



Minnesota NRCS State Technical Advisory Committee Meeting Notes

April 16-17, 2024

St. Cloud, MN

Welcome and Introductions

- Minnesota NRCS State Conservationist Troy Daniell started the meeting off by welcoming attendees, and emphasized their importance to NRCS carrying out its mission.
- Ryan Galbreath explained the purpose of the State Technical Advisory Committee and reminded attendees of the STAC website, and the notes, operating procedures, and archived documents available there.
 - Emphasized the committee as advisory and informal. From time-to-time NRCS may poll participants, but never call for votes.
 - Discussed the subcommittees that are active, and invited involvement in one or more of them.

Subcommittee Reports

- The Wildlife Subcommittee report was presented by Minnesota NRCS State Biologist Jeff Kalin. Several updates to policies, practice standards, equipment, and forms proposed and developed.
 - Conservation Practice Standard (CPS) 338, Prescribed Burning, policy change: Job Approval Authority (JAA) maintenance and advancement requires participation in a burn after supervisory approval and supervised by a qualified entity with a certified Burn Boss.
 - CPSs 644-645 are being combined to reduce redundancy in wildlife CPS scenarios.
 - Updates and revisions are being made to Implementation Requirements, fact sheets, JAA reviews, and payments are increasing for Plug Planting within CPS 420.
 - Fire trailers are coming.
 - More information: Jeff Kalin, Jeffrey.kalin@usda.gov; [Presentation Slides](#)
- The Forestry Subcommittee report was presented by Minnesota NRCS State Forester Callie Bertsch. Resource concern and practice partnerships and resources were discussed.
 - Tree Planting: Climate Smart Seedling Production Network – The Nature Conservancy; MN Million – Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP); others.
 - Agroforestry: Silvopasture/Biochar – Great River Greening, Sustainable Farming Association; support from/for Savanna Institute.
 - Catastrophic forestry events (Blowdowns, Spruce budworm, Emerald ash borer): Expedite cost share to avoid waste and fire danger; increase field days to promote awareness.
 - More information: Callie Bertsch, callie.bertsch@usda.gov, [Presentation Slides](#)
- The Watershed Subcommittee report was presented by Water Quality Specialist Courtney Cheever. Subcommittee purpose, partner collaboration, and common activities were discussed.
 - More than 14 partners meet quarterly to brainstorm solutions to water quality issues, review National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) and Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI) projects, and make recommendations to the State Conservationist.
 - More participants are invited to attend, present, and to provide guest speaker and topic ideas.

- More information: Courtney Cheever, courtney.cheever@usda.gov, [Presentation Slides](#)
- The Easement Subcommittee report was presented by Easement Program Manager Kaitlyn Miller. The flexibility in choosing one's RCPP easement was discussed.
 - The process begins with the determination of program purpose and the goal of the easement.
 - Determine the level of restriction, high, moderate, or minimal.
 - Select the easement holder (entity or U.S.) and the corresponding right of U.S. enforcement for entity-held, and partner contributions for US-held easements.
 - The easement valuation must then be considered.
 - More information: Kaitlyn Miller, kaitlyn.miller@usda.gov, [Presentation Slides](#)
- The Grazing Subcommittee report was presented by Grazing Specialist Jeff Duchene. The general format of meetings was explained, including partner updates, upcoming events, guest speakers, and NRCS information and updates.
 - Grazing under solar fields might be beneficial, especially for beginning farmers.
 - Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) allocations for 12 grazing-related practices for FY 2023 totaled nearly \$5.5 million.
 - Interim Conservation Practice Standard 827, Strategic Harvested Forage Management, is primarily for winter grazing on harvested land. The planned feeding of livestock by controlling access to harvested forages arranged in a predetermined pattern on the landscape can add fertility to the land.
 - More information: Jeff Duchene, jeff.duchene@usda.gov, [Presentation slides](#)

