

USDA STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING

Neal Smith Federal Building
210 Walnut Street, Room 693
NRCS Hugh Hammond Bennett Conference Room
Des Moines, Iowa

MICROSOFT TEAMS

March 28, 2024
1:00 P.M. – 3:00 P.M.

Minutes

Opening Comments – Jon Hubbert

- Introductions of in-person and virtual attendees.
- Jon introduced Andrew Thomason as the new Outreach Coordinator.

Approval of Minutes from December 7, 2023 – Jon Hubbert

- Unanimous approval of minutes as written.

Agency Updates – General

NRCS – Jon Hubbert

- Current Farm Bill was extended through September 20, 2024. Congress continuing to work on writing a new Farm Bill.
- Budget was passed for all agencies. Cuts were made, but NRCS will be able to do planned program work for this year. Waiting to see how the cuts will affect Iowa.
 - Does not appear that cuts will impact financial assistance provided, impacts likely to be seen to the technical assistance aspects.
 - Expect to see increases in the amount of financial assistance obligated – especially EQIP CSP, RCPP, and ACEP-IRA.
- Direct Hiring Authority has been granted – details still being finalized.
 - Will allow hiring for engineering and soil conservationists (and others).

FSA Update – Matt Russell

- Finished Commodity Program sign-up ~96% participation.
 - Late filing/enrollment is allowed.
- Many counties are still in extreme drought (D3).
 - When grazing season starts on April 15, any county still in D3 will likely trigger a Livestock Forage Program (LFP).
- Concerns from Rural Water Associations (RWA) about water availability for livestock.
 - Looking into programmatic relief for farmers, especially livestock farmers.
- Partnerships for Climate Smart Commodities.
 - During a visit to Minnesota on March 26, Secretary Vilsack rolled out Climate Smart Rice as one of the first commodities with the Climate Smart label.
 - Based on reduced methane emissions and reduced water usage for irrigation.
- National Pork Board and Iowa Soybean Association – have programs with farmers interested in conservation in addition to FSA/NRCS programs.
- FSA had less of a budget cut – likely to see impacts to discretionary spending (e.g., travel).
- County Executive Directors Training Program will be launching again soon.
 - Quadrant training – candidates for this training will identify a quadrant of the state vs. the entire state, that they agree to work in.

- Leasing – some new buildings, some remodels. FPAC implementing some good things with leasing.
 - Open bid process that will allow for communication with community and economic development groups.

Question: what level of rains are needed to avoid worsening drought or the worst D3 impacts?

Answer: *The state just got by last year with some rain coming just in time to make a decent harvest for grain. For livestock, surface water is not recharging to provide adequate livestock watering. Shallow groundwater is very depleted. Over the last three years we're close to a full year's precipitation deficit. Getting the average amount of precipitation (34-35 inches) would allow for good crops, but much more needed to recharge subsurface stores.*

Question: Will the amount of biomass from cover crop forage be considered in the amount of available forage with the Livestock Forage Program (LFP)?

Answer: *LFP is based on the drought monitor. On an individual farm basis, it will deal with what is being reported and unsure how cover crops fit.*

Follow-up from Matt Russell: Cover crops are not considered eligible grazing land for LFP. They are specifically listed as Ineligible Grazing Land for LFP. Eligible grazing land for LFP is Native grasses, Improved grasses, mixed forage, small grains, and forage sorghum crops planted specifically for the use of grazing and reported on the producer's FSA-578 with the intended use of grazing. As with all of Iowa FSA programs, interested participants should always work with their county office service center to make sure they understand LFP and their potential eligibility.

Comment: Iowa Cattleman's Association (ICA) hearing concerns from many cattle producers, especially in Southern and Western Iowa about livestock water availability. Thank you to FSA and NRCS for understanding this is a significant issue – happy to hear about LFP. ICA is talking to members about establishing watering systems and available programs.

Follow-up: *EQIP program has strong livestock component – long-term water and forage productivity.*

Comment: From a biofuel standpoint, carbon intensity is being measured at the facilities and there is a lot of talk with the tax incentives to the 45G/GREET (Greenhouse Gases, Regulated Emissions, and Energy Use in Transportation) model. How do we collaborate between USDA programs with Climate Smart to collect and aggregate information to get into ethanol and biofuel facilities?

- Having a Climate Smart tag/component is vitally important for the ethanol industry.
- If something is put in place at the state level or the Climate Smart Ag level, how to make it so it gets accounted for with GREET?

Follow-up: *No good answer currently. For Farm Bill programs and IRA funding we must report back on the impacts or the greenhouse gas adjustments that are made because of those practice applications. Unsure how it's connected to the partners for Climate Smart Ag.*

Secretary Vilsack gave whiteboard presentation to FFA group and talked about connection point between ag producers, benefits they're creating, and how that's going to be important to ag/food industry.

Question: Knowing that many EQIP practices for livestock will need to have an approved grazing plan, is NRCS looking to help expedite grazing plans for both as a climate smart practice and to be able to act rapidly to mitigate drought?

Answer: *Resource teams are staffed with grazing specialists where NRCS feels there is a need and are working to fill open positions. If a gap in service is noted and brought to the attention of NRCS, we could pull in grazing specialists from adjacent resource teams to meet the need. The goal is to get practices implemented as quickly as possible, but there is not additional funding just for grazing specialists. Please reach out to Jon Hubbert or any Assistant State Conservationist – Field Office (ASTC-FO) if you feel that additional services are needed.*

Question: Is there a grazing TSP training in Wisconsin and would that training make someone eligible for grazing plans in Iowa?

Answer: *Generally speaking, TSP is regionally based with few changes across state lines for training requirements. If the person in Wisconsin is working with that regional coordinator for the TSP there should be no issue in Iowa being able to accept.*

Local Workgroup Feedback

- NRCS has an agreement through Conservation Districts of Iowa (CDI) – goes beyond strategic planning and looks at providing support for local work groups.
- At the state level – remind people in local communities that if they have an opportunity to participate in a meeting, please do so.

Technical Topics

EPA/USDA MOU (attached with agenda packet) – Mike Henderson

- EPA working to meet Endangered Species Act (ESA), Section 7 – how to label and legalize use of pesticides.
- How can we provide common language and unified strategies between government agencies to avoid confusion.
- Working within the framework of USDA conservation practices (e.g., runoff, drift, erosion standpoints) so that naming conventions of the practices are consistent.
- The MOU provides a connection in communication to allow the USDA to communicate with the EPA on name changes or changes to USDA practice standards.
- USDA will not be brought in on a regulatory level and the USDA NRCS will not be changing its position on recommending or interpreting pesticide labels.
 - Will remain up to the producer or their ag advisor to read, understand, and move forward with pesticide labels.
- There is some current language on some of the pesticide labels directly related to maintaining the pesticide application onsite.
 - This is not the ESA protocol.
 - Unlikely that practices will be put in a specific pesticide label to meet the ESA responsibilities because the species aren't everywhere that the pesticide may be labeled to be applied.
 - ESA will have to include a Native Species Act statement. The applicator/producer will have to go to a bulletin website and select their location to bring up the specific requirements.
- Enlist Duo label example – has a section about the ESA with direction to see the Endangered Species Protection Bulletin. There is also a section that references practices, but in relation to management of runoff, not the ESA.
- **Question:** how would USDA or EPA be involved with farmers that are not utilizing NRCS technical or financial assistance, but are building practice on their own, to certify that they are being done in conjunction with NRCS standards to be conformance with the MOU?
- **Answer:** *The MOU applies no responsibility on NRCS to do any level of certification for pesticides. NRCS will not be doing any policing, certification, or regulation.*
 - *If we are asked for technical assistance, we will do our best to verify whether practices comply with NRCS practice standards.*
- **Question:** On the Bulletin website, would types of practices that could be applied be added or known conservation practices?
- **Answer:** *When you click on an area on the map, select a field and it will bring up a list of pesticides or you input what pesticide you're applying and click "full details" and it will provide a list of limitations.*

- **Question:** Is there any data on labels about grazing restrictions?
- **Answer:** Susan Kozak will follow-up with Dr. Gretchen Paluch.
- Doug Jones, EPA, offered to follow-up with anyone that has additional questions.

