarding clarifying the IRA funds and ways to access the funds, particularly with the carbon capture and sequestration tax credits. Discussion ensued regarding pastureland versus forested land and soil health.

The following is a list resources concerns that were suggested and discussed:

- **Forestry and water quality**
- **Forest Wildlife**
- **Forest thinning good tool for carbon sequestration and storage, protecting forest soils**
- **Invasive species – protecting biodiversity**
- **Infrastructure capacity for handling excessive storms – both private land and public land (state/towns)**
- **Hydrologic connectivity and function**
- **Drought mitigation – more mulching, whole field mulching, irrigation systems**
- **Loss of farmland soil to solar farms and forests**
- **Coastal erosion**
- **Native Pollinator habitat**
- **Deer pressure/exclusion fencing for all cultivated land**
- **Runoff from Dairy Operations in Knox – bunker silos and manure storages**
- **Pfas**
- **Forest fire protection**
- **Soil nutrient management with the goal of reducing inputs**
- **Soil and water quality**
- **Buffer management**
- **Agricultural waste**
- **Increasing ecosystem services – soil health, pollinator habitat**
- **Pasture management**
- **Smooth bedstraw control**

Discussion ensued regarding one animal waste project was funded out of fifteen submitted. This category has

the largest backlog due to the associated project costs. It was noted that manure management and runoff impacting water quality is one of the most critical issues to address. The Ag Waste Projects are the most expensive. Although the cost sharing is increasing it is not keeping up with inflation.

Discussion continued on what EQIP projects could be funded through the IRA funds. This would allow for more EQIP funds to address backlogs of applications and projects. It was noted some Farm Service programs and the NRCS AMA program may be applicable.

Peter explained that he tries to match all applications to appropriate programs in order for the projects to be funded.

A clarifying question was posed regarding the Ranking Questions under Forestry and if applications would be awarded more points to address wildlife habitat. The revision of wording specific to forestry was discussed and approved:

#### FORESTRY

1. Will the proposed action ~~focus solely on~~ **include** Forest Stand Improvement? **150 points**
2. If Forest Stand improvement is included in the plan does the treatment location and dominant species have a site index greater than 65 based on soil survey? **100 points**

Discussion continued regarding ranking the suggestions of resource concerns for FY 2025 funding. It was agreed that when the amount of IRA funding headed to Maine is known, the rankings and allocation percentages will be revisited and refined.

#### **Funding Allocations:**

Peter reviewed last year's allocation percentages and asked for suggestions for adjusting the funding formula. The group recommended keeping the same allocation percentages as the previous year.

Resource Concern	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021*	2020	2019
Agricultural Waste	60	60	68%	68%	53%		
Animal Waste						53%	53%
Forestry	12	12	10%	10%	15%	15%	15%
Cropland (incl. blueberry)	22	22	20%	20%	30 %		
Cropland/Hayland						-	-
Blueberry						20%	17%
Pasture	3	3	2%	2%	2%		
Pasture/Crop						12%	5%
Pasture						-	-
Small AU Producer	3	3				-	10%
TOTAL	100%	100%	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	12/04/2023	Time	2:00 PM to 4:00 PM
Minutes prepared by: Julie Sells, Medea Steinman		Location: Online via Zoom	
Attendance at Meeting			
Name	Department / Division	Name	Department/Division
Peter Abello	DC, NRCS Belfast Field Office	Nanne Kennedy	Livestock producer, Meadowcroft Farm, Knox County
Courtney Hawkins	Soil Conservationist, NRCS Belfast Field Office	Paul Sweetland	Blueberry producer, Knox, Lincoln & Waldo Counties
Julie Sells	Knox-Lincoln SWCD Office Manager	Alison McKellar	Knox landowner; Camden Selectperson
Mark Hedrich	Knox landowner; Knox-Lincoln SWCD Chair, Board of Supervisors	Marcy Bonner	Georges River Land Trust, Trails & Public Access Manager
Diane Schivera	Knox landowner; KLSWCD Supervisor, Vice Chair	Braedon Lineman	Georges River Land Trust, Stewardship Manager
Karin Rector	Knox landowner; KLSWCD Board Supervisor	C.J. Walke	MOFGA, Orchard Program Manager
Barrie Brusila	MidMaine Forestry Assn, TSP, KLSWCD Associate Supervisor, Knox landowner	Brian Powers	Blueberry producer, Hart’s Clary Hill Farm, Knox County
Medea Steinman	Waldo SWCD Administrative Director	Ron Howard	Blueberry producer, Brodis Blueberries, Knox County
Andy Reed	Waldo landowner; Waldo SWCD Supervisor; MACD Chair	Tom Wilhite	Knox landowner with woodlot
Cooper Funk	Farmer, Door Yard Farm, Knox County	Robin Hackett	Maine Farmland Trust, Land Steward
Christina Breen	Angus King Local Representative	Frank Altimore	Farmer, Tiny Brook Farm, Waldo County
Ryan O’Neill	Coastal Mountains Land Trust, Stewardship Project Manager	Tempe Landi/Newsom	Coastal Mountain Land Trust. Development & Communications Manager
Emily Mallory	Producer in Waldo County, TSP, and works for Northern Tilt	Allyssa Gregory	Maine Forest Service, District Forester

The meeting adjourned at 4:20 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:  
Julie Sells and Medea Steinman  
Knox & Waldo County SWCD's

The following recommendations were made to the State Tech Committee that reviews funding allocations

and takes our comments into consideration:

- A recommendation was made to move Animal Waste projects to the AMA program as there is more capacity to fund expensive Animal Waste projects.
- The following recommendations were voiced at the LWG meeting and followed up on Dec 5, 2023 via email from Waldo County producer, Frank Altimore of Tiny Brook Farm [50 acres (25 crops, 25 woodland), 10 to 15 agricultural units of various livestock and 1 acres of vegetables]

“I hope that we can report to State committees that a consensus was reached that we should PRIORITIZE a way to help more farms of ALL sizes with EQIP funds. We all agreed that four of thirty AG waste application funded in two years is inadequate to address the conservation needs in Waldo and Knox county.

So to me the obvious solution would be to significantly increase funding. We are clearly able to demonstrate a need for 10 times more than we have, but that has been enough to get a State response because funding has NOT been significantly increased.

This is a problem.

**To summarize my comments:**

Prioritize a way to help MORE farms of ALL sizes with EQIP funds, such as significantly increasing funding.

Expand programs in Maine to include exclusion fencing to increase farm resiliency and reduce risk from increasing wildlife pressure.

Prioritize programs that improve soil and water quality, construct buffers, and manage waste.

Frank Altimore  
Waldo County  
Tiny Brook Farm”