



United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service
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MASSACHUSETTS STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

December 6, 2018

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

Participants

- Christine Clarke, USDA/NRCS
- Tom Akin, USDA/NRCS
- Deron Davis, USDA/NRCS
- Vince Snyder, USDA/NRCS
- Dan Wright, USDA-NRCS
- Jessy Gill, World Farmers
- Kim Lutz, Nature Conservancy
- Ben Clark, Clarkdale Fruit Farms
- Kira Jacobs, EPA
- Gerard Kennedy, MDAR
- David Viale, MDAR
- Jane Obaggy, MACD
- Marianne Piché, MassWildlife
- Rebekah Zimmerer, MassWildlife
- Patrick Conlin, MassWildlife
- John Scanlon, MassWildlife
- Lyndon Nichols, USDA/Rural Development
- Peter Church, MDCR
- Lindsay Nystrom, MDCR
- Alex Hackman, MA DFG DER
- Brian Wick, CCCGA
- Tom Cairns, USDA/FSA

The meeting was called to order at 9:00 am by Christine Clarke, Massachusetts State Conservationist

Welcome & Opening Remarks – Christine Clarke NRCS/USDA

- There were no corrections to the October 3, 2017 minutes.

Role and Responsibilities of the State Technical Committee – Christine Clarke, NRCS/USDA

- 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 regarding program ranking, implementation and future needs.

- The STC meeting framework allows for the formation of subgroups to provide more input from partners on specific topics, such as forestry or land conservation and to suggest utilization of NRCS funds.

The STC gives NRCS, other USDA agencies and partners the opportunity to explore common needs and possible areas of collaboration for the best of the agriculture community. STC can help with

- Defining common geographical areas to work in
- Identify natural resources needs
- Recommend new standards or practices
- Inform state and national policies that would benefit MA producers
- Conduct public outreach to enhance participation in programs

Public outreach is very important for NRCS staff using methods like this:

- Local working groups organized through the conservation districts
- Jane Obaggy (here) represents the Massachusetts Assoc. of Conservation Districts (MACD).
- Conservation Districts continue to be vital to NRCS nationally, and in MA, we and the state agencies work closely with them on many fronts including outreach.

USDA Staffing, Administrative Reorganization – Christine Clarke NRCS/USDA

- NRCS has a new Chief, Matt Lohr. He is from Virginia and is a farmer and former head of the Virginia Dept. of Agriculture. Chief Lohr has a long and distinguished career in agriculture including working the family farm.
- Secretary Perdue continues to focus USDA field staff on providing the best possible customer service we can. He believes strongly in supporting the customer-facing employee who is key to the success of USDA and NRCS.

Farm Bill – Christine Clarke, NRCS/USDA

- We are hopeful we will have a new Farm Bill by the end of the calendar year.

Engineering Programs – Deron Davis, NRCS/USDA

Watershed Rehabilitation / Dam Safety

The criteria for safety and performance has changed over time. Several factors led to these changes including access to more complete rainfall data. NRCS contracted with engineering companies from 2010-2016 to complete dam assessments on NRCS funded dams in the state. No dams are failing, but approximately 50% of dams constructed by NRCS don't meet current NRCS or State Dam Safety standards. Most need to pass or store more water. NRCS is currently funding the rehabilitation planning and design for five (5) dams in the Sudbury-Assabet-Concord Rivers (SuAsCo) watershed. NRCS is working w/ consultants who are developing the updated plans and designs. As part of the rehabilitation planning NRCS asks 3 questions:

- Is the dam still needed?
- What are the different alternatives?
- What is the best design to meet the needs?

The George Nichols Dam was recently rehabilitated for \$1.8 million to install an additional spillway to pass more water during high flow events. NRCS received \$14.5 million for the current dam rehabilitation

projects. \$3.1 million has already been spent on current dam rehabilitation projects. We work closely with the state to maintain capacity.

Sponsors: Projects are brought to the state's or NRCS's attention via sponsors, who are local people who request that local dams be inspected / upgraded.

