2024 Local Working Group Meeting Minutes **December 12, 2024**

Held by: Waldo County (host) and Knox-Lincoln Soil & Water Conservation Districts

Location: Searsmont Town Office, 37 Main St S, Searsmont, ME 04973 (Waldo County)

The meeting of the **Waldo-Knox Local Working Group** was held in person and via Zoom on **December 12, 2024,** from 10:00am to noon. An informational session was held at 9am. Note: The original date was Tuesday, December 10; the change of date due to inclement weather and ongoing power outages in both Waldo and Knox most likely affected attendance.

Attendees-Total count of people attending = approximately 29 (see table at end of minutes)

Overview

Registrants received via email the meeting agenda, prior year meeting minutes and funding pool categories, percentages, and Local Ranking Questions. Peter Abello, NRCS District Conservationist, Belfast Field Office, explained the role of the Local Working Groups (LWG) in identifying resource concerns and making recommendations to the NRCS District Conservationist on how EQIP cost-share funds might be prioritized to address those concerns. Recommendations discussed at this meeting are for FY 2026.

Call to Order & Introductions

District Conservationist Peter Abello called the meeting to order at 10am and thanked attendees for their participation. He walked everyone present through the contents of red folders provided and explained the process for Local Working Groups. Introductions followed, with each person stating their name and organization/department/town of residence or land ownership, and the primary reason(s) for their attendance.

Peter reviewed the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), which addresses resource concerns in response to existing problems and other NRCS programs. He provided an overview of some other USDA conservation programs and other partners that may be used to address resource issues:

Agricultural Management Assistance Program –The objective of this program is to reduce the risk in agricultural production. Examples of how funds have been utilized in the past have been new irrigation systems and high tunnels.

Conservation Stewardship Program – This program rewards a high-level of stewardship while providing assistance to further enhance conservation efforts. This is the highest funded program and requires good record keeping and documentation from the landowner.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program – This program engages private conservation groups to address commonly shared resource issues. This program requires a 50% match or services in lieu of money. An example of a project is Aquatic Organism Passage, which addresses interrupted waterflow due to blockages, such as a high culvert.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - The objective of this program is to restore wetland function and value where human activities have altered wetlands and is also used to purchase floodplain easements. This program also protects high value farmland from development by helping to offset the cost of development rights as part of a conservation easement.

Peter noted that the BIG IDEA for this group was to decide what the natural resource priorities are for Knox

and Waldo counties. Approximately half of the funds received by the state are designated for state-wide initiatives and the other half is applied to the locally led programs. The Local Working Groups recommend the percentages of the distribution of these local funds. Peter had the participants count off by threes and broke the crowd into smaller groups to spend about twenty minutes discussing priorities. Each group then reported out their top three concerns to the entire group. Their comments are summarized below (in order of presentation):

<u>Group #3:</u>

WATER

- Farms need funding for more diverse management options
    - Too much/not enough due to climate change
        - Tile drainage
        - Tillage management
        - Cover crops
        - Irrigation

WILDLIFE

- Farms and Forests both experiencing increased risk and request funding for exclusionary fencing
    - Animal pressure in woodlands
        - Deer browse the best hardwood saplings
        - Tent caterpillars, webworms, browntail moths
    - Animal pressure on farms
        - Crop loss could be prevented or reduced
        - Why are there funding differences between California and Maine? (fencing cost-share)

HABITAT CREATION

- Diversity assistance and regeneration help
- Climate Smart forestry practices for brush management

<u>Group #2:</u>

PASTURE

- Grazing practices
        - Soil health
        - Nutrient management

FOREST HEALTH

- Invasive plant management
    - Forests of tomorrow are impacted by today's management practices (or lack thereof)
        - Degraded forests, ex. Ash and honeysuckle
        - Why is mechanical removal the only thing allowed now, when judicious chemical use could help contain the problem before it worsens?
    - Diversity of forests increases resilience

WATER MANAGEMENT

- Diversion, not concentration
- Slow it down, spread it out
- New roads, adequate water bars

Group #1:

SOIL HEALTH & FORESTRY HEALTH (tie)

- Funding limits management options
    - Catch-22: financial difficulties arise from just leaving things "as is", financial difficulties block prevention measures
        - Management of invasives and brush can be cost prohibitive, particularly for organic producers
        - Cover crops, no till and low till management practices
- Barriers: not just funding
        - Reporting – the reporting requirements are onerous
        - Communication – more effective outreach needed (short of knocking on doors)

Whole group first and final thoughts:

Someone suggested to include more incentives in CSP programs to keep forestry land the same, keep solar farms out.

Someone asked about funding options for exclusion fencing NRCS does not offer any, but APHIS has a program.

Someone asked about programs specifically targeting tent caterpillars, NRCS has a program for forest pests in general but not targeting a specific pest.

Regarding Invasives:

-one person wants NO funding for chemical management because of collateral impacts, wants MORE funding for mechanical removal

-one person commented that management protocols should aim to control the smaller areas that are still able to be helped, let the others go – must triage, everything can't be top priority

-one person reiterated the need for cost-sharing for mechanical help

Regarding Terms of Agreement between landowners and NRCS:

-one person is concerned about what is and what isn't allowed on his land after signing a contract he didn't fully read (reply: agreements are voluntary, following the contract project is expected, there are no long term restrictions but sometimes it is a long-term commitment, such as a fence's life expectancy of 20 years, and certain areas of the property may be excluded)

-one person is concerned about dairy farmers going out of business after money is spent on capital improvements and wonders what happens next

-one person wants to know whether consideration of the financial health and viability of the farm is part of the calculation of awarding funding

-one person commented "taxpayers are paying for this" and observed that there is competition between large, lucrative operations and small, start-up operations

Funding Allocations:

Resource Concern	2026	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021*	2020	2019
Agricultural Waste		60%	60%	68%	68%	53%		
Animal Waste	55%						53%	53%
Forestry	20%	12%	12%	10%	10%	15%	15%	15%

Cropland (incl. blueberry)	15%	22%	22%	20%	20%	30 %		
Cropland/Hayland							-	-
Blueberry							20%	17%
Pasture	10%	3%	3%	2%	2%	2%		
Pasture/Crop							12%	5%
Pasture							-	-
Small AU Producer		3%	3%				-	10%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: In spring 2020 EQIP programmatic rules changed limiting the number of Local Funding Pool Categories to the following: Agricultural Waste, Forestry, Cropland (includes Blueberry) and Pasture. Percentages were reassigned to fit into the four categories.

Meeting/Project Name	**Waldo and Knox-Lincoln Soil and Water Conservation Districts LOCAL WORKING GROUP MEETING**		
Date of Meeting	12/12/2024	Time	10:00 AM to 12:00 PM
Minutes prepared by: Cindy Wright and Cassidy Gerrish		Location: In-person and Zoom	
Attendance at Meeting			
Name	Department / Division	Name	Department/Division
Peter Abello	DC, NRCS Belfast Field Office	C.J. Walke	MOFGA, Orchard Program Manager, grows for Fedco, Swanville resident
Courtney Hawkins	Soil Conservationist, NRCS Belfast Field Office	Meg Mitchell	MOFGA, Climate Smart & Organic Transition Specialist, NRCS
Allyssa Gregory	Maine Forest Service, District Forester, woodlot owner and resident of Waldo County	Maddie Eberly (zoom)	MOFGA, Low-Impact Forestry Specialist, NRCS
Tim Pratt	Natural Resources Specialist, Belfast	Caleb Goossen	MOFGA, Organic Crop and Conservation Specialist
Shelby Stoll	Program Assistant, NRCS	Laura Cormier (zoom)	MOFGA, Orchard Assistant
Julie Sells	Knox-Lincoln SWCD Office Manager	Alex Wong	Maine DEP, Nonpoint Source Grants (319) Program, advocate for soil retention and erosion prevention
Mark Hedrich	Knox landowner; Knox-Lincoln SWCD Chair, Board of Supervisors, MDACF	Cary Nash	Certified organic wild blueberry producer in Knox County, Camden, and Lake St. George Road Commissioner
Cindy Wright	Knox-Lincoln SWCD Program Development Specialist	Tasha Brodeur	American Farmland Trust, NRCS partner

Cassidy Gerrish	Waldo County SWCD Administrative and Program Coordinator	Emily Mallory	Works for Northern Tilth, TSP, producer in Waldo County
Barrie Brusila	Mid-Maine Forestry, TSP, KLSWCD Associate Supervisor, Knox landowner	Ryo Murasaki	Planner in Augusta, can't make that meeting, here to observe LWG process
Maren Granstrom	Mid-Maine Forestry, sugar maple forestry	Jessica Leibowitz	USDA Farm Service Agency, Belfast, and Bangor
Gene Randall	Waldo SWCD Supervisor	Sy Schotz and daughter	Producer (forestry and pasture) in Northport
Cooper Funk (present and contributed additional comments, see addendum)	Farmer, Dooryard Farm, Knox County	Jim Colcord	Belfast forestry (20 years +)
Randy Place	Selectman, town of Morrill	Frank Altimore (absent but contributed comments in advance, see addendum)	Farmer, Tiny Brook Farm, Waldo County
David Marceau	Retired soil and wetland expert with Gartley & Dorsky Engineering & Surveying, Waldo landowner	Shana Hanon (absent but contributed comments afterwards, see addendum)	Producer (livestock and blueberries) Belfast
Rachel Olsen (zoom)	Associate Supervisor WCSWCD	Ron Howard (absent but contributed comments afterwards, see addendum)	Blueberry producer, Brodis Blueberries, Knox County

The meeting adjourned at 12:06 p.m.
Respectfully submitted:
Cindy Wright and Cassidy Gerrish
Knox & Waldo County SWCDs

ADDENDUM:
Comments from Frank Altimore (per email to C. Gerrish, 12/11/2024):
"Agricultural Waste Management programs have and should be the first priority of EQIP in Waldo County. The outcome I want to continue to prioritize this with as much funding as possible.
PFAS testing resources to test soil and farm inputs such as forage, compost, and fertilizer that are currently available to producers in Waldo County should be improved. The outcome I want is a fast locally conducted way to detect PFAS in forage, compost, and fertilizer so I don't unknowingly contaminate my farm.
In Waldo County, I have experienced increased wildlife pressure and losses in orchards and fields as wildlife and producers adapt to climate change. The outcome I want is to expand the Maine NRCS programs scope to include exclusion fencing. This will increase resiliency and reduce the risk of loss from wildlife damage."

Comments from Ron Howard (per email to Cassidy Gerrish and Peter Abello 12/14/24):
I would highly recommend that NRCS implement programming to support the application of sulfur to the

fields of wild blueberry growers. The intent is to lower the pH to levels in the 4.0-4.5 range. This practice is very much like the current NRCS practice of supporting the application of lime to crop land to adjust and raise soil pH to be more accommodating to the crops grown. Wild Blueberries grow best in the more acidic conditions but beyond that there are significant environmental benefits. The lower pH makes the soil less hospitable for weeds to grow within the wild blueberry fields. This will result in less herbicide use resulting in better conditions for native and introduced pollinators that are so important for everyone. The practice could be linked to and require soil testing to prove the need and quantity of sulfur to be applied. Ideal soil amendment with sulfur is typically over a series of years as opposed to one application and thus it would be most helpful if funding could cover applications for as much as 6-10 years, although annual approvals would be ok if that is not possible.
Copying Dr Lily Calderwood here as she may have a different take and/or be able to share language to better describe the benefits of sulfur for our wild blueberry growers.

Comments from Cooper Funk (per email to C. Wright, 12/16/2024):
"Regarding the LWG minutes, I want to make sure my plea for deer exclusion fencing and irrigation assistance as EQIP priorities makes it into the minutes. My previous farm (in CA) received funding for both of those things through EQIP, so there has to be a way. Both issues are huge hindrances on the viability of production agriculture in the area. Another concern that I would like in the minutes in the need for improved outreach for NRCS programs. Attendance at the LWG is certainly one issue and, despite the continued lack of representation, has gotten better in the last couple of years. The other really big need is regular (quarterly?) outreach regarding available NRCS programing, especially current and new program funding for EQIP, etc. For example, every year there is (potentially) updating/revisions of EQIP programs as a result of LWG or federal funding (IRA, etc.) but we (farmers) aren't really made aware of these changes. When new initiatives are launched (i.e., soil carbon, or, hopefully, deer fencing), we need to know!!"

Comments from Shana Hanson (mailed in response to Belfast office, 12/31/24):
"I am concerned to see 'invasives' = killing plants related to a much broader, more pressing, and more positive title of 'Forest Health.' In my woods and on my blueberry property, the 'invasives' have been participating in diverse plant/animal 'communities' without fulfilling their predicted negative impacts, for at least the ≈20 years I've been watching them here. Meanwhile, 'Forest Health' can be impacted positively by SO MANY tasks that are begging me to be done- tasks that are pro-active and do not kill any life:

- Pollarding acres of trees for storm resilience, soil root-turnover contributions, and growth stimulation
- Cord-u-roying the muddy paths and woods roads with dead fir trees, to slow soil loss and soil compaction
- Thinning- releasing strongest, straightest, most species- diverse selections of trees, rather than having so many small, struggling tops on tall thin trunks= inefficient forms for optimal growth
- Laying tops and trunks crossways on still shaded, moist enough slopes to create moisture retaining fungal duff
- Browsing lightly for stimulation of plant growth versus inhibition, with light annual fertility contributions; the literature says such proper browsing increases biodiversity
- Protecting/fencing areas for understory establishment and seeding shrubs (post animal impact created in winter yards where trees are pollarded= sunlight, and hay/manure compost has accumulated= soil change and planting opportunity)."