P-Index – Mike Henderson

- Discussion and overview of the P-Index tool reports.
 - Noted some changes in how to get to the reports in the tool.
 - Added a Detailed Report
 - Added password protection on the reports.
- P-Index Calculator
 - Tech Note 25
 - Changes to remove NRCS policy changes and align with the original science used to develop the tool.
 - Reverted language to dominant critical soil type to align with development of the P-Index calculator.
 - Updated “interrill” to “sheet.”
 - Removed reference to using “annual soil loss rate for the year in which the manure is applied.”
 - Tech Note 29
 - Updated document language.
 - Updated example photos.
 - Updated location of supporting documents.

Status of Farm Bill Programs

Programs and IRA Report – Sam Adams

- See report attached with agenda packet.
- IRA projects – must have practices that are tied to one of the practices listed on the Climate Smart Agriculture and Forestry (CSAF) Mitigation Activities List for FY2024.
 - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2023-10/NRCS-CSAF-Mitigation-Activities-List.pdf>
- **Question:** When is the next RCPP round?
- **Answer:** Hope to have it out by the end of April.

Partnerships update – Scott Cagle

- See report attached with agenda packet.

CRP Report – Matt Russell

- Continuous Enrollment batching process ongoing.
 - Expecting at least 2 more rounds of batching – likely in April and May.
- General CRP sign-up ends March 29.
- Expect a Grassland CRP late April or May.

Subcommittee Reports

CSP – Kate Hansen

- See report attached with agenda packet.
- No recommendations.
- **Comment:** Selections are being made with \$25 million obligated. All IRA applications were selected for funding and there are still funds available – there are still opportunities for IRA applications.
- **Question:** Are smaller farms enrolling due to the increased \$4000 minimum payment? Has there been an increase in interest?

- **Answer:** There has been more interest and more questions about what is eligible.

EQIP – Nick Baumgarten

- See report attached with agenda packet.
- 336 soil carbon amendment was main topic of subcommittee meeting.
 - Subcommittee voted unanimously to recommend that NRCS place a payment cap per person, per contract for FY2024.
 - This recommendation was moved forward by Jon Hubbert due to a deadline to act.
 - **Question:** If this is a year-to-year program, what type of funding is anticipated moving forward? There is a lot of interest with the biofuels segment and anerobic digesters for this type of program. How can this become a long-term program?
 - **Answer:** *A lot of funding from IRA which has a shorter lifespan than Farm Bill. IRA dollars are ramping up until 2026, then ramping down until 2031. From a Farm Bill perspective, it would still be an eligible practice, but applications are ranked based on multiple factors and resource benefits associated with multiple practices. There is no specific dollar amount that we're funding on soil carbon amendments. To make it successful in the future, we will need to continue looking at ones that are implemented now and gain a good understanding from the producer, vendor, and agency. We need to continue to evaluate the benefits of this practice for long-term effects.*
 - **Comment:** California has a good model on ag land, but Iowa may not be ready due to not having enough biomass turned into biochar. There are methods that may be a conversion to a fertilizer-type product
 - **Comment:** Question the science behind this amendment and if this size of payment rate is going to be offered for practices that are focused on soil carbon increases, then payments for conservation crop rotation, 328, and manage intensive grazing systems. If we want to drive all the benefits besides just an amendment, we shouldn't forget the established practices that have science behind them that are already doing the things being discussed.

ACEP-WRE – Kelly Smith

- See report attached with agenda packet.
- No recommendations.
- Subcommittee met to review the Iowa NRCS Wetland Restoration Criteria and Guidelines manual.

ACEP-ALE – Joe McGovern

- No recommendations.
- Expressed appreciation and support for funding of ACEP-ALE.

CRP – Sean McMahan

- Have not met since last STAC on December 8, 2023.
- Net loss of over 6600 acres of CRP since last year – over 10 square miles and a big portion is filter strips.

SWP – Christina Murphy

- Have not met this quarter.
- Have had several questions and discussion from a utility perspective about how IRA practices mesh with source water protection.
 - Will be reaching out to Sam to get some clarification about these questions.
- At the 20% threshold and will have to start adding criteria to keep the number of watersheds that are being selected down to 20%.

Urban Ag – Tim Palmer

- See report attached with agenda packet.
- Subcommittee has three recommendations – listed in the report.

- **Comment:** FSA teams have reported positively on visits that cooperative groups have had in county offices. There have been some challenges, like program language. Need to continue to find ways to support and continue working with these organizations.
- **Comment:** Going to try to capitalize on opportunities at the Iowa State Fair – the USDA booth and the ISU Extension booth to try to reach more urban, small-scale, and specialty producers.