NRCS Programs Report

- NRCS program updates were presented by Keith Kloubec. The discussion included Local Work groups, program funds and trends, and elicited audience input on conservation practices they would like to be part of the *Act Now* process.
 - Locally led conservation model is important to addressing resource concerns, ranking, and identifying priorities in local areas. Useful tools include the RCA Data Viewer and Inflation Reduction Act Visualization tool.
 - Act Now for EQIP is new for 2024. This process involves expediting applications for some or all (for historically underserved producers) conservation practices when a certain ranking threshold is met.
 - Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) highlights include upward funding trend, increases in payment schedules, earlier sign-up, and an increase in minimum annual payment amounts.
 - EQIP highlights include increase in funding trend, Act Now, increase in payment rates for most practices, targeting considerations, and an increase from 3 to 5 years of management activities.
 - RCPP highlights include a Notice of Funding Opportunity (deadline 7/2/2024), recommendations for assistance, and upcoming webinars.
 - More information: Keith Kloubec, keith.kloubec@usda.gov, [Presentation slides](#)

Ducks Unlimited Working Lands Team in Minnesota

- Grazing Biologist Mae Rose Petrehn presented the Working Lands Ag Program. The purpose of the program is to conserve, restore, and manage wetlands and associated habitats for the benefit North America's waterfowl, and by extension, other wildlife, and people. The work of the Grazing Specialist and team is toward that end.

- Work with state, Federal, and NGO partners to utilize programs, provide technical assistance, and develop grazing plans.
- The Living Lakes Initiative seeks to address resource concerns through strategies to improve soil health, restore wetlands, and protect conservation easements land.
- In the Prairie Pothole Region, the focus is on resource concerns that include the conversion of grasslands and pothole wetlands to ag crop production, and water quality. Rotational grazing, cover crops, Wetland Reserve Easements, and edge of field grass and wetland buffers are some of the conservation practices promoted to achieve this.
- Conservation practices such as Prescribed Grazing, Silvopasture, and Annual Forages are used to promote forage quality and diversity and improve habitat function.
- More information: Mae Rose Petrehn, mpetrehn@ducks.org, [Presentation slides](#)
- Working Lands Biologist Liam Bonk introduced the Climate-Smart Commodities Program and explained how this Partnership supports ag practices, and benefits wetlands, wildlife and farmers.
 - Any commodity crop or livestock producer in Minnesota can apply for the Advancing U.S. Pork Sustainability grant, which helps to boost revenues and to meet on-farm conservation objectives.
 - The process starts with the completion of a Pork Cares Farm Impact Report. This report quantifies and summarizes the effects of on-farm practices such as tillage and carbon sequestration.
 - More information: Liam Bonk, lbbonk@ducks.org, [Brochure](#)

National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS)

- Dan Lofthus presented statistics, scope, and trends from the 2022 Census of Agriculture. The Ag Census is taken every 5 years. He explained how a “farm” is defined for census purposes.
 - Since 2017, the number of farms has decreased by 4.8%; cover crop acres increased 31%; Average farm size (acres) has increased 4.6%; the numbers of women, Hispanic, and American Indian producers have all increased.
 - On average, farms are 388 acres and farmers are 35-44 years of age. Farms of 1000+ acres account for 10% of farms and 56% of total acreage.
 - To help determine conservation effects, NASS will conduct a survey for NRCS later this year. About 12,000 latitude/longitude points across the involved states will be surveyed.
 - More information: Dan Lofthus, dan.lofthus@usda.gov, [Presentation slides](#)

Green Lands Blue Water

- Meghan Filbert introduced the Virtual Fence (VF) concept. Originally developed in Norway, VF is currently being developed and tested in the U.S. and not available to the public. VF offers many potential benefits for conservation, but there are also challenges at the current state of the technology. Base stations, collars, and GPS are used to establish boundaries.
 - Benefits include controlling the grazing area from a cell phone, reduced need to build and maintain physical fence, no negative impact on animal welfare, identifying sick animals, use in difficult terrain, no harm to wildlife, preventing over-grazing, and support by some Prescribed Grazing (CPS 528) payment schedules.
 - Challenges include cell signal strength variations, some functionality limitations, collar maintenance (including battery replacement), protection from predators, and does not replace perimeter fencing in most cases.
 - More information: Meghan Filbert, meghan@nofence.no, [Presentation slides](#)

Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR)

