

## State Technical Committee Meeting Minutes – 6/12/24:

**Location:** Gainesville State Office, Zoom

- I. Welcome and opening remarks: Juan
  - a. IRA is a significant challenge
    - i. Big focus of our agency last 2 years
    - ii. Challenge has benefits
      1. Update, 7700 employees, now have 11,000 employees
      2. Expectations are to get up to 12000 employees
      3. We are running out of space in our offices
  - b. This is an open meeting, wants everyone to ask what they ask. Add any items you would like to bring up, please do so.
    - i. Always want to take advice on how to improve
    - ii. We rely on the public to work together to accomplish our main goal of conservation
  - c. RCPP
    - i. Going well, many good proposals coming in.
    - ii. July 2<sup>nd</sup> deadline will bring in a difficult choice to make

## II. Financial updates: Amber Till

- a. Big year for FA programs
  - i. Funding levels have increased
  - ii. Demand is going to outweigh supply and is greater than the funds available
  - iii. We spent all our funds \$67,593,600.00
  - iv. We anticipate more growth in numbers
  - v. What has changed? IRA funds
    1. We have added in CSP
    2. Added more than regular EQIP-29 million
- b. CSP changed FY 2024
  - i. Minimum annual payment for CSP increased to 4 thousand and is applicable to all renewal and classic CSP contracts obligated in fiscal year 24
  - ii. Historically Underserved annual payment rates for applicant that self certifies on the NRCS-CPA- 1200 form is a HU producer available starting 24
  - iii. Additional climate smart agriculture and forestry activities CSAF were made available to CSP funding through the Inflation Reduction Act.
- c. CSP Farm Bill:
  - i. CSP demand has waned in the past but is increasing again.
  - ii. Long leaf pine initiative
    1. Demand was low but we did almost fully spend allocated funds
    2. That money is solely set aside for LLP, can not do ag land etc. Must have stewardship enhancement for LLP
  - iii. Contracts
    1. Usually, 5 years but can be renewed as well
- d. CSP reduction act
  - i. We want to spend everything so we can always ask for more.
  - ii. Is there a limitation to renewal?

1. Not necessarily, payment programs are limited.
- e. CSP 3-year trend
  - i. Keeps increasing.
- f. EQIP Classic preapproval/obligation to date.
  - i. There are some ties attached to 18.4 million dollars.
    1. At the discretion of the State Conservationist to look at ranking pools.
  - ii. Field office pools direct allocated funds to a service center. Dedicated funds at the local level.
  - iii. We must allocate a certain percentage to livestock per policy.
  - iv. We set 5 million aside for hurricane response.
  - v. \*\*Note: if an applicant has applied to FSA financial assistance and NRCS financial assistance, they cannot do both as they are sister agency.
  - vi. We are required to target 5% to HU, but we could double dip HU with wildlife and livestock as long as we achieve that 5%.
  - vii. There are parameters we must follow to obligate funds.
    1. Discussion of this topic between attendees and Amber Till.
  - viii. Organic
    1. Demand is fairly low.
    2. National initiative with a cap in funding: targeted to certified producers, exempt,
    3. Transition initiative: for producers transitioning into organic farming.
      - a. A lot of funding is available here but is not in demand currently.
  - ix. there are limits:
    1. We are coming to the end of the farm bill, so we are getting more challenges.
  - x. We have to spread this funding across a lot of priorities within the state.
  - xi. We have top 10 practices (screen shot?)
- g. EQIP National Initiatives (screen shot)
  - i. Demand of this initiative is high.
    1. Long leaf pine
    2. Gopher Tortoise
    3. Northern Bobwhite
  - ii. Juan unsure if we will get more funding for the Gopher Tortoise because it is no longer listed in Florida. Might be in jeopardy but does not have a final say on this yet.
    1. Bobwhite funding probably won't diminish
    2. Numbers will most likely stay same for next year
  - iii. EQIP IRA (screen shot)
    1. ACT NOW EQIP IRA
      - a. The idea is the application can be acted on now instead of waiting to have all pieces fall into place with regular applications
        - i. Good questions and discussion regarding this topic with Attendees and Amber Till.
        - ii. Too move the process along quickly, Juan advises to complete FSA eligibility prior to applying.

