

Kentucky State Technical Committee
December 18, 2018
NRCS State Office Conference Room, Lexington, Kentucky

Welcome and Introductions

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Acting Kentucky State Conservationist Tim Hafner called the meeting to order at 9:30 a.m. and introduced himself as acting state conservationist. He said that this meeting had been put off in hopes of having a farm bill to discuss, but that it had not yet passed. He asked everyone to introduce themselves and who they represent. The group introduced themselves and who they represented. An attendees list may be found at the end of these notes.

NRCS Leadership Personnel Changes

He then informed the group that a new state conservationist would be reporting to Kentucky on January 20, 2019. Greg Stone, currently an assistant state conservationist for field operations in West Virginia was selected to follow former State Conservationist Karen Woodrich who is now the state conservationist in Kansas. He said the next state technical committee meeting will be after Mr. Stone's arrival. Following Mr. Stone's introduction, Tim said that in his normal role, he is the Kentucky state resource conservationist. He assumed this position in May 2018. He then asked the new Kentucky leadership team members to introduce themselves.

The others that introduced themselves were new State Conservation Engineer Keith Reed who assumed the role in August 2018, and new Assistant State Conservationist for Partnerships Sonya Keith who started in November 2018. Detailed bios of Mr. Stone, Tim, Keith and Sonya may be found in the attached PowerPoint presentation.

The Farm Service Agency also has a new employee who was introduced to the group. Angella Watson is the new Conservation Programs person for FSA.

Tim then introduced two of his new staff members: Jennifer Walser joins the Ecological Sciences staff as the state business tools coordinator. In this role, she will be responsible for the field office technical guide, ecological support tools, technical service providers (TSPs) and other tasks. Jennifer comes to Kentucky from California NRCS. Also joining Tim's staff is Christina Pappas as the new state archeologist (replacing retired Bill Sharp who retired last year.) Chris is from New York and has been in Kentucky for 16 years. Before accepting the NRCS position, she was at UK as the assistant state archeologist.

ACEP-WRE Geographic Area Rate Cap

After all the introductions were made, Tim turned the floor over to Allen Arthur, easement acquisition specialist for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Wetland Reserve Easement (ACEP-WRE). He discussed the ACEP-WRE Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC). He said that as in prior years, Kentucky will use area-wide market analysis and appraisal values to establish easement offers in the state. He provided a map (see attached PowerPoint) showing the draft FY 2019 GARC values. He also asked for comments and input for establishing the GARC for FY 2020.

Fiscal Year 2018 NRCS Program Updates & FY 2019 Changes

ACEP-WRE and WRP

Next on the agenda was Reed Cripps, assistant state conservationist for easements. Dr. Cripps discussed fiscal year 2018 ACEP-WRE and Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) activity. He said that Kentucky enrolled 21 ACEP-WRE easements for 2,770 acres which was the second largest number of WRE

easements enrolled in the country. Additionally, 12 WRP/WRE easements were closed on 2,565 acres representing a federal investment of \$8,353,351. Restoration occurred on 1,882 acres on 12 WRP easements. Reed gave credit to his staff – Allen Arthur and Doug Hines at the state office, and Donna Gilland and Ray Toor in the field. He said that there is a lot of paperwork involved in enrolling, closing, and restoring these easements.

Dan Figert, Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, asked a question about if the new Farm Bill was going to allow public hunting on easement land if the landowner takes more than 89 percent of the value. Reed responded that he could not find this in the Farm Bill. If it is, NRCS will receive and follow national guidance. He said that the GARC is set at 95 percent, so that would be a six percent loss. There is a long list of applicants trying to get into the program. Allen Arthur added that it is required in policy to reduce the value, and 95 percent was previously determined by the state technical committee.

There being no more discussion on ACEP-WRE, Reed then discussed the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) projects that were approved in Kentucky during fiscal year 2018. He said that Kentucky enrolled five RCPP projects (second largest in the country), which includes a project with the Knox County Conservation District (grazing); Kentucky State University (wildlife and pollinator work); a \$10 million Carbon Sequestration project with The Nature Conservancy utilizing Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP); a \$10 million Precision Agriculture project with Security Seed and Chemical (private industry); and a project with Pine Mountain Settlement School (a non-governmental organization in rural Harlan County) to provide seasonal high tunnel implementation and training to the small farms in an eight-county region of Appalachian Kentucky. Kentucky is also part of an upland game bird habitat project for which Tennessee will be the lead state.

Reed said that the new Farm Bill includes an expansion for RCPP and he wouldn't be surprised to see a spring application period for RCPP. Sonya Keith, in her new role, will now be the point of contact for new RCPP proposals.

He then provided a ACEP-WRE ranking update (see two handouts – one for fiscal year 2019 and one for fiscal year 2020.) He said that there is a change (from previous years) on page 5. The NRCS national office wanted a better definition of prior converted (PC) wetlands and this has been tweaked. See page 5, section IV, item 1.

On the fiscal year 2020 ranking, page 3, item I. 1. (Local Significance – Special Interest Areas) – there are several in the state. Please see the map entitled “Special Interest Areas Map”. We want to continue to build on the TNC Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Project (WREP) in western Kentucky. Jackson Purchase area applications inside identified WREP areas will receive 15 points and all other offers within the Jackson Purchase will receive 5 points.

Another area of interest is the expiring Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) contract acres by providing applications within the CREP boundary additional ranking points. Reed asked what do we want to do with this? Do we want to use the original or a smaller version of CREP boundary? Reed putting together a group of interested persons. Interested in changing the ratio of eligible to non eligible land (“other” land). 1:1 ratio can be waived. Interested in waiving it for karst land. Do we want to enroll other sinkhole land? Or use it as a ranking characteristic? Or other? If interested in joining that group, let Reed know. A comment was made by Henry Duncan. He said that CREP was kind of sold to the public as being about the karst area that affected Mammoth Cave. Reed responded that he is asking partners to help make the decision on how to move forward.

EQIP, CSP, ACEP-ALE & FRPP

There being no more questions or comments, Tim next turned the floor over to Assistant State Conservationist for Programs Deena Wheby. Deena updated the group regarding fiscal year 2018 Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), and RCPP implementation, as well as ACEP – Agricultural Lands Easements (ALE) easement activities. Details of the following discussion may be found in her PowerPoint presentation entitled, “Financial Assistance Programs Updates”. She cautioned the group that the numbers she presented were not official agency numbers; they were just for this presentation. If anyone needs official numbers for publication, please contact Deena.

She said that fiscal year 2018 was again another record year for EQIP obligations. Including RCPP-EQIP, almost 900 contracts were entered for nearly \$20 million, and protecting almost 75,000 acres. She presented maps to show where EQIP obligations occurred. She also said that the state had almost 600 high priority applications representing nearly \$11 million as an unfunded backlog, and although there were available funds at the national level, the Kentucky NRCS staff was stretched too thin to take on additional funding last year. She said partner assistance is vital to NRCS Kentucky being able to receive and obligate more funds each year. She said for the first time ever in Kentucky, cover crops were the number one dollar contracted practice, followed by fence, and pipeline and livestock tank systems. High tunnels were again a popular practice with 132 high tunnel systems being contracted for almost \$1.3 million (\$1.6 million including companion practices such as roof runoff, water storage tanks, and microirrigation.) She provided information regarding number of contracts and dollars obligated in various fund accounts. A highlight of the fund account information was that a large number of beginning farmers (those who have not farm for ten consecutive years) received EQIP financial assistance. Kentucky beginning farmers received 250 contracts for over \$6.1 million in fiscal year 2018.

During the RCPP implementation discussion, she asked several of the partners present to briefly discuss their on-going projects. Those included Mark Walden of Grow Appalachia, Paulette Akers from Division of Conservation, and Pam Snyder from Kentucky Division of Forestry.

She presented several slides showing CSP obligations, noting that the eastern part of the state received a larger than usual number last year, and that the RCPP project, Precision Conservation Management (led by the Illinois Corn Growers), was successful in getting 9 CSP contracts last year. She said that while this didn't seem like a large number, the contracted acres represented 25 percent of the state's total fiscal year 2018 acres, and they're in an area where NRCS staff has not been able to get a lot of large CSP contracts. She said that she attributes this to the field person employed by the partner. She said he is able to focus on this one project and do one-on-one visits and follow-up.

She said that in addition to ACEP-WRE as discussed by Reed, that there is also a component of ACEP called “ALE” or “Agricultural Land Easements.” Through this component, NRCS works with eligible entities to help them acquire conservation easements that protect prime and important farmland from development. She said in fiscal year 2018, 12 easements were closed protecting over 1,000 acres (\$1.2 million in federal funds.) Additionally, five new parcels were enrolled which will be closed later. These five parcels represent 235 acres and \$571,000 of federal funding. Federal funds are (at least) matched in this program with entity funding. She mentioned that in the last (2014) Farm Bill, the ACEP-ALE program replaced the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) which had earlier replaced the Farmland Protection Program (FPP). She said Kentucky has been a player in acquiring these easements since the programs started in 1996. To date, Kentucky has helped six entities acquire more than 220 conservation easements in 19 counties on over 35,000 acres. The federal investment in these

easements is nearly \$33 million, with a combined value (federal, entity, landowner) of more than \$72.5 million. These lands are protected for ag use in perpetuity.