- Tom Gile presented on a 3-phase soil health system that features a Soil Health Staffing Grant. The system seeks to advance the principles of soil health, which include keeping the soil covered, minimizing disturbance, and keeping living roots in the ground.
 - Phase 1 is people. Create additional local points of contact to work with landowners on increasing utilization of soil health practices and systems that promote soil health.
 - Phase 2 focuses on education and outreach. Expanding public-private partnerships across multiple sectors and activities and increasing mentorship, peer-to-peer learning support, and facilitate farmer-driven learning opportunities are part of this phase.
 - Phase 3 is leveraging federal funding through the NRCS RCPP. This \$25 million will be used for staffing, project start up, grant management & reporting.
 - More information: Tom Gile, tom.gile@state.mn.us, [Grant profile](#), [Program policy](#)

Partner Updates

There was informal general discussion on several issues, projects, and announcements.

- Jan Joannides from Renewing the Countryside announced Minnesota Women in Conservation. MNWiC will be a women-centered partner project helping women farmers and landowners become better land stewards in peer-to-peer settings and activities. Such a project exists in Wisconsin already. Learn more at WiWiC.org. Contact jan@rtcinfo.org for more information.

NRCS Minnesota Soil Health and Cover Crop Seeding Rates

- Stephanie McLain, Minnesota NRCS Soil Health Specialist, provided information and led a discussion on current cover crop research. Proposing cover crop seeding rates for NRCS Conservation Practices involves on-farm vs. plot studies, and professional discussions.
 - NRCS is working with farmers, several seed vendors, non-profits, and the Minnesota Office of Soil Health. Research includes seeding rates and impacts to erosion and nitrates, timing of planting, seed mixes, and rates for different tillage types.
 - The objective is to update the seeding calculator and developing guidance.
 - More information: Stephanie McLain, stephanie.mclain@usda.gov, [Presentation Slides](#)

FSA Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Update

- Angela Hanson, Chief Agricultural Program Specialist, presented updates on CRP. Current contracts and acreages, 2018 Farm Bill limits, and signup periods were discussed.
 - As of 4/16/2024, CRP enrolled contracts totaled 53,289 involving 963,092.63 acres.
 - For signup period 1/12/2024 – 3/15/2024, 1457 offers were accepted, consisting of 20,827 acres.
 - The 2018 Farm Bill caps CRP acres at 27 million. There are currently 24.7 million acres enrolled.
 - More information: Angela Hanson, angela.hanson@usda.gov, [Presentation slides](#)

BWSR Living Landscapes Initiative

- Jason Beckler and Dan Shaw gave a presentation featuring BWSR's Living Landscapes Initiative. Emphasis was given to the Habitat Enhancement Landscape Pilot Program (HELP). To reverse the trend of declining insect numbers and species, pollinators, and bird populations, the HELP program was added to BWSR's Living Landscape Initiative.
 - HELP is designed to support at-risk species with declining populations through a variety of project types (prairie, wetlands, shorelines to name a few) on eligible lands.
 - Funding is available through competitive grants to Watershed Districts, counties, SWCDs, and the like. Several eligible expenses are covered by this funding.

- In addition to HELP, BWSR's Living Landscapes Initiative combines [other programs](#) to support wildlife species, build corridors and increase resiliency. Among these programs are Lawns to Legumes, Habitat Friendly Solar, and Weed Management.
- More information: Jason Beckler, jason.beckler@state.mn.us, and Dan Shaw, dan.shaw@state.mn.us; [Presentation slides](#); [HELP Program Policy](#)

NRCS Partnerships & Operations Report

- The report on the NRCS Agreements and Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) was presented by Molly Mehl. There are 4 NOFOs for 2024. There are also other grant options available.
 - NOFOs include assistance to agricultural start-ups, temporary fencing, watering, and agroforestry.
 - Grants are between \$100,000 and \$1 million, no match required.
 - Input is invited to identify the gaps for next year's NOFOs.

Closing Comments

Minnesota State Conservationist, Troy Daniell gave some closing remarks to bring the meeting to a conclusion. He expressed his gratitude to meeting organizers, presenters, and attendees. He encouraged all to continue the great conservation work.