- b. Somewhat of a first come first serve but similar
  - c. Small set of practices to be able to use to get this funding
  - d. If all ducks in a row, it can take up to 2 weeks to get funding, but only if everything is perfect. Up to a month to get funding
  - e.
2. Climate Smart Agriculture
- a. The idea is to address a Resource Concern.
  - b. Grazing and Pasture-**
    - i. Prescribed burning is applicable to mitigation categories?**
      - 1. Answer: Mitigation categories are not tied up to a specific land use. If that specific practice is applicable to all land uses per the standard, then even the list only says “grazing and pasture” that does not mean these mitigation/practices are only tied up to those two specific land uses. This will be for all eligible land uses for that practice.**

Mitigation Categories	Code	Conservation Practice Standard Name <sup>[2] [3]</sup> (practice unit)	Code	Conservation Enhancer
Grazing and Pasture	314	Brush Management (acres)* <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Used to remove woody invasive vegetation and the removed material will be mechanically treated and left onsite<sup>[4]</sup></li> </ul>	E314A	Brush mana
	315	Herbaceous Weed Treatment (acres)* <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Used to release desired deep rooted perennial species<sup>[4]</sup>.</li> </ul>	E315A	Herbaceous consistent v
	338	Prescribed Burning (acres)*	E338A	Strategically habitat*

- iv. EQIP 3-year Trend
  - 1. Also a continuous increasing trend.
- v. Sign up dates
  - 1. Looking for input on this. This is the typical batching cycle of applications
    - a. Applications is form 1200
  - 2. Application deadline November 1, 2024
  - 3. FSA farm records/ determinations: January 21, 2025
    - a. Not negotiable, must be done to become eligible for NRCS funding.
  - 4. NRCS completes the assessment/ ranking deadline (each state can establish own timeline)
    - a. CSP 3/7/25

- b. EQIP 4/11/25
  - 5. NRCS obligation deadline 6/30/25 (could be earlier than this date) if ready in April, we will obligate
- vi. Questions?
  - 1. Amber took questions and gave answers to as many as she could. Please see zoom meeting link for more information.

### III. Easements Updates:

- a. ACEP/ALE
  - i. Update 2024 projects
    - 1. 10 ALE applications with total federal share request of \$24,148,875.00
    - 2. 6 applications were selected for funding with \$9,515,375
      - a. We received additional funds for a big project of 7 million earlier and going to request extra funds for another 4 million
    - 3. Counties: Charlotte, Columbia, Gilchrist, Hardee, highlands, Levy, Okeechobee, Suwanee
    - 4. We partner with FDACS
  - ii. ACEP/ ALE Ranking
    - 1. Proposing changes to ranking
      - a. Wanting to remove grassland worksheet as it is cumbersome
      - b. Additional land evaluation and site assessment score to assess development pressure-
      - c. Seeking review and input from state tech committee
        - i. 30-day window to put in questions and responses.
  - iii. Florida WRCG document
    - 1. Each state is responsible for developing a state specific Wetland restoration criteria and guidelines document.
      - a. Establishes the general framework
        - i. Manual is very broad nationally
          - 1. Once to Florida we can further define our criteria and guidelines
  - iv. Easement management
    - 1. Perpetual easements that US holds deed.
      - a. Work with landowners to help manage the land with easements on them.
    - 2. Compatible use authorization (CUA) for and any limitations for those activities.
    - 3. There are guidelines on when these can be implemented. IT is making a working document so we can tweak to what the STAC is looking to have.
      - a. We can further define priorities,
  - v. Are CUA's being granted?
    - 1. Yes, the landowner can define what they would continue to do on the land.
    - 2. It a plan made with the landowner and NRCS
    - 3. Annual monitoring is done to keep up with the CUAs
    - 4. Grazing CUAs allowed?

- a. Yes, allowed in certain situations on a restoring acreage
    - b. How we manage the Grazing CUA is what the discussion needs to be.
    - c. Grazing plans are written to focus on not overgrazing on the native species
  - 5. Part of the Deed has economic gain on property, so these are negotiated before closing.
  - 6. Does the CUA only pertain to WRE
    - a. Yes
- b. ACEP-WRE
  - i. FY 23 IRA
    - 1. 17 WRE applications received
    - 2. 2 were acquired
      - a. \$2,738,113.04 million funded
    - 3. Acres: 456.15
  - ii. FY 23
    - 1. One easement acquired
      - a. \$11,674,547.43 funded
        - i. Based on acquisition, environmental study, closing costs, restoration, planning, etc. boundary,
      - b. 1621.6 acres
  - iii. FY 24
    - 1. 7 WRE applications
      - a. 2 easements acquired
        - i. \$9,835,980.12 funds
        - ii. 1644.38 acres
      - b. Funds don't go as far from previous years for total acres
      - c. Market value is making it difficult to acquire acres in easements.
  - iv. FY-25
    - 1. WRE had 2 sign ups
      - a. 10 applications
      - b. Ranking has begun
      - c. Allocation for the highest ranking will be funded in the first FY 25 quarter
    - 2. We are trying to get applications ranked early before the next FY. We do this so we can request more funds if needed.
    - 3. Florida is ahead of most other states
    - 4. Biggest thing is to seek additional funding before we are not able to.
  - v. ACEP budget
    - 1. FA remaining \$18,991,986.65
    - 2. TA remaining: \$2,796,466.67
  - vi. Staffing
    - 1. Looking to hire 2 Natural Resource Specialists in Okeechobee