She also discussed fiscal year 2019 changes and said once the Farm Bill was signed that if there were any changes in Programs, that there might be another state technical committee called to get input from the group (or “subcommittees”). She said that there were no significant changes for fiscal year 2019 (subject to change when the new Farm Bill is passed.) States were allowed to have an “early start” for certain EQIP subaccounts and that application cutoff date was November 2, 2018. Almost 600 applications were received and so far, 250 applications have been preapproved. More recently, states were allowed to move forward with the remainder of EQIP and an application cut-off date of January 18, 2019, has been identified. She reminded the group that applications may be submitted at any time, but cut-off dates are identified in order to evaluate and rank applications taken up to that point. She said that NRCS is currently making payments for current/active CSP contracts, however there is no national CSP sign-up date identified at this time. The House and Senate versions of the Farm Bill differ for CSP; one combines it with EQIP and the other has it remaining as a stand-alone program.

Reed Cripps added a few comments about on-going edge-of-field monitoring activities. Edge-of-field monitoring is paid for through EQIP in an effort to help show and compare improvements of different conservation practices. University of Kentucky is the lead partner for this effort. One EQIP edge-of-field contract was added in fiscal year 2018; two were entered in fiscal year 2017.

Again, Deena reminded the group that the numbers in her presentation should not be published as “official” NRCS numbers, and if such numbers were needed, to contact her. Next, she introduced Matt Hutchison, resource conservationist on her staff, to discuss ACEP-ALE ranking criteria.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP – ALE) Ranking Criteria

Matt discussed the ACEP-ALE ranking process. He provided a copy of the NRCS policy regarding ACEP-ALE ranking process (Title 440, Conservation Program Manual, Part 528, Subpart E, 528.41, “ACEP-ALE Ranking Process”) and a copy of the draft fiscal year 2019 ranking questions to all attendees (copy included with these notes). He covered national, state and local questions, explaining the importance of several, and how they came to be. He advised the state technical committee that their advice was important to the process of developing ranking questions, and that their input was welcomed.

A question was asked how many Kentucky counties have ag zoning. Matt responded that he was unsure, but the primary counties we deal with do have some form of agricultural zoning (Fayette County has Agricultural and Rural Corridor Overlay Zones, and Christian County has a Comprehensive Plan for Community Development.)

He said NRCS hasn’t specifically discussed ACEP-ALE ranking questions with the state technical committee for several years, since the questions have not changed. He asked the attendees to review the policy manual excerpt and the draft ranking questions and provide feedback at their convenience. Matt may be reached at matt.hutchison@ky.usda.gov

Forest Stewardship Committee Update and Forest Action Plan Revisions

Steve Kull, Kentucky Division of Forestry (KDF) Assistant Director, gave a Forest Stewardship Committee update and discussed Forest Action Plan revisions. Please see his PowerPoint entitled, “State Forest Stewardship Coordinating Committee” for details.

Steve highlighted fiscal year 2018 activities which included assisting more than 2,700 landowners and completing more than 400 Forest Stewardship/Forest Management plans on more than 56,000 acres. He said that KDF had assisted with a number of practice plans for federal programs including EQIP, CSP, CREP, WRP and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) that addressed both forest stand improvement as well as wildlife habitat.

Additionally, education and awareness programs had been delivered to more than 5,600 landowners in 2018. He said that KDF partnered with University of Kentucky to conduct three woodland short courses in the summer of 2018. They also inspect forests that are certified by the American Tree Farm System. There are approximately 800 certified forests in Kentucky, but we could have more. These are forests that are operating in a sustainable way. He identified Chis Lagermann (Red Lick Ranch, LLC) as the 2018 Outstanding Forest Steward of the Year.

Steve informed the group that KDF is in the process of reorganizing. They are going from five regional offices to six branches. In 2013, KDF combined two offices in Eastern Kentucky, but that area was too big. They will be re-opening an office in Pineville. There will be the same staff and services available as before.

Next Steve discussed the Forest Action Plan which is available online at <http://forestry.ky.gov/LandownerServices/Pages/ForestlandAssessment.aspx>

He said the 2008 Farm Bill required states to develop a statewide assessment of forest resources. This included identifying the top issues regarding forestlands, which was done through stakeholder groups and other sources. The top five issues identified were forest health, water quality/quantity, forest loss and fragmentation, forest management, and funding. The assessment also identified priority areas which were discussed previously with the state technical committee and other groups. Forest Legacy Areas were also identified as those most critical to protect from conversion to non-forest uses. Maps of the priority and legacy areas are found in the assessment as well as in Steve's PowerPoint.

Steve said that an update was required to be completed in the summer of 2020, however, the new Farm Bill might not include this. Nevertheless, KDF is working now on this update and want to include input from interested parties. The actual working document will be used to direct KDF and their activities. KDF is currently doing internal audit of the document, then will be seeking participation from stakeholders for input. One key change will be a refocus of the priority areas. Current priority areas cover about 80 percent of Kentucky forests, and there is not enough money to address all priority areas. The areas need to be more focused. KDF will still work in other areas, but need to be more focused for federal funding use.

