

Alaska State Technical Committee (STAC) Meeting

11/21/2023

Meeting held at 1:00pm in the NRCS Palmer State office conference room.

The Tribal Conservation District (TCD) subcommittee meeting was held in the morning prior to the STAC and there will be a report out from that meeting.

NRCS has programs that are administered through the Farm Bill. We work with private land farmers, ranchers and Ag producers and we are here to help Alaskans help their land. We are a federal agency and gather input from our local partners and the STAC provides recommendations for how we run our programs.

Updates from the State Conservationist (STC) Alan McBee

Infrastructure Reduction Act (IRA) Funding – We received our normal amounts of funding that we get through the Farm Bill plus additional IRA funding.

- We have done many Emergency Watershed projects across the state.
- Our hiring roadblocks have now been lifted and we have about 27 vacancies that will be advertised by the end of December.
 - New positions will include Technical Tribal Liaisons, ASTC- SRC (Assistant State Conservationist-State Resource Conservationist), ASTC-FO (Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations), Watershed, and snow survey positions.
- Most of our watershed work in Alaska that is non-emergency work is village relocation or managed retreat.
- We have been very busy this year with emergency watershed work. We had about 9 emergencies in the state that were funded.
- NRCS is responsible for the snow survey data across the United States. We are doubling the size of our snow survey team in Alaska as we are adding 20 new snow survey sites across the state.
- EQIP Funding: In the past we received 9 to 10 million dollars a year for EQIP in Alaska. Last year they added an additional 1.5 million dollars on top of that. This year we have our projected budget of the initial \$10 million and then on top of that the initial IRA allocation is \$15 million.
 - IRA has to be used for Carbon Sequestering practices that are nationally preapproved.
 - We plan to use IRA funding for specific projects which allows us to use other funds for projects like wildlife, aquatic organism passages and other projects.
 - We are working with the National office to increase the number of eligible practices for IRA. Trails and walkways are one of our major practices where we have done raised boardwalks and hardened trails which has helped reduce erosion which therefore increases plant health and vigor which would benefit carbon sequestration. Erin, our Climate Hub Fellow, will be doing research on this to support this through science.
- We are expecting more money in the coming years and with the huge influx of funding we are trying to use the funds for the different programs the best we can. CSP, EQIP, RCPP, ACEP.
- Last year we only funding one CSP contract because it was the only application we had.

There is a lot of support from everyone at the National Level about how they can help us get all of this done. We want to meet the needs and are asking our Local Work Groups, STAC and our partners where we can be successful.

- CR- we are a federal agency and funded by federal appropriations. This means if the government shuts down, we are one of the agencies that would shut down. We are currently funded through the end of the continuing resolution which is January 19th, 2024.
 - This does slow some of the things down like big agreements or financial decisions, but it's not slowing down our programs.
- Food Security in Alaska is a big part of the focus. Our most popular program by far is called our Hoop House (High Tunnel) program. There is new policy that allows us to fund EQIP applications at a much quicker pace. We will test run it on High Tunnels and have batch dates every 2 weeks which will allow people to get funding through a timelier and more streamlined process.
- This new process is referred to as ACT NOW.

Local work groups are designed to send recommendations to the STAC. They are intended to be set up by local conservation districts with NRCS support from a technical capacity. We encourage you all to work towards having the local conservation / local work group meeting to allow more conversation about priorities. (7-CFR-610.25)

- There will be some sort of informational session on local work groups put out by January 30th, 2024.

When we start planning for what we are rolling out the next fiscal year, we are planning months in advance. Right now, we are in FY24 and are thinking about FY25. If the local work groups have met and talked about how the programs are working by February 2024 then at the April STAC meeting the group can give us information that helps staff to make decisions to roll out programs in October of FY25.

- We use the information provided to prioritize where funds are spent. After the meeting a couple years ago, we worked on priorities and filled out charts with dots and stars. We took those and did the math of what percentage was represented on each resource concern. We then took our budget and created a pot of money to go to each need with a direct correlation of the input that was given from that meeting. In order to fund those priorities, we need applications. So, if fund pool A only has so many applications and doesn't use all of the money dedicated to it, then we roll that money over to fund B and C. We have used the same allocation method from the beginning of the farm bill.
 - Last year we funded 100% of the applications received and allocated exactly how the STAC recommended based on our application.
 - If anyone would like to have Alan attend their board meeting to share what is going on he is available.

Wetlands- Minimal Effect and Functional Assessment

In order to qualify to participate in USDA programs, whether they are technical or financial, one has to be in compliance with the Food Security Act of 1985. One provision in the Food Security Act states that

agricultural producers agree to comply with the wetland conservation provisions, which means producers will not farm converted wetlands or convert wetlands to enable or enhance agricultural production. The Food Security Act also states that we can grant exemptions. We are working on a statewide process that would allow us to make a minimal effect determination on an area in which the effect to the wetland would be nominal and not affect the water and land as a whole. There is a national procedure in the works, but it isn't complete as of yet.

- This process started by utilizing the Montana Minimal Effects procedure and removing what didn't apply or had red flags. The Alaska Process that has been presented today demonstrates the 14 functions and services that will get rated in a series of matrix(es). Once there is a final rating, our technical experts will go to the Alaska Worksheet and make a decision on the percentage.
 - To move forward this is being put out for public comment and discussion.
 - This can potentially increase the number of producers we work with.
 - Discussion and comments need to be received by December 15th. A survey will be sent out in the next few days with a recommendation request and any feedback you may have.

