

Local Working Group (LWG) Meeting Minutes Oxford County

1/17/24; 10 am, South Paris, Maine

Participants-

1. Jade Gianforte, District Conservationist, NRCS Oxford County
2. Andrew Johnson, Southern Maine Resource Conservationist
3. JB Cox, Natural Resource Specialist, NRCS Oxford County
4. Kasey Farrington, Program Technician, FSA Oxford County
5. Chantelle Hay, Education and Outreach Coordinator, Oxford Co, SWCD
6. Gary Hill, Ox Co SWCD Member, Woodlot Owner, Syrup Producer
7. Ivy Ellsworth-Farmer, Program Technician, FSA Oxford County
8. Merle Ring, Ox Co SWCD Member, landowner
9. Seon Horan, NRCS-Extension Climate Smart Specialist
10. Carrick Gambell, NRCS-Extension Urban Ag Specialist
11. Rebeccas Long, UM-Extension
12. John Farmer, Program Assistant, NRCS Oxford County
13. Janette Plummer, Farmer
14. Christine Hawes, Farmer, M6 Volunteer

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

Call to Order – Jade Gianforte, NRCS DC began meeting at 10:08am

Introductions and Overviews of LWG

- Attendees introduced themselves.
- Jade 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 NRCS Program Delivery by Jade Gianforte

- Employee Roster
- NRCS Programs List
- FY 2023 NRCS Payments by Program
- Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) Program overview
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) Program overview
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Program overview
- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) Program overview
- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Program overview by Andrew Johnson

Overview of Statewide Fund Pools by Jade Gianforte

- Statewide EQIP and IRA Funding Pools

- Urban Ag- presentation by Carrick Gambell (see below)
 - Climate Smart- presentation by Sean Horan (see below)
- Statewide AMA Funding Pools

Overview of Urban Agriculture Funding by Carrick Gambell

- State has defined urban agriculture by population density.
- Qualifications criteria for attaining Urban Agriculture Funding
- Purpose for Urban Agriculture Funding
- Cost Sharing/practice overview
- List of Projects which qualify for Urban Agriculture Funding
- Further Qualifiers for Urban Agriculture Funding by Jade Gianforte

IRA Climate Smart Ag and Forestry Funding Overview by Sean Horan

- Description of Climate Smart Funding Program
- Description of Climate Smart Practices
 - Question from Merle Ring about Re-establishing a forest using practice (612) Tree/Shrub Planting
 - Answer from Andrew Johnson stating there are different qualifiers (size of program/purpose) for when (612) can be used.

Overview of Farm Service Agency Services by Kasey Farrington

- 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 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
- States they're one of the first steps in the process when signing up with NRCS to get into the "customer records" system.

Overview of Local EQIP Fund Pools by Jade Gianforte

- Agricultural Waste (AgWaste) represents 42% of EQIP funding in Oxford County for FY24
 - Need to have a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan to qualify (also fund these)
 - AgWaste Practices before and after photos
- Forestry represents 40% of EQIP funds in Oxford County for FY24
 - Forestry Practices Example photos
- Croplands represents 5% of EQIP funds in Oxford County for FY24
 - Cropland Practices Example photos
- Pasture represents 7% of EQIP funds in Oxford County for FY24
 - Pasture Practices Example photos
- Wildlife represents 3% of EQIP Funds in Oxford County for FY24
 - Wildlife Practices Examples

- Invasive Control represents 3% of EQIP in Oxford County for FY24
 - Invasive Control is NEW for 2024

Funding Allocation Examples by Jade Gianforte

- Explanation of FY 2023 Local Funds Allocations.
- Look Forward to 2025 Funding... Lots of money coming in for IRA
- List of Local Resource Concerns for 2024:
 - Invasive Species Control
 - Carbon Sequestration
 - Source Water Protection
 - Soil Health
 - Pest Control (Deer and Insects)
 - PFAS
 - Lack of Workforce
- Newly added local resource concern for 2025 suggested by Rebecca Long:
 - Climate Change, Adaptation and Resilience

Jade asked for input from the group for recommendations on FY25 fund pool percentages:

Fund Pool	FY2023	FY2024	FY2025
Ag Waste	42%	42%	40%
Forestry	40%	40%	40%
Cropland	5%	5%	5%
Pasture	5%	7%	5%
Wildlife	5%	3%	5%
High Tunnel	3%	-----	-----
Invasive Control	-----	3%	5%

Reviewed Ranking Questions by Jade Gianforte:

- Discussion amongst entire group to assign FY2025 Ranking Points as well as review local questions and restructure/re-word as needed. Below are the results:

Ag Waste			
	Local Ranking Question	FY24 Points	Recommended FY25 Points
1	Will the producer implement a practice that addresses excessive nutrients, pathogens, or sediment in surface waters?	55	70
2	Will the producer implement a practice that addresses excessive nutrients or pathogens in groundwater?	50	60
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	40

4	Does this farm have no existing manure storage or stacking sites available?	25	30
5	If the applicant previously had or currently has an NRCS contract, did it fall behind schedule or become non-compliant within the last three years for reasons within the applicant's control? Answer NO if no previous contracts.	-50	-50
FORESTRY			
	Local Ranking Question	FY24 Points	Recommended FY25 Points
1	Will this application include practice 666, Forest Stand Improvement or practices that will increase Carbon sequestration?	50	65
2	Will the producer implement a practice that addresses sediments in surface waters?	40	45
3	Will the producer implement a practice addressing invasive species, pest, or disease management?	45	55
4	Will this project include practices that will improve wildlife habitat?	30	35
5	If the applicant previously had or currently has an NRCS contract, did it fall behind schedule or become non-compliant within the last three years for reasons within the applicant's control? Answer NO if no previous contracts.	-50	-50
Cropland			
	Local Ranking Question	FY24 Points	Recommended FY25 Points
1	Will the producer implement a practice to improve soil health?	40	45
2	Will the producer implement a practice to address soil erosion?	40	60
3	Will the producer implement a practice that addresses excessive nutrients, pathogens, or sediment in surface waters?	45	50
4	Will the producer implement a practice addressing invasive species, pest, or disease management?	40	45
5	If the applicant previously had or currently has an NRCS contract, did it fall behind schedule or become non-compliant within the last three years for reasons within the applicant's control? Answer NO if no previous contracts.	-50	-50
Pasture			

	Local Ranking Question	FY24 Points	Recommended FY25 Points
1	Will the producer implement a rotational grazing system following an NRCS approved grazing plan?	60	80
*2	Will the producer be installing fence to exclude livestock from practices to protect surface waters (stream, pond, lake, or river)?	60	80
3	Will the producer implement a practice addressing invasive species, pest, or disease management?	40	40
5	If the applicant previously had or currently has an NRCS contract, did it fall behind schedule or become non-compliant within the last three years for reasons within the applicant's control? Answer NO if no previous contracts.	-50	-50

*Group agreed to re-word question 2 to be more inclusive.

Wildlife			
	Local Ranking Question	FY24 Points	Recommended FY25 Points
1	Will the producer be installing practices to provide food, cover, or shelter for Species of Greatest Conservation Need?	35	35
2	Will the producer be installing practices to provide food, cover, or shelter to T&E species?	45	45
3	Will the producer be addressing Aquatic Organism Passage?	40	40
4	Will the application include a planting for pollinator species?	40	40
*5	Will the producer be addressing invasive species?	n/a	20
*6	Is producer managing land without use of pesticides?	n/a	20
7	If the applicant previously had or currently has an NRCS contract, did it fall behind schedule or become non-compliant within the last three years for reasons within the applicant's control? Answer NO if no previous contracts.	-50	-50

*Questions 5 and 6 were suggested by the group during the discussion and were added.

Invasive Control - New for FY24			
	Local Ranking Question	FY24 Points	Recommended FY25 Points

1	Will the producer implement a practice with a primary purpose to address invasive species, pest, or disease management?	100	100
2	Will invasive species, pests, and/or disease be treated on more than 50% of the project's total treated area?	15	15
3	Will invasive species, pests, and/or disease be treated on 100% of the project's total treated area?	30	30
4	Will all planned practices treat or facilitate the management of invasive species, pests, and/or disease?	20	55
7	If the applicant previously had or currently has an NRCS contract, did it fall behind schedule or become non-compliant within the last three years for reasons within the applicant's control? Answer NO if no previous contracts.	-50	-50

Questions asked during the meeting:

Q: Merle Ring: Can Tree/Shrub Planting be used to re-establish a forest through EQIP?

A: Andrew: We can use this to facilitate regeneration. There may be potential in a forest setting to use this practice to achieve more diversity. There are a lot of questions and interest in getting more diversity in our forests. If you see changes in climate and want to get ahead of it, like you want to plant red oaks in a forest to mitigate future climate change, it may qualify.

Q: Merle Ring: What fund pool has the largest backlog in Oxford County?

A: Jade: Forestry and Ag Waste is our biggest backlog in Oxford County. The reason Ag Waste percentages are so high is because the projects are expensive and cost a lot.

Q: Rebecca Long: Because of the weird weather, can we predict any new demands?

A: Jade: USDA has emergency programs through FSA available for these catastrophic weather events. We currently have new applications for culvert replacement, some field cleanup work, fencing got ripped down. We do not currently have any emergency programs through NRCS to help with these things.

Q: Do you have to have a Forest Management Plan to apply for invasive control practices?

A: Jade: If it's on a forest land unit then yes you need to have an FMP. The requirement for an FMP is tied to the forest land unit more than the fund pool. However, if it is an aquatic organism passage issue, it can be done in a wooded setting without an FMP.

Q: If PFAS a big issue in Oxford County

A: Jade: Not particularly that we know of yet. Andrew: NRCS has practices to assist with testing for PFAS if a client is interested.

Q: Rebecca Long: What are the bottlenecks in the NRCS program process?

A: Andrew: Staff and having time to properly address everything that falls on our plates. Staff has doubled in the Oxford office. Jade: staff is new and not yet fully trained but we are getting there. Once staff is trained things should go smoothly with limited opportunity for bottlenecks.

Q1: Christine Hawes: It may not be wildly popular, but can we add a question about removing points if you are using pesticide in the wildlife pool? Using poisons would negatively affect the wildlife habitats.

Q2: Maybe we cannot penalize someone for using pesticides, but can we add points to someone for using organic programs to eliminate pests instead of poison?

A: Jade: Maybe we can word it, are you using organic practices to manage your pests? Or are you not using pesticides to manage your pests? Sometimes the most effective method of controlling invasives is with pesticides. Andrew: It definitely takes away some of your tools if you are not using pesticides. Group agreed to add question 6 to the Wildlife local ranking pool.

Q: Merle Ring: Back on pest control, is there anything we can do about the gypsy moth? Are there any practices to deal with it?

A: Andrew: There are projects like Thinning to deal with that. It's too late to deal with the after effects. Jade: I have taken the issue to the state office, both NRCS and FSA. Hoping that woodlots can somehow be included some day with crop insurance of some sort.

Meeting Adjourned at 12:00pm by Jade Gianforte.