In summary, currently, updates are due in 2020. Look for emails; your input is needed. To see the Action Plan, go to the webpage identified above. Contact Steve Kull if you have any questions regarding it or the process. His email address is steve.kull@ky.gov

He asked if there were any questions. Dan Olsen, USDA – Forest Service Forest Supervisor, Daniel Boone National Forest, mentioned that there was talk about combining wildlife and forest action plans. Steve responded that in Kentucky, there is no plans to combine the two. While KDF must take the wildlife action plan into consideration, there is no mandate to combine them at this time. Dan Figert, Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife resources mentioned that the plans are required by different laws and have different timelines. He agreed that they will consider each other plans, but don't see them combined. For some states, they are more reasonable to be combined.

Someone asked about a white oak initiative. Pam Snyder, KDF Forest Stewardship Branch Manager, said NRCS has been informed of the initiative. KDF has just gotten a Memorandum of Agreement with UK in place. They will be looking for demo sites. The initiative has gone from 7 states to 17 states. This initiative will be similar to the Long Leaf Pine Initiative. The next steps will be to hire a project coordinator with UK, write a conservation plan for the initiative, and identify possible cost share programs that could be included. Steve added that while white oak is currently of good supply, saplings and seedlings aren't there for regeneration. The Kentucky Distillers Association has recognized this (they use white oak for their barrels). They realize that the future supply might not be there and this is an opportunity to include a different stakeholder group. A lot of states and stakeholders have come together to support landowners. He believes it will be a budget line item and hopes that USDA (NRCS/FSA) gets funding to implement. Pam added that right now there is \$2 – 3 million for the initiative and UK has a geneticist who is looking how to raise the best nursery stock for regeneration.

NRCS Field Office Technical Guide and New Conservation Practice Documents – Document Management System

Tim Hafner, in his role as state resource conservationist, discussed the NRCS Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) and new Conservation Practice Documents – Document Management System.

He said that NRCS field offices guided by the FOTG. Section 4, which is the design and implementation information (including practice standards) section, is being updated. NRCS is implementing a new “Conservation Practice Documents – Document Management System” (CPPDMS) that automates the authoring of national and state conservation practice standards and other associated documents. A national contractor is moving everything over to the new data base and there may be issues getting to it. It will be linked to other NRCS tools (Toolkit, etc.) and will be a better repository for information. It will contain national information, Kentucky's standards and other information, as well as archived information.

Job authority approval is now being required for employees and partners. Ecological sciences practices will be added to the existing engineering practices list. While employees have always had a job approval authority, partners will also need to have it now. This is needed for checkout and approval of all practices.

Comments/Announcements from Group

Tim asked if there were any announcements from the group. Brooke Gentile, Executive Director of the Organic Association of Kentucky, announced that the 8th annual Organic Association of Kentucky Conference, “*Healthy Soils, Healthy Farms: Reshaping Kentucky with Organics*”, will be held March 1-2, 2019, at the Clarion Hotel North in Lexington. For registration and more information, visit www.oak-ky.org

There being no more announcements or business, the meeting was adjourned at 11:30 a.m.

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Attendees
State Technical Committee Meeting
December 18, 2018
NRCS State Office, 771 Corporate Drive, Lexington, Kentucky

Name	Organization
Joe Cain	Kentucky Farm Bureau
Meredith Scales	Kentucky Dairy Development Council
Angella Watson	USDA - Farm Service Agency
Mark Walden	Grow Appalachia
Sadie Middleton	Governor's Office of Ag Policy
Ben Koostra	Consultant/TSP
Dan Figert	Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources
Dian Osbourne	The Nature Conservancy
Paulette Akers	Kentucky Division of Conservation
Brooke Gentile	Organic Association of Kentucky
Pam Snyder	Kentucky Division of Forestry
Steve Kull	Kentucky Division of Forestry
Harold Duckworth	TASK, Inc.
Wesley Jorette	TASK, Inc.
Brent Harrel	US Fish and Wildlife Service
Crystal Renfro	Kentucky Association of Conservation Districts
Henry Duncan	Kentucky Woodland Owners Association
Jack Stickney	Kentucky Rural Water Association
Doug Wilson	TASK, Inc.
Dan Olsen	USDA - Forest Service
Maury Cox	Kentucky Dairy Development Council
Brad Lee	University of Kentucky
Tim Hafner	USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service
Deena Wheby	USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service
Reed Cripps	USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service
Matt Hutchison	USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service
Allen Arthur	USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service
Keith Reed	USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service
Sonya Keith	USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service
Jennifer Walser	USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service
Chris Pappas	USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service