- Jane O. (MACD): Are state agencies working with NRCS on these dams? Is there an opportunity for municipalities to link rehab work with climate change grants from EOEEA?
- Peter C. (DCR): Our Secretary of Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) is working on climate change.
- Marianne P. (MassWildlife): Dams aren't good for wildlife. Are fish biologists consulted or engaged during rehab efforts? Are fish passage standards usually included?
- Deron: Usually dams are at upper ends of watersheds. We'll look into it and get back to you. Some rehab projects are just for fish and wildlife.
- Kim L. (TNC): If dam owner wants a dam removed, is that possible?
- Deron: At least two alternatives are considered, one of which always includes removal of the dam.
- Marianne P.: Doesn't EQIP fund dam removal?
- Tom A. (NRCS): We have done that in the past.
- Dan W. (NRCS): If the landowner eligibility works, it could be done.

Watershed Operations

PL-566, passed in 1965, is the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act that allows NRCS to work with local Sponsors to fund, plan and implement watershed projects, most often flood control dams. The Cape Cod Water Resources Restoration Project (CCWRRP) was authorized in 2009 as a PL-83-566 watershed project. Typical goals:

- Altering stream crossing to increase tidal flushing (salt marsh restoration)
- Repair or upgrade of fish passages to restore fish runs (esp. herring)
- Treating first flush of storm water runoff to improve water quality in shellfishing areas

Approximately 20 projects were completed with ARRA in 2010-2013. The plan was developed in 2009 but is still valid to be able to install new projects. MA NRCS has received approximately \$11.5 million in FY17 and FY18 funding to complete 14 projects and begin to update the CCWRRP Plan. (Showed 3 slides of photos: one of a fish ladder, one of infiltration unit that keeps storm water from going directly to shellfish beds, and the other of a salt marsh restoration.)

- Jane O.: What future funding possibilities are available?
- Christine C. (NRCS): If there's a partner groundswell, we can pursue money if we have local support. It takes patience and diligence, but can be done eventually if partners want. The purposes of conservation districts and meetings like this is to facilitate these discussions.

Possible subgroup #1: Form a subgroup that will focus on watershed restoration

- Deron D.: The local advocates have to be really passionate about the project.
- Jessie G. (World Farmers): Is NRCS prohibited from speaking to state agencies?
- Christine C.: I think you may be talking about a situation that involved state land, so we can talk about that case afterward.

Farm Bill Programs – Dan Wright, NRCS/USDA

Last year (in fiscal year 2018), the largest percentage of NRCS funding went to forest land. We also spent more money on buffers and on soil health.

- Gerard K.: What about livestock?

- Dan W.: It depends on the practices.
- Tom A.: Most of the funding involving livestock is going into manure management, and many dairy farms have also received financial assistance through the soil health fund pool.
- Dan explained that many Conservation Activity Plans (CAPS) were also funded; these provide landowners with recommendations to implement conservation practices that are also eligible for financial assistance.
- Tom A.: Landowners need to have a MA DCR-approved Forest Management Plan or an NRCS-funded CAP to apply for financial assistance to implement forestry conservation practices.

Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE)

Maximum value of \$13,600 per acre for cranberry bogs in Plymouth & Bristol Counties, \$11,050/ac in Norfolk County, \$13,365/ac in WLFW Focal Area 2, \$1,755/ac in WLFW Focal Area 1. All other areas of the State will order USPAP appraisal and receive 90% of FMV not to exceed \$5,000/ac. Generated new Geographic Area Rate Caps (GARCs) in FY 2018, which average land value for a specific area. A GARC allows for quick assessment of property easement valuation without an appraisal, instead of property by property appraisals, which take a long time and cost a lot of money. Statewide vs. cranberry areas: in 2019, cranberry areas will be funded at the above referenced GARC values.

- David V. (MDAR): So there are other areas that have GARCs?
- Dan W.: Yes.

Ranking changes (handout provided):

- Extra ranking points for salt marsh sparrow were removed (no applications or feedback on it)
- Ranking consideration was added for BioMap 2 areas (Marianne P.)
- 3 new questions were added to award points for cold water fish habitat, larger tracts that benefit wildlife habitat, and number of habitat features included in the restoration plans

Agricultural Lands Easement (ALE) and ACEP

Ranking changes: more ranking points were awarded for larger parcels, contiguous parcels, newly-funded people, and efficiency of easement closings.

- Gerard K.: What's the role of the State Tech Committee for input on ALE ranking?
- Dan W.: Form a subgroup, advise the State Conservationist, help develop statewide ranking criteria.
- Chris C.: Gerard, you can form a subgroup and have interested STC members meet together.

Possible subgroup #2: Form a subgroup that will focus on ALE ranking. (Gerard K. and Brian W. expressed an interest in forming this subgroup.)

Regional Conservation Partnerships Program (RCPP)

Projects target specific issues and can include multiple states. It's partner-driven. Discussions must be started early, before going to the national level for evaluation.

- Alex H. (MA DFG DER): How much funding is available, and what is the timing?
- Dan W.: We'll have to wait until the Farm Bill is completed (February or March is best estimate of when program rules will be released).
- Kira J. (EPA): RCPP projects around the subject of drinking water protection would be welcome to EPA, which has \$3.2 million that can be used for this. I'd love to talk to anyone about that. Right now there are 3 projects involving drinking water (incl. Providence Water, Merrimack Watershed, and the Long Island Sound).

State Forest Action Plan – Peter Church and Lindsay Nystrom, MA Department of Conservation & Recreation

Director of Forester Stewardship, and the main state forester. The State Forest Action Plan (SFAP) was mandated in the 2002 Farm Bill, to be completed for the U.S. Forest Service and be updated every 20 years. Its purpose is to:

- Conserve and manage working forest land
- Protect forests from threats
- Enhance public benefits

NRCS and UMass developed this structure, patterned after a Montreal working group. Massachusetts has 3 million acres of forest land (60% of state). One result from SFAP has been a “Greening Gateway Cities” program, where 10-12 cities planted 20,000 trees. In 2020, revisions will include hurricanes and 2 other focus areas.

Lindsay: I direct the Forest Legacy Program and am also leading the FAP Working Team. We want input.

- They’re conducting outreach, survey, meetings, requests for changes
- People use the SFAP for grant proposals
- The next SFAP will be simpler, with some interactive maps

Peter: SFAP is similar to the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP), and we coordinate with Dept. of Fish and Wildlife. We have one more round of stakeholder meetings.

- Chris C.: The U.S. Forest Service will give more weight to grants, etc. if a state plan was done.
- Kira J.: Some initiatives I know about:
 - Urban tree planting has been a huge success in Lawrence, MA.
 - Working with Karl Honkonen (U.S. Forest Service) to increase forested areas to 70%.
 - Wildlands to Woodlands Initiative seeks to increase agricultural by 7%.
 - An RCPP meeting in September in Harvard Forest was held re: landscape restoration project.

Programs and Staffing Updates – Gerard Kennedy, MDAR

MDAR has a new Assistant Commissioner, Ashley Randle. And Dave Viale, here, is the new director of the APR program.

Dave V.: I worked in New Hampshire for a land trust, using the ALE and FRPP programs. New to state government. The APR program recently completed a state audit, as well as held listening sessions for farmers and other landowners. 920 farms are now in APR. 350 are co-held with federal partners.

Gerard K.: State legislation was passed so protected land transfers more easily to farmers who will retain the agricultural value.

Climate resiliency: received \$500,000 in FY18, and \$1 million in FY19.

- Complements NRCS’s focus on soil health and no-till farming, as well as food safety
- A new composting program will fund ag. composters’ equipment
- Funded 31 no-till projects
- Looking for good data to see if no-till results are improving the land

Food Ventures and Mass. Food Trust Program (\$500,000): funded a new slaughterhouse in Westport. Intended to secure adequate food supply for the future.

- Jessy G.: We received infrastructure from Food Ventures twice (but it doesn't pay for staff time):
 - Refrigerated van, trailer and cooler
 - Creating a commercial kitchen in Lancaster
- Marianne P.: Are agroforestry and silviculture part of MDAR and DCR efforts?
- MDAR & DCR reps: not very much
- Dan W.: NRCS in New Hampshire did do some agroforestry, so it's possible and could be funded through Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG).
- Dave V.: Could APR start protecting prime farmland soils that are under forest cover?
- Dan W.: that could be done via RCPP / ALE programs via the State Tech Committee in Massachusetts.
- Chris C.: State Conservationists in New England work together and don't compete with each other.
- Kