

# Notes for STAC Meeting in Jerome, ID on Dec. 9, 2015

## Welcome by NRCS State Conservationist Curtis Elke

- NRCS is changing format of these meetings a bit –less information “drop” and more discussion-making board
- He makes introductions

The importance of the subcommittees, then asks: “What does the STAC want them to be, do, etc.?”

- Elke noted that NRCS looks to the subcommittees for information, facts and recommendations so we can come to the state meeting and make good decisions that benefit the greatest number.
- Laid out expectations for the size of subcommittees (6-8) and their composition (one person serves on NO more than 2 subcommittees)

The question “What are the barriers to HEL compliance? Is raised so it can be discussed during the break out session.

The importance of Conservation Planning Strategy and work NRCS is doing to encourage high quality/stronger plans as well as some additional ideas, including:

- Funding Strategy – How do you want us to spend our money (cost benefit)  
Tell the Story – getting more outcomes reported

The Post-Fire EQIP application numbers are covered briefly

- 62 applications for post-fire relief/restoration

On Congressional issues:

- The Continuing Resolution situation.
- His meeting with Sens. Risch and Crapo while in D.C. He noted the “Senators voiced their strong support of our efforts.”

Turning to more general topics, Elke pointed out:

That NRCS and its partners must work together to raise awareness of agricultural conservation efforts among the 98% of Americans who are not part of the agricultural community.

That a Memorandum of Agreement among the group could be beneficial.

- It would improve general communication and provide a means by which to cover what resources are available and what everyone is doing.

## **Representative for Sen. Risch**

Senator was on KLIX talking about Continuing Resolution and what an Omnibus package is.

- Sen. Risch wants to get back to looking at each appropriation separately, there are about 12 each year
- If omnibus doesn't work, there will be new Continuing Resolution

Senator sits on Energy and Natural Resources Committee, Intelligence Committee and several others

**Q: How does the Senator's time portion out between the committees he sits on?**

A: It is a balancing act.

**Q: Better way to communicate with the Senator's office?**

A: Info provided to state offices, email, phone will get sent to Senator.

## **Conservation District Report**

Benjamin Kelly spoke on behalf of the Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts. He noted:

- The Conservation Districts have a great relationship with NRCS State Conservationist Curtis Elke
  - It's very encouraging
  - Curtis represents an interesting shift in how NRCS conducts business

Projects are moving forward even with reduced funding

Kelly noted that the IASCD is always looking for projects, and with 50 different districts, they are always looking for partners.

The IASCD's work in the autumn revolves around its annual conference in Boise.

- This year, BLM, FWS, IDL spoke, re: Sage Grouse Initiative and FWS ruling and plan.

The IASCD is working with the Clearwater Group on rehabilitation in post fire areas.

## **Soil and Water Conservation Commission Report**

Report was given by Norman Wright, President of the Idaho Conservation Commission

The Conservation summit was a success.

- Held with the idea of trying to find out who else was interested in conservation.
- Turns out everyone should be interested and people often are, but don't realize it
- Let's find out who those people are and visit with them, find out what we agree on – and then work on those

Together we can do a lot.

- The Commission has limited funds – there is no grant money, BUT, it has a lot of expertise
- We have some loan program money that can dovetail with EQIP at 2.75%

He noted that Curtis Elke has been great, and from the point of view of the Commission it appears NRCS may have turned a corner – in realizing that NRCS staff needs to get back in the field.

No questions were raised.

## **NRCS Financial Assistance Programs report**

Report given by Kris Berg – NRCS

The report covered each of the current Farm Bill programs as well as ideal work flow.

Questions Raised covered the following topic areas:

*WRP*

RE: Geographic Area rate caps

- **Q: Do you see the limited funding as an issue?**
- A: It doesn't have to be – there is some flexibility.
- **Point raised:** \$5,000 cap seems low in regards to recreational landowner.
- **Point raised:** There is a hurdle to acceptance by landowners -- Significant restrictions on compatible uses

*Post-Fire*

Discussion broke out, raising the following points:

- Livestock grazing to be considered during application process feed/forage balance
- Fish watersheds
- Fish and Game habitat considerations

*EQIP*

**Q: For the ranking, is there a minimum score a producer must receive to qualify for funding? Are poor projects being rewarded?**

A: There is no minimum score for funding. The highest ranked applications are funded until the money is used up.

**Q: How does NRCS determine its priority ratings?**

A: Local Work Group priorities, NRCS division input and participant contract performance history (within last 2 years) if applicable.

**Q: Isn't money allocated by division?**

A: Yes

**Q: What is the make-up of the local workgroups?**

A: A representative from NRCS, the local conservation district, partners and other interested agricultural and/or environmental groups.

**Q: Has DEQ ever been a participant in the local workgroups?**

A: Not at this time, but they can be invited.

## **NRCS Conservation Planning Strategy report**

Given by James Eller – NRCS

He explained the framework of conservation planning and shared statistics related to planning. He then went on to talk about the NRCS's consideration of a Strategic Plan format.

He shared the agency's objectives for Conservation Planning as well as NRCS's current Planning Process.

Provided information regarding the new Resource Stewardship Tool.

Questions Raised

**Q: If a dairymen walked into an NRCS office today, what would they be asking for?**

A: Right now, mostly information on nutrient management.

## **Highly Erodible Lands Compliance**

Elke noted it is an NRCS and personal goal to address the soil erosion more seriously and have the signs about blowing dust eventually GONE from eastern Idaho.

He said:

- We need to be proactive.
- We want to hear from you about your thoughts on how to deal with HEL issues
- This is an opportunity to get people in the door and get them to sign on to conservation

Questions Raised

**Question posed by Elke: What do people think of when they hear Highly Erodible Lands compliance?**

Answers:

- Another Federal regulation
- Too many people in DC involved

From the Group

**Q: Can we get a map of areas of concern for Highly Erodible Lands?**

A: That is something that we should be able to work on.

**Q: What does non-compliance lead to?**

A: Loss of crop insurance, ability to participate in USDA funding programs.

**Q: Can you be a multiple violator?**

A: No, You get one appeal – after that you are out until you are back in compliance.

FSA representative noted that they want to have a closer partnership with NRCS on this issue.

## **Breakout session recommendations**

## **Subcommittees**

- Meetings have been extremely infrequent
  - Structure
    - Each Needs a Chairman
    - Each Needs an NRCS rep
    - Each Needs to meet at least annually
      - Option of VTC/teleconferencing important
    - Look at make-up of agencies participating?
      - Are they needed or can they be covered in another way
        - Restricted resources
        - List of agencies (with contacts) related to and interested in these topics
  - Meeting frequency should be once a year
  - Core Issues to discuss year in and year out
  - Hot Topics
    - Needs and issues of community
    - Provide additional expertise
    - Recommendations for ways that USDA can improve
  - Are additional Subcommittees needed?
    - Compliance – or is this covered by soil health?

## **Funding Strategy and Special Projects**

- How to prioritize?
  - Who are the players? Those who show up at the local work group tend to drive the priorities
  - Look for areas where projects, concerns, state and regional initiatives overlap
  - Addressing multiple resource concerns

## **Local Workgroups**

- Challenging to get participation.
- Special projects or targeted funding could possibly improve situation, because people would be driven to work together to get funding on projects
  - For example in Owyhee, range cattle can be a priority, and enlist the aid of the Owyhee County Cattlemen's Assoc.

## **Compliance**

Need to get the word out:

- Workshops – Provide information on compliance

- News releases – specifically through conservation districts, showcasing producers who have come into compliance & how
- School visits – education and outreach
- Reaching out to new partners or partners we haven't focused on in awhile.

Wind Erosion Prediction System model is a barrier and is not well understood – the computer's prediction doesn't always match reality.

## **Conservation Planning Considerations**

Contract with tech service providers to provide certain review functions  
 Implement a pilot project to “test drive” it rather than statewide implementation  
 Look more at issues rather than holistic plans

## **Current Snow Conditions**

Given by Ron Abramovich – NRCS Hydrologist  
 He explained El Nino weather patterns and how they manifest in Idaho.

Abramovich covered current precipitation and current water needs for the state.

He noted the need for a water/hydrology sub-committee, which would advise on various topics, potentially including:

- SNO-TEL sites
- Soil Moisture monitoring
  - IDWR
  - USFS

“We're not a regulatory agency – we are providers of non-biased technical information.”

Questions raised

**Q: Can NRCS piggyback on state/federal legislation to fund projects?**

A: It would depend on the project and legislation.

## **Idaho Department of Environmental Quality**

Report given by Dave Pisarski  
 The report covered the following points:

- Water Quality Programs Administered by Dept. of Environmental Quality
- Partners
- Collaborations
- Next Steps
  - Staffing
  - NRCS/EPA/DEQ
  - Information sharing/coordination

- Central data base – could be housed at a research university

## **FSA Update**

Phoned in by FSA State Executive Director Mark Samson

The following topics were covered:

Sign up for FY2016 programs opened Monday, Dec. 7, 2015.

FSA Loan Programs

- Micro loans for youth and beginning farmers
- Loans for beginning farmers doubled between farm bills, micro loans tripled.

Responding to natural disaster

- Loans made under emergency conservation

He noted that FSA is dedicated to working closely with NRCS to make sure that compliance requirements are met and that producers are aware of programs.

Samson talked briefly about the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Conservation Reserve Program program.

He mentioned that the CREP to recharge the aquifers has not been successful at this time, as commodity prices remain high.

Samson discussed that the FSA is charged with promoting Rural Energy America Program, and that lots of loans are available in rural areas for energy efficiency and independence.

Questions received

RE: Livestock indemnity program

**Q: Were there any wolf or grizzly claims?**

A: We will get back to Idaho Fish & Game with the answer to this question.

## **Open Discussion**

During the open discussion/round table portion of the meeting, the following items were covered:

Recommended fewer agenda topics, so the group can delve more deeply into them.

There is a desire for a more detailed agenda.

The discussion came back around to subcommittees, asking whether they were a good idea or not. One unexpected suggestion was that the subcommittees be transformed and having them utilize more of a project team approach. Specifically, being activated only when there was a very specific task to be addressed.

There needs to be an information “well” that is easily navigable and contains relevant information to the STAC.

There should be an opportunity for additional non-governmental groups to report to the group.

Whether an interactive area map – to illustrate where projects are on the ground or planned – could be instituted and built.

- STAC members liked the ideas of the conversation dynamic – informal information sharing
- Information sharing on a specific project can raise privacy concerns – how would that be addressed
  - Suggested that project sharing be limited to type and a dot in the general area on the map.

The group noted that agencies are genuinely concerned about doing the right thing by the environment, however:

- Discussion needs to get down to the grassroots
- A few producers should be invited to these meetings, in the interest of breaking down old prejudices. A couple of producers were present at the meeting.

Information distribution from regional and state levels down to local level was discussed briefly, asking the questions:

- How do you get locals to see the big picture and how do you get the higher level people to see the local impacts?
- How do we get everyone on the same page?

Curtis Elke thanked everyone for their time and adjourned the meeting.

State Technical Advisory Committee Meeting ended.

Next meeting will be in Boise. The Farm Service Agency will chair the next meeting and will set its date.