2. Looking to hire 1 Easement Natural Resource Specialist in Gainesville State Office.

#### IV. Partnerships & Initiatives

##### a. Local Working Groups

###### i. What is a Local Working Group?

1. Composed of agricultural producers, owners/operators of nonindustrial private forest land, professionals representing agricultural and natural resource interests, and individuals representing a variety of disciplines in the soil, water, wetland, plant, forestry, and wildlife sciences who are familiar with agriculture and natural resource issues in the local community.

###### ii. Essentially, they provide feedback from communities.

##### b. Top 10 Priority list of Resource Concerns

###### i. Highlands Soil & Water Conservation District discussion with Susie Bishop, Executive Director and Kayla Nickerson presenting results to STAC meeting:

1. Federal level, connect to federal legislators to press the importance of SWCD and not dissolve them. If they go away, they will not be back.
2. Kayla Nickerson presented Results from Highland LWG April 16 meeting: the following are points from this meeting:

a. Lot more money coming in but less land to work on

b. Topic of limitations of the farm bill being extended

c. Projects they would like to do, NRCS may not be the best partner for these projects

d. Cross training for NRCS and FSA

###### i. Are we able to do this?

1. Juan: we all have our own versions of expertise so this may not be effective. We must rely on the expertise of each agency.

e. CRP maybe coming to Florida

###### i. If that is the case, please include specialty crops

1. Because land is so expensive, it is difficult to make CRP economical. Florida is not great for CRP due to the cost of the land.

###### ii. Grass land program is a better option

1. Limited by the threshold for 5% forest cover regulations.

f. Staffing needs,

i. Highlands county needs more staff

ii. Highlands SWCD has office space. NRCS is in their office.

iii. Proposed a contribution to get an Admin assistant for Carlos

1. Juan: offices should have at least 2 people in there.

2. Juan: selection for this office has been made

g. Plant Pest Pressure: number 1 resource concern

i. Need more widespread funding for this

ii. Pest is still a huge issue in the highland area

- iii. Groves are breeding grounds for pests as they become abandoned.
    - iv. Want to emphasize the need for funding for this resource concern.
  - h. Asking for payment scenario for clearing abandoned grove, planting cover, nutrient management,
    - i. Compatible with the Citrus Health Response **Program** (CHRP) (push groves and receive tax exemption) \*get clarification on this
  - i. Payment scenario for fencing to improve soil health
    - i. Perimeter fencing is the one we need to reevaluate
  - j. Forage and bypass planting
    - i. Requesting additional herbicidal treatment and discing and hoping to increase the funding for these.
      - 1. Not a Gainesville decision, it is a process to increase the funding. We must coordinate with 4 states to make any changes.
        - a. Discussion on getting receipts and evidence together for state office to consider and propose increase in funding
  - k. Need for more outreach to increase awareness of programs.
    - i. Would like to get updates on any changes made on programs as a result of State Technical meeting.
    - ii. When there are updates to programs it is the DC's job to give these updates.
    - iii. Is there a document to provide these updates?
      - 1. Once a month a meeting is held to update NRCS staff with updates on programs, DCs then give that information to their area.
    - iv. Juan: work with Hilary to see how we can give updates to these programs. It sometimes takes up to 2 years to execute the changes.
- c. RCPP updates presented by Denise Liggett
  - i. Currently have 6 active projects
    - 1. 5-year projects
    - 2. TT, NFLT 2019 awarded
    - 3. ACT 2020
    - 4. ACT 2022
    - 5. ACT/NFLT 2023
  - ii. Each of these projects have combination of LM and Easements
  - iii. RCPP Federal Funds
    - 1. \$52,010,500 FA
    - 2. \$45,822,000 Easements
    - 3. \$6,189,000 Land Management

