

State Technical Committee Meeting Minutes

August 30, 2017
USDA Conference Room
100 Sun Avenue N.E, Suite 629
9:00 a.m.

Welcome from Xavier Montoya, State Conservationist

Welcome to the new building. 100 Sun Avenue is a nice place, nice building, but they are strict. Partners are welcome to use the USDA conference room here. If the meeting is less than 2 hours visitors can park in the visitor parking lot in front. Otherwise NRCS will have to provide parking passes.

Many good things were said yesterday at the 2018 Farm Bill listening session about the work that NRCS is doing. The State Technical Committee (STC) also gives input and direction on the 2018 Farm Bill. NRCS can't do this good work alone. Right now New Mexico NRCS is understaffed by 40 people. The goal is to have 166 employees with most of them in the field. We would like to have 126 in the field but are now short 34 people. We have been able to hire a person for Mora, Clovis and Deming. We really need a State Engineer, State Conservationist Secretary and District Conservationist for team 5. We will be able to hire 3 more vacant positions and will have 3 students who will graduate and can fill open positions that they qualify for. That is 6 positions for the year when we are short by 40.

The goal of Xavier with EQIP funds is to provide 75% of the funding to address local resource concerns. 25% is used to address state level priorities.

Kristin Graham Chavez, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs

The STC meetings will be held more regularly. There is a sign in sheet and we are also collecting business cards so we can keep a better list of members. Information on the STC meetings will be posted at the NM webpage. Please let us know of other individuals we need to be at the meetings so they can be added to the list of STC members.

See attached power point: State Technical Committee and its role, purpose, member make up, responsibilities and special committees.

The local work groups are subcommittees of the State Technical Committee. Please attend the local LWG meetings. The map of Conservation Districts and when the LWG meetings will be held is posted at the NM NRCS webpage:

Partners have an effect at the local level. Contact the local Conservation District office or District Conservationist about the Local Working Group meetings if you have questions or concerns.

NM Bulletin 440-17-05 Local Working Group Guidance: LWG are to provide input on ranking criteria, screening criteria, tiebreakers and practice cost caps.

Deadlines: EQIP deadline will be December 22, 2017, Easements will be January 19 for pre-proposals. NRCS will work with applicants to have all applications requirements completed by March.

EQIP fund codes: The program fund accounts are like separate checking accounts. From 2010-2014 there were 40-52 fund accounts for EQIP. Then the fund accounts went to individual field offices and in 2015 had 118 fund accounts and 140 in 2016. For 2017 the EQIP fund accounts are now at the team level and so there are about 80. This makes it much easier to manage. For a field offices there were fewer contracts than in the past but overall field offices have similar contract workload as in the past.

RCPP: 2018

New portal new way to submit applications. NM had 3 applicants and 2 were asked to submit full proposals by September 7, 2017.

In 2017 there were 5 proposals and we should have agreements signed soon.

2016 had 2 agreements and we are working with partners to complete these.

Kenneth Branch, Resource Conservationist

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

The team allocations resulted in 94 fund accounts since there were some last minute funds from national and so created more fund accounts. We are trying to streamline the process for more efficient utilization and management for participants and our staff.

In 2017 the ranking deadline for national initiatives was held first to use the national money on applications before the local money. The District Conservationists had the discretion to move applications that are not funded in one fund account to another and have a chance at being funded in another fund account that it qualifies for. All DC's choose to do this.

New Mexico received \$16.9 Million for EQIP in 2017. 5% is required to be spent on wildlife projects, 5% on Beginning Farmers and Ranchers and 5% on Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers.

The application deadline is in December this year and the ranking deadline will probably be 4 months later to give NRCS time to work with the applicant and determine what is needed in the contract.

We need input from STC on:

Animal Feeding Operations: Locations, resource concerns and practices needed.

Acequias: allows acequias that do not have associations registered with the state to qualify for the acequia initiative.

Emergency Watershed Program

We recently completed the Dog Head Fire EWP.

There are no funds available now. NRCS can do damage survey reports, but with Hurricane Harvey and other disasters in the US we may continue to have no funds to provide to partners.

Athena Cholas, Resource Conservationist

Conservation Stewardship Program

The CSP Reinvention has been a big change this year. Because of these changes there has been concern by producers in enrolling in the program. New Mexico received 113 applications and only 25 are moving to contracts because so many producers cancelled their applications. As with EQIP at least 5% of the funds need to go to Beginning Farmers and 5% to Socially Disadvantaged Farmers. In 2017 23% of the applicants are Beginning Farmers/Ranchers and 24% are Socially Disadvantaged Farmers Ranchers. CSP does not pay more for Limited Resource Farmers. Only 3.5% of applicants are limited resource farmers. 2% are veteran farmer Rancher which means they are also Beginning Farmer Rancher. Even though we don't have to meet a certain percentage for limited resource and veterans we still keep an eye on it to see if there is need for more outreach and communication.