Updates From Other Agencies and Committee Members

DNR – Steve Hopkins

- DNR Nonpoint Source Plan review period has ended, and it was submitted to the EPA for review.
- EPA Nonpoint Source Program Section 319 concluded a year-long effort to update its guidelines.
 - Expect these to be completed this spring.
 - Iowa’s plan is intended to be consistent with and be updated at the same time as the new EPA 319 guidelines.
- Iowa has an EPA approved nonpoint source success story – Lake Meyer in Winneshiek County.
- DNR headquarters moving – within the month. New address will be 6200 Park Ave.
- Steve will be retiring May 2024 – Thank you for your years of dedication to Iowa’s natural resources!
- **Comment:** Provide an update on the beach-shed and watershed research you have done regarding Iowa’s swimmable lakes.
- **Follow-up:** *Embarking on a new plan called the Beach Risk Reduction Plan. This is based mostly on research done by Jason Palmer, aquatic biologist, that looks at sources of bacteria at certain state park lakes. Have determined that some state park lakes have a primary bacteria source that the DNR is calling “beach-shed”, not the from the entire watershed. Working with Jason Palmer, the 319 team, and a consultant to put together a couple beach risk reduction plans. Plan to start with Big Creek Lake in Polk County and Brushy Creek Lake in Webster County. Right now, this is just in the planning stage.*

CDI – Dien Judge

- Hiring of 25 administrative support staff – 16 filled, four candidates in background check process, two have potential selection. Still need applicants in Webster City, Dennison, and Bloomfield.
- DNR Private Lands Loan Program – eight of nine positions filled.
- Planner Program agreement expires end of September and will be submitting a plan to continue.

Vince Sitzmann

- Stewardship Week 4/28 – 5/5 – good opportunity for outreach.
- Virtual field day scheduled for Thursday May 2 at 1:00pm through the Iowa Learning Farm at ISU
- Theme is “May the Forest Be with You Always.”

Future Meeting Dates

June 20, 2024

Attendance

In-Person

Jon Hubbert, NRCS

Jaia Fischer, NRCS

Mike Henderson, NRCS

Joe McGovern, INHF

Sam Adams, NRCS

Nick Baumgarten, IDNR

Dien Judge, CDI

Hannah Grimm, NRCS

Rubyana Neely, NRCS

Scott Cagle, NRCS

Christiana Murphy, IA Assoc. of Water Agencies

Zach Cassidy, SILT

Matt Russell, FSA

Julie McMichael, NRCS

Keiko Sampson, NRCS

Virtual

David Petty, Cattle Producer

Tim Palmer, NACD

Amy Fischer, NRCS

Holly Shutt, Ducks Unlimited

Joe Dierickx, Iowa Farm Bureau Federation

Angela Barker, Iowa Native Seed Growers Assoc.

Steve Hofmann, IDALS SSCWQC

Steve Hopkins, IDNR

Kate Hansen, Izaak Walton League of America

Liz Hobart, GrowMark

Sarah Carlson, PFI

Kelly Smith, IDNR

Sally Worley, PFI

Sean McMahon, Iowa Agriculture Water Alliance

Susan Kozak, IDALS

Cynthia Farmer, Center for Rural Affairs

Matt Dvorak, IDNR

Mark Heckman, Eco Engineer

Mark Jacobs, Houston Engineering

Vince Sitzmann, IDALS

Greg Thessen, USDA NASS

Jean Eells, Women Food and Agriculture Network

Joan Flecksing, Meskwaki Nation DNR

Paige Frautschy, TNC

Jamie Benning, ISU Extension

Shawn Richmond, Iowa Farm Bureau

Alicia Vasto, Iowa Environmental Council

Blaine McNabb, EPA Region 7

Cora Fox, Iowa Cattleman's Association

Catherine DeLong, ISU Extension

Pamela Stahlke, RMA

Roger Wolf, ISA

Lori Altheide, NRCS

Jessica Downey, NRCS

Andrew Thomason, NRCS

Sara Strassman, Trout Unlimited

Travis Sieve, EPA

Ashley Utt, Pathfinders RC&D

DRAFT