



## Natural Resources Conservation Service State Technical Advisory Committee Meeting

Doyle Conner Agriculture Building, 1911 S.W. 34<sup>th</sup> Street Gainesville, Florida 32608  
Aug. 15, 2017, 10 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

### Agenda

10:00 – 10:10 a.m.	Welcome and Opening Remarks	Russell Morgan, NRCS State Conservationist
10:10 – 10:30 a.m.	Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)	Nina Bhattacharyya, NRCS Easement Specialist
10:30 – 10:50 a.m.	Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE)	Crenel Francis, NRCS Easement Programs Coordinator
10:50 – 11:10 a.m.	Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	Nathan Fikkert, NRCS Conservation Programs Specialist
11:10 -- 11:30 a.m.	Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	Georganne Wiltse, NRCS Conservation Programs Specialist
11:30 – 11:45 a.m.	Overview of Florida Forest Service (FFS) Private Lands Programs and Initiatives for Longleaf Pines Management	Anthony Grossman, FFS Conservation Programs Manager
11:45 – 12:00 a.m.	Landscape Scale Planning for Natural Resource Management to Private Landowners	Greg Marshall, FFS Region 2 CFA Coordinator
12:00 – 12:10 p.m.	Working with Small and Medium sized Livestock Producers	Dr. Samuel Scott, Ph.D., Director North-South Institute, Inc.
12:10 – 12:25 p.m.	Questions	
12:25 – 12:30 p.m.	Closing Remarks	Russell Morgan, NRCS State Conservationist

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# STATE TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

## Welcome and Opening Remarks – Russell Morgan, State Conservationist

- Welcomed all partners to the committee meeting.
- Explained the function of the STAC and that he wants to see the meeting as an interactive process.

## Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) – Nina Bhattacharyya, Easement Specialist

- Agricultural Land Easements
  - Discussed purpose and background of program including partner eligibility, NRCS financial contribution, land eligibility, and acquisition process.
  - ALE Status in Florida
    - 38 closed easements (30,300 ac., \$35 million NRCS investment)
    - 3 ALEs enrolled in 2017 (7,665 ac., \$9 million NRCS investment)
  - Presented 2018 ALE ranking criteria and requested STAC input
    - Question asked about the invasive species ranking criteria breakdown.
      - Answer: <2% invasive species cover received 30 points, 2%-10% received 5 points, and >10% received 0 points. Priority given to landowners who are actively managing their property.
    - Question was also asked if ALE landowners can apply to EQIP and CSP. Answer: yes, landowners can apply under EQIP, CSP or any other agency or organizational program to assist with management of property.
- Agricultural Land Easements Grasslands of Special Significance (ALE-GSS)
  - Explained the purpose of the component and NRCS financial contribution, and how it differs from general ALE
  - Presented ALE-GSS ranking criteria
    - Certain ranking criteria carry over from ALE (e.g. invasive species cover, implementation of conservation practices, etc.); additional ranking criteria prioritize native cover and protection of sensitive and declining habitat.
    - Question asked if longleaf pine (LLP) range was included in ALE-GSS
      - Nina answered that it is not prioritized under ALE-GSS, but rather under the Regional Conservation Partnership Program has a critical conservation area, specifically under Healthy Forest Reserve Program.
- Regional Conservation Partnership Program
  - Provided background on program, different funding pools, and adjustment of terms
  - Presented RCPP status (10 funded proposals from 2014-2017), >\$20 million invested

- 3 applicants to submit full proposals for 2018
- Presented RCPP State Resource Concerns/Priorities and requested feedback from STAC.

Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) - Crenel Francis, NRCS Easement Programs Coordinator

- Provided recap of WRP/WRE and explained priority to expand program, type of applications received, and focus on properties that do not cost as much to restore.
- Presented 2018 Ranking Criteria
  - 5 factors (hydrology, habitat, location, wildlife, economic considerations)
    - Hydrology makes up ½ of the total ranking points
- Discussed different easement options (permanent and 30 year)
- Presented the area wide market analysis (AWMA) which is based on the most recent sales activity over the past 18 months
  - AWMA includes two deliverables: deliverable 1 is fee simple interest associated with market sales, deliverable 2 is less-than-fee interest associated with remainder sales and establishes the geographic area rate cap (used to establish payment rates for CE).
  - Presented regions covered by AWMA (North Region: 21 counties, Central Region: 17 counties, South Region: 12 counties).
  - Discussed the changes in GARC seen this year, primarily pasture land prices have risen in the south.
  - Mentioned that the GARC does not include the panhandle since few applications are received in that region, but if NRCS does receive an application an appraisal can be completed.
- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) Special Enrollment Options
  - Wetland Reserve Enhancement Partnership: part of ACEP-WRE administered by NRCS in consultation with US Fish and Wildlife Service
    - Must meet same requirements as ACEP-WRE.
    - Partners are required to provide matching funds; can be cash or in-kind contribution
    - NRCS Chief allocates funding for specific regions.
    - Goal is to protect high priority wetlands
- Reservation of Grazing Rights Option
  - Separate enrollment from ACEP-WRE. Landowner may reserve grazing rights on lands subject to easement or 30-year easement.
  - Option is available for unique wetlands where grazing is appropriate way to manage vegetation.
  - The wetland reserve plan of operation (WRPO) is connected to the grazing plan which the landowner must follow/implement.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) – Nathan Fikkert, Conservation Program Specialist

- Fiscal year 2017 was first year of CSP applications and obligation after ‘reinvention’ of the program (changes covered in previous STAC meeting in November 2016)

- Provided background on ‘reinvention’ of CSP
  - Main points were to increase transparency, align CSP with other programs, increase producer awareness of impacts of current and future activities, connect enhancements to existing conservation practice standards, allow additional flexibilities in scheduling conservation activities, and facilitate benefit and performance tracking.
  - Improvements include web based evaluation tool, flexibility in scheduling activities, use planning criteria and evaluation tests to evaluate resource concerns.
- Explained purpose of CSP, application subaccounts (general ag land and non-industrial private forestland), eligibility (private land, 5-year contract, payment limit is \$200K)
- Emphasized that applicant must submit all land in their ag operation for the contract and is responsible for submitting maps of ag operation to NRCS at time of application.
- Reviewed ineligible payments and land.
- Explained CSP evaluation and ranking
  - Discussed conservation activity evaluation tool and application evaluation and ranking tool
- CSP Update: 46,035 ac. enrolled in general ag-land and forestland, 5,602 ac. enrolled in LLP initiative
- Lessons learned
  - NRCS staff and applicants should work together earlier in process and need to produce better maps to properly plan activities.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) - Georganne Wiltse, NRCS Conservation Programs Specialist

- Reviewed the purpose of EQIP and reminded STAC that applications for the program can be submitted at any time.
- 60% of EQIP funds are allocated to grazing (this is mandated)
- Explained batching dates, ranking, and impartiality of ranking process.
- Ranking includes national, state and local questions:
  - National: cannot be changed
  - State: same for all fund pools, address state issues
  - Local: locally led to address resource concerns
- Provided summary of EQIP funds obligated by land use and initiative
- Discussed LLP, Gopher Tortoise and Bob White Quail Initiative
  - LLP and Gopher Tortoise include practices such as prescribed fire
  - Bob White Quail focus on restoring early successional habitat
- Provided overview of EQIP subaccounts and obligations
  - On-farm energy initiative: producer is required to have energy audit completed
  - Reviewed CAPs, Everglades Initiative, Confined Livestock and Forestry obligations, socially disadvantaged farmers, beginning farmers, American Indian tribes, and beginning farmer veterans

- Gulf of Mexico initiative (GOMI) includes two watersheds: Middle Suwannee and Escambia Rivers
- Discussed Strikeforce which provides funding to rural communities in 20 states to target historically underserved producers in counties with persistent poverty
  - Provides opportunity for small, limited resource producers to get funded
  - Applicants are not required to compete with more financially-secure established farmers and ranchers to receive assistance.

Overview of Florida Forest Service (FFS) Private Lands Programs and Initiatives for Longleaf Pines Management - Anthony Grossman, FFS Conservation Programs Manager

- Discussed Private Lands Outreach Initiative
  - Funded under USFS LaSR grant
  - Encourage landowners to better manage forest
  - Previously funded on a first come, first serve basis; now they are looking at bigger landowners and fund based on threat to water quality, T&E species, etc.
  - Reviewed forest stewardship priority areas
  - Why private lands:
    - Make up 75% of Florida forests
    - Less expensive
    - Ecosystem services for all
    - Biodiversity hotspots mostly on private land in FL.
  - Priorities for conservation attention: Apalachicola, GOMI, Sandhill, Lake Wales
  - Look at reforestation as indication of forest management
    - Reforestation is well below the amount of industry harvest
    - With regard to specific species, reforestation by group is fairly stable (including LLP)
- NFWF LLP summary provided
  - 3 NFWF grants received
  - Majority of work was for reforestation: 1.5 million LLP seedlings planted over 1900 ac.
  - Included other practices: prescribed fire, invasive species control
- Southern Pine Beetle Prevention Program
  - Incentive payments for landowners who implement preventative forest practices
  - 2005-2015 >160K ac. treated
- LLP Ecosystem Assessment
  - Assess what is out there
  - Look at natural areas where LLP is occurring
  - FL is the state with the largest acreage of LLP.

Landscape Scale Planning for Natural Resource Management to Private Landowners - Greg Marshall, FFS Region 2 CFA Coordinator

- Discussed how to engage family woodland owners (dominant owner of forestland in FL)

- Writing individual plans for landowners is time intensive and does not appear to change behavior
- Focus resources elsewhere; discussed what does work:
  - Build trusting relationship
  - 1-on-1 engagement
  - Nontraditional and innovative strategies
  - Focus on critical geographies and issues
- Landscape Plan: explained why to complete landscape plan: credible/endorsed, reduce barrier to participation, cost and time effective
- Discussed FL project goals and how it works
  - Make contact, walk the land, assess resources and what landowner can do, program enrollment, monitoring/follow-up
  - Landscape plan is the plan
- Current status of landscape plan
  - Plan development by Southern Forestry Consultants, support team, stakeholders
  - Technical guidance development
  - Training FFS
- Concerns for landscape plan:
  - No written plan in hand
  - Impact to ag exemption
- Pros:
  - Foresters do not have to develop individual plans
  - LOs like face to face meetings before making decisions
- Work to be done:
  - Streamline plan for individual landowner and printing
  - Work on getting ag classification under property appraisers
  - Mapping option
- Pilot project happening in Panhandle

Working with Small and Medium sized Livestock Producers - Dr. Samuel Scott, Ph.D., Director  
North-South Institute, Inc.

- Framework for NRCS to continue assisting small and medium-sized livestock and crop producers
  - Discussed the expansion of new farm ownership and operations in FL
  - Reviewed the Transition to Specialty Food Enterprises (SEP)
    - Goal is to generate same returns on 1 ac. of specialty crops as it takes 11-16 ac. traditional crops (e.g. corn, soybeans)
    - FL SEP transition: challenges with tomatoes, citrus, strawberry
    - SEP limitations: labor intensive, lack on-farm infrastructure, irrigation, perimeter fencing, land control
- Scenario solutions

- Perimeter fencing for SMPs attempting to manage risks through enterprise diversification
- Renewable resource micro-irrigation for crops and pasture
- Resultant approach (recommendations)
  - Use production trends to add 500-1000 ac. specialty food enterprises
  - Perimeter fencing: \$8 million to cover 250 producers
  - Micro-irrigation: \$12 million
  - Upcoming Farm Bill:
    - Recommend innovation fund for small and medium-sized family farms and ranches for FL- \$20 million for perimeter and renewable micro-irrigation

Closing Remarks - Russell Morgan, State Conservationist

Mr. Morgan invited the partners present at the meeting, when the opportunity is availed, to provide input as to what they want to see in the next Farm Bill.

Meeting adjourned 12:30pm