As with EQIP every dollar spent has to be tied to a natural resource concern. We have to be able to justify why each dollar was needed for a project. With CSP planners need to work with the participants to identify and quantify the natural resource concerns. The requirement for CSP is that 2 resource concerns have to be met at the time of application and one more met or exceeded by the end of the contract

We developed technical resources. One is a state supplement on the cover crop mixes to address different resource concerns. Another is a flow chart to help producers determine when and how many fecal samples to collect to monitor animal health. Other technical resources are being developed.

Slide on Future Technical Resources. A big emphasis with new CSP on rangeland is the requirement for contract participants to follow a grazing plan. NRCS Range Specialists have been working on minimum requirements for the grazing plans.

As with EQIP we have to identify priorities and develop ranking questions. The higher the ranking score the higher the priority for funding. The national priorities for CSP that we have been given are soil health and habitat for wildlife. By wildlife is meant species that are threatened, endangered or species of concern. For New Mexico species of concern means species on the State Wildlife Action Plan. State can also designate a priority geographic area, priority airshed or priority watershed. NRCS can assign more

than one priority area. The challenge with having many priorities is that the funding is watered down.

In 2017 all the applications competed against each other based on land use. For Rangeland priority was given to projects that benefitted grassland birds. On Cropland priority was given to the percent of land where no-till or cover crops would be implemented and for pollinator habitat. On Forest land there were several priorities. NRCS did not receive any applications for forest land in 2017. NRCS is expecting that next year staff will be better prepared to explain the reinvention and more confident about the changes and so we are expecting a higher number of contracts next year.

STC comments:

Q. If NRCS could share information about applications at the county level and the resource concerns being applied for then the STC could provide more input on what outreach is needed to get more applicants and contracts.

A. Will work on communicating those issues.

Q. Technical contractors are being approached by CSP applicants to help them with monitoring. It would be helpful for NRCS to provide instructions and guidelines on monitoring requirements for grazed land. Some monitoring methods are very time consuming and others can be done quickly.

A. We are working on guidance and hope to have that out soon.

Q. To address the issue of not having forest applications NRCS could contract nursery associations.

A. NRCS has not done this and thinks the reason for lack of applications is that the payment on forest land is 50 cents per acre and the activities to select from may require a lot of work from the participant. NRCS can invite partners to learn more about CSP so that the partners can promote it to the landowners they are working with. Partners would be willing to attend meetings or do a training so that they can explain the program.

Agricultural Conservation Easements Program

NRCS easement program has two parts, the Agricultural Land Easement program and Wetland Reserve Easement Program. Under WRE funding is available to nonprofits and government agencies under the Wetland Reserve Enhancement Partnership (WREP). Under WREP partners can do outreach to enroll landowners in WRE and the money from NRCS goes to landowners for easement purchases. Funds from NRCS can also go to the partners for technical assistance to assist with the restoration of wetlands. For example, in Missouri NRCS provides funds to the State Department of Wildlife and the State employees prepare the wetland restoration plans.

To be a grassland of special significance there has to be little to no invasive species, predominantly grasslands and can have shrubs and forbs. For ALE the STC can

designate areas that aren't dominated by grasslands as "grasslands of special significance" if there is a need to protect the habitat from development. Wind development projects are threats to grasslands.

For WRE the land has to have had the hydrology degraded by human activity, been used for agricultural and the hydrology can be significantly restored. The payment is capped at \$5,000 per acre. The STC can recommend that this cap be increased for instance where the market value is high due to the water rights associated with the land. The ratio is 1:1 for wetland to nonwetland, but in some situations NRCS can enroll more nonwetland acres than wetland acres when the nonwetland acres provide a benefit to the wetland or it makes it easier to manage the easement.

STC input will help prioritize specific locations, specific threats of development, or specific issues to address. For instance in some places easements are purchased in urban centers to provide farmland that is providing local food in the urban area. Any priority could be connecting wildlife refuge areas and state parks or reducing flood risk by breaking levees to flood easements when needed.

STC Comments:

Q. Need to inform staff and landowners at the local level about NRCS easement program. A lot of people go to NMLC and are not aware of the opportunity with NRCS.
A. We will work on a training for all employees in the state.

Steve Kadas, State Resource Conservationist

Conservation Reserve Program

FSA has provided a handout on the CRP program in New Mexico.

Not much has changed with CRP. There is the grassland option along with the regular CRP.

Partner Reports

STC comment:

- Q. For LPCI territory there needs to be an option on the payment schedule for NRCS to assist with removing skeletons of dead brush.
A. It is available with the practice Woody Residue Treatment.
NRCS needs to do a better job of letting NRCS staff know to contract it with Brush Management when needed.
- Q. The team funding has not been well received by some Districts. It does not make sense to have one ranch become an oasis and another blow away. In Fort Sumner there are some resource concerns that don't exist like an impaired stream and so they don't compete with other parts of the Team

A. Landowners and the Districts need to be familiar with resource concerns like soil health, pollinator habitat and soil erosion. Many times these are not addressed in the contract even though they could be addressed on the land.