Programs Update

Farm bill programs-Administering the following Farm Bill programs:

- **EQIP**- Environmental Quality Improvement Program. Bread and butter program in Alaska. Every year we take the STAC feedback to figure out our budget for programs. This year with IRA we have an additional 15 million dollars dedicated to climate change practices. The list we can work from for administering are practices such as nutrient management, grazing and forestry.
 - We were able to do 12.6 million dollars in EQIP last year and this year we are expecting an additional 24 million dollars.
 - Last fiscal year 92% of the budget, or 11.2 million dollars, went to EQIP contracts serving socially disadvantaged customers.
 - Last fiscal year 50% of the contracts went to beginning farmers and ranchers.
 - For FY24 we will enact a new program called "ACT Now" which is designed to fast track EQIP applications.
 - This year we will be focusing on high tunnels and planning and design.
- **CIG** - Conservation Innovation Grant program. It is one of the few grant programs we have. There is a National Competition but in Alaska we have asked the STAC if we should have a state program. We put out a notice of funding opportunity last year and did not fund any applications because they did not meet the priorities.
 - An example of one is in Kachemak Bay we were looking at grazing systems and how we can manage them. An opportunity chosen could be by using GPS collars on livestock to track movement.

- We are looking at how to bring something new to the table that can become a process in Alaska.
- Because this is a grant, feedback to applicants cannot be provided. We received a template from headquarters for the application process so we cannot simplify it. There is help on the website with associated trainings/webinars.
- Once the National Office puts out their priorities, Alaska will set Alaska priorities. The match is 50%.
 - Priority suggestions: Food Security / shelf life/ storage
- **CSP- Conservation Stewardship Program.** This is a 5-year program where there is a base level of conservation, but there is interest in doing more... going above and beyond. There are dedicated practices and activities associated with this program.
 - We asked the STAC for priorities on this and used the priorities you gave us within the ranking process. We only received one application last year and it was funded. We have done a lot of training with our staff to better utilize this program moving forward.
- **Easement Programs-** ALE-Agriculture Lands Easement; we have 9 NRCS easements and 8 partner easements. This year we were able to put a 96-acre parcel into an agriculture land easement.
 - WRE - Wetland Reserve Easement – wetlands that have been degraded and the easement will protect it.
 - We use the GARC or geographic area rate cap for payment. Currently that is set at \$5,200 per acre based on an appraisal that was received and feedback from the STAC. We are asking the STAC today if there are any other known appraisals out there that would show that these needs adjusted. (none at this time)

Amy Tippery Partnership for Landscape Action with Native Terrestrials (Plant Nurseries)

The plant nursery is a direct response to needing tools to address climate change. There are 2 main funders for this plant nursery: US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management.

There are 4 nurseries at conservation districts in the South-Central Region and 1 in the Interior.

There are 4 goals.

- Goal 1- create a reliable and available source of native plants in each ecoregion of Alaska so appropriate genetic and acclimatized materials are available.
- Goal 2- Build capacity in the private sector through public subsidy of nurseries in the Conservation District System.
- Goal 3- Use plants for restoration, pollination support, reclamation, and cultural heritage programs.
- Goal 4- Create centralized locations where native plant resources can be aggregated, tested, and provide R&D for novel approaches to native plant restoration.

Tribal Conservation District (TCD) Subcommittee Report

MOU between TCD and NRCS; some are expiring, and some have expired. Older MOUs don't have expiration dates. We are looking at options to extend or change the format of those. Obstacles when the MOUs are 5 years are that it can take 2 years alone to negotiate them and get all of the signatures. Sometimes they've expired before the last signature is obtained. There is no funding or money involved, it is just recognizing the TCD. It can take over a year of traveling between villages just to get this complete.

- Would like to see TCD's assisting in the assessment of pay schedules for EQIP and CSP formulas.
- Methods of working with NRCS for input on Alaska National Funding opportunities and review panels.
- Local Work Groups were covered as well but we discussed that earlier.
- Co-Stewardship and tribal conservation efforts- One thing we found was there are a lot of non-government agencies or organizations trying to say they are working with tribal conservation districts or working for the tribes but there is not active involvement by Tribes, so we ask that the notice of funding include criteria that requires letters of commitment or resolutions from the Tribe supporting the project or grant. There is supposed to be money behind it.

Seeing a lot of grants being written on behalf of tribal interests and would like to see NOFO (Notice of Funding Opportunity) include letters of commitment or tribal resolution from tribes or tribal entities.

We don't want funding to be filtered to the TCD's as we end up with very little once it is filtered down.

Annual funding – everyone needs funding to keep things going. Some of the funding that gets pushed through the state doesn't make it to where it needs to go. We will be bringing this to our Western Region Advisory Committee meeting at the beginning of December. If you have any input, please email at TCD@AHTNAtribal.org. Building relationships with both the state conservation districts and the tribal conservation districts will do more for our food security.

Action Items

- NRCS will put together a training for LWG (Local Work Group) meetings and guidance for the conservation districts to include the law and where to find it.
- NRCS to provide an information session on Local work groups by January 30th.
- LWG feedback due at the end of March for the April meeting.
- Feedback needs to be provided from the STAC by DEC 15th on the minimal effects document.

