



United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service
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MASSACHUSETTS STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

October 27, 2016

*Mass. Division of Fisheries & Wildlife Richard Cronin Building - Room 110
1 Rabbit Hill Road, Westborough MA
9:30 am – 12:00 noon*

Participants

- Christine Clarke, USDA-NRCS
- Tom Akin, USDA-NRCS
- Deron Davis, USDA-NRCS
- Vince Snyder, USDA-NRCS
- Diane Petit, USDA-NRCS
- Dan Wright, USDA-NRCS
- Heather Baylis, USDA-FSA
- Katie Campbell-Nelson, UMass.
- Peter Church, Mass. DCR
- Denny Diveley
- Cassandra Ferranzini, ITD Fellow, Uruguay
- Trish Garrigan, EPA
- Murshidul Hoque
- Kira Jacobs, EPA
- Gerard Kennedy, MDAR
- Marianne Piche, MassWildlife
- Mario Shimokaya, ITD Fellow, Peru
- Juan Jose Vazquez, ITD Fellow, Mexico
- Brian Wick, CCCGA

The meeting was called to order at 9:30 am by Christine Clarke, Massachusetts State Conservationist

Welcome & Opening Remarks – Christine Clarke, State Conservationist

- There were no corrections to the March 3, 2016 minutes.
- Chris Clarke asked if there were additions to the agenda. There were none.

Role and Responsibilities of the State Technical Committee – Christine Clarke, State Conservationist

- Chris Clarke reminded everyone about the roles and responsibilities of the State Technical Committee (STC); i.e., the STC is an advisory body and provides information to stakeholders and an opportunity for stakeholders to provide feedback to NRCS.
- The STC meeting framework allows for the formation of subgroups to provide more input from partners on a specific topics, such as forestry or land conservation) and to suggest better

utilization of NRCS funds. Marianne Piche and Bob O'Connor both expressed interest in participating in a land conservation subgroup.

- Gerard Kennedy asked if NRCS program funding locations can be impacted by the State Tech Committee. Chris Clarke said that there is an opportunity for the committee to review The State Resource Assessment (SRA) and provide feedback. In most states, conservation districts and local working groups provide feedback to NRCS on fund allocation and program sign-up. Massachusetts does not have a strong conservation district engagement, so the STC provides the forum. Dan Wright indicated that the committee can also help guide where funding is targeted through the ranking process.
- Bob O'Connor said that the conservation district grant announcement would be made shortly.

Drought response – Christine Clarke, State Conservationist

- Chris Clarke said that the Massachusetts congressional delegation is hearing from constituents about drought. Federal and state partners held a meeting attended by about 100 participants and hosted by the Northeast Regional Climate Center in Boston. The Northeast Drought & Climate Outlook Forum enhanced communication among those engaged in forecasting and mitigating drought impacts.
- Heather Baylis presented Farm Service Agency (FSA) drought assistance programs. She said that with the 2014 Farm Bill, there are no longer direct payments for disasters. It is hoped that many of the farmers impacted have crop insurance to cover losses. FSA made an Emergency Conservation Program allocation request earlier this month; however, funding has not yet been approved by Washington.
- Practices authorized will include tailwater recovery for orchards, deepening wells for livestock and orchards, and emergency livestock watering. The Livestock Forage Program has been triggered in all Massachusetts counties with the exception of Berkshire County. However, this covers only grazing livestock. The Emergency Livestock Assistance Program is also authorized for emergency watering of livestock and losses to honey bees due to drought.
- Brian Wick commented that cranberries were not included in ECP, which is a concern for growers.
- Katie Campbell-Nelson said that a UMass survey confirmed cranberry farmers were also affected.
- Tom Akin summarized NRCS efforts concerning the drought. A drought mitigation factsheet has been created for Massachusetts farmers and is on the NRCS web site. The information includes practices such as converting to drip irrigation to conserve moisture as well as soil health practices (no-till, cover crops, mulching). NRCS' soil health effort is focusing on increasing soil organic matter to increase water holding capacity.
- Katie Campbell Nelson cautioned that increasing soil organic matter is good, but this should not include continuous applications of compost that can cause losses of nutrients in runoff and negatively affect water quality.

- Gerard Kennedy asked for an update on the NRCS aerial cover crop seeding program offered through EQIP. Tom said that approximately 4000 acres of cover crops were seeded through the program.
- Chris Clarke said that there was much interest in the soil health message at the Northeast Drought & Climate Outlook Forum, particularly from municipal agencies. These agencies want more education on the soil health subject.