- iv. Obligated funds
    - 1. FY 23
      - a. Land management: \$675,000
      - b. Easement: \$63,550
    - 2. FY 24
      - a. Land Management: \$1,265,731
      - b. Easements: \$5,026,236
  - v. Currently accepting applications (proposals)
    - 1. Expecting several proposals
    - 2. Proposals are due July 2, 2024.
  - vi. Questions:
    - 1. RCPP is heavy on Easements with additionality of Land Management practices
    - 2. We do have flexibilities in RCPP that we don't in other.
      - a. AGI Waiver is a big difference
      - b. Payment Rate (MUST BE REQUESTED)
    - 3. Across US there are CCA, can you still apply if outside the CCA?
      - a. Yes.
      - b. It does not affect funding
        - i. There are two pockets of funding
          - 1. CCA and multistate so this is who you compete against. Two separate pools
    - 4. Partner/Federal contributions discussion
    - 5. Each partnership is separate and unique. It depends on the goals of the partner on what they are on their project.
    - 6. Easements is match, project is Contribution
- d. CIG: Conservation Innovation Grants
  - i. CIG is a subset of EQIP
    - 1. ½ IRA, ½ non-IRA funding
    - 2. Been offered for the last 3 years
    - 3. If you have ideas outside of the box, this is a good opportunity to get your idea funded and on the ground.
    - 4. Does not require success. We are looking for what works and what does not work.
  - ii. 2025 NOF: coming soon!
    - 1. Priorities:
      - a. Urban agriculture
      - b. Water conservation
      - c. Soil health
      - d. Carbon sequestration
  - iii. Timeline:
    - 1. Deadline 9/30/24
    - 2. Animated Selection Date: December 2024
    - 3. Anticipated Agreements Developed with NRCS & Awardee: March 2025



- 4. Anticipated Start Date: June 2025
- iv. 1-3 years in duration for Grants
- v. Applicants contribute 1:1 match
  - 1. Tribal does not need match
- vi. Contact Hilary Barnhart, Assistant State Conservationist- Partnerships & Initiatives, for more information:
  - 1. [Hilary.Barnhart@usda.gov](mailto:Hilary.Barnhart@usda.gov)
  - 2. 850-633-7204
- vii. If you apply for National CIG, can you apply for state level as well?
  - 1. Yes, but the ranking will be different. (get clarification from Juan/Hilary)
- viii. We are allowed to take data from CIG data to create interim practice to a fully executed practice.

## V. Table Ecological Sciences Updates for this meeting

### VI. Questions:

- a. Questions from Zoom -Answers were given on an individual basis
  - i.
- b. AFA behaves as a grant.
  - i. Expected to be independent on delivery, NRCS is not as involved. Must be able to take project from start to finish independently.
    - 1. NRCS does have requirements, but the major portion of the project must be delivered independently.
    - 2. We have not gotten an AFA as it is difficult to execute.
    - 3. We will discuss with anyone interested in AFA.
- c. Archbold Letter presented by Juan Hernandez, State Conservationist
  - i. In line with comments with Highland SWCD
  - ii. Landowner outreach request
    - 1. What we can do is we can an RFP at state level for anyone willing to do outreach in certain counties. For outreach and educational purpose. Must have a legal standing as a real organization to be able to get the RFP (nonprofit, NGO, etc.)
    - 2. Wanting to add a component to RFP for FSA registration. (nothing finalized with this component)
  - iii. Easements
    - 1. Stewardship funds.
      - a. Money for easements comes from different pockets
      - b. Stewardship fund (3<sup>rd</sup> pocket) to maintain value of acreage
        - i. It is limited compared to other pockets
        - ii. We are looking at how to invest more funds into this portion of easements. We don't have all the plans set yet, but we have intention to do so.
      - c. With our quarter million easement acres, we do understand this is a need for more stewardship funds
    - 2. AGI is a congressional act.
  - iv. Payment cap

1. It is a congressional act. We do not have any control over this.
- d. Have we met and made storm plan for 2024?
    - i. We have a foundation of more or less how NRCS will respond to major weather events.
    - ii. We get as close as we can but have flexibility to pivot to the area hit by the major weather to address specific concerns.
    - iii. The main piece of the puzzle, FSA records. Encourage producers to get FSA documentation completed as storm preparation.
  - e. Ben Williams Question:
    - i. Question given to Hilary on Collared Cow demonstration project,
      1. NE Florida has interest in this project
      2. What about the possibility of demo project in civil culture land in FL?
      3. Good fit for CIG
      4. He can get producers willing to partner but has a difficult time getting the CIG paperwork completed.
        - a. Need to discuss what specifically needs to be done.
        - b. Need to explore viability of project.
- VII. Closing of Meeting with Juan Hernandez thanking attendees for their time and efforts.