Congressman McGovern Summer 2016 farm tour – Christine Clarke, State Conservationist

- Chris Clarke discussed Congressman Jim McGovern’s summer visit to local farmers. The visits were well received; the drought and on-farm labor issues were the main concerns voiced by the farmers.
- Congressman McGovern sits on the House Ag Committee. Congresswoman Anne Kuster (NH) also sits on the House Agriculture Committee and has submitted legislation that eliminates SAM/DUNS requirements for USDA clients interested in accessing Farm Bill dollars.

Farm Bill programs FY2016; Updates for FY2017 – Dan Wright, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs

- Dan Wright gave a presentation on the FY2016 NRCS financial assistance programs. This was the first year that NRCS used a “rolling sign up” strategy with monthly batching of ranked applications.
- Trish Garrigan asked if the program data could be further broken down to break out issues such as how many buffers were installed to improve water quality. This might be done through a deeper analysis of the individual conservation practices that were contracted.
- Farmer feedback on the process of batching applications was generally positive. This allowed projects to get started quicker.
- Allocations for FY2017 will probably be similar to last year, with about \$4 million for EQIP. FY2016 easements included 18 ACEP-ALE applications. NRCS requested additional funds for a total of \$3.5 million that allowed funding of five easements.
- Marianne Piche asked about the focus on turtle conservation and if WRE is being used to conserve rare species. Dan said that these issues are considered in the ranking process.
- Bob O’Connor asked if there was overlap with the WRE areas of the state and the recently announced USFWS Great Thicket Reserve. David Sagan from USFWS and Marianne Piche said that the Great Thicket includes mostly New England Cottontail focal areas of southeastern MA.
- Trish Garrigan from EPA mentioned that the Taunton River Resiliency Project might benefit from WRE. There is a big need for an outreach effort for riparian buffers, wetland protection and soil health all of which improves wetland hydrology.

- Dan Wright also talked about increasing aquaculture participation in EQIP. Kira Jacobs and Trish Garrigan mentioned that EPA has funded the Southern New England Program (SNEP) which includes a shellfish component for improving water quality.
- Chris Clarke mentioned that these efforts could dovetail with NRCS Cape Cod Water Resources Restoration Project if funding is secured in 2017. SNEP and CCWRRP complement one another well. Trish and Kira offered that they could do a presentation of SNEP at a future STC.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) – Dan Wright, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs

- Dan Wright gave a brief introduction to the newly revised Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). This is the largest conservation program in the US. The program revisions allow greater flexibility to modify contracts and include a base payment of \$1500 per year for participating farmers.
- NRCS welcomes input from partners on state ranking questions. Partners suggested that NRCS send an email with examples of ranking questions that could be shared with STC members.
- Assistance from partners with CSP outreach would be appreciated.
- Marianne Piche asked if there could be geographic overlap between programs. Dan Wright said yes, but no “double dipping” between EQIP and CSP is allowed.
- Brian Wick asked if there could be a reconsideration to include in EQIP the replacement of irrigation pumps for cranberries. These are typically older inefficient diesel pumps that need to be upgraded/replaced. Dan Wright mentioned that these would only be allowed for areas that are in a non-attainment zone for air quality. The only non-attainment zone in Massachusetts is the Boston area.
- There was a discussion about the need for more forestry Technical Service Providers (TSP) and training. Tom Akin offered to provide training to foresters who might be interested. Events such as the Mohawk Trail RCPP Foresters for the Birds and Massachusetts Forestry Alliance meetings would be good opportunities to recruit new TSPs.
- Tom Akin summarized the State Tribal Environmental Advisory conference hosted by EPA Region 1 for federal agencies. There were excellent presentations on climate change from scientists around the country. Both the Mashpee Wampanoag and Aquinnah Wampanoag Tribes were recognized for their contributions to natural resource conservation. Both Tribes will receive assistance to participate in the USDA Northeast Regional Climate Hub.
- Tom Akin summarized a new five-year pollinator conservation project between NRCS and the Xerces Society. A Xerces pollinator conservationist will provide technical assistance to NRCS conservation planners and farmers in Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine.

Conservation Client Gateway – Christine Clarke, State Conservationist

- Chris Clarke gave a brief update on the Conservation Client Gateway. This is an NRCS-created on-line portal for farmers to carry out their NRCS business remotely; the intent is to save time for customers by enabling remote access to sign documents and request assistance.

Other business

- Kira Jacobs made a request for a future STC topic.
- Trish Garrigan asked if the STC could begin discussions on selecting a watershed for the FY2018 National Water Quality Initiative. Tom Akin said that he would set up a meeting between EPA and MA DEP officials for November 2017.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:00 pm.

Minutes compiled by Christine Clarke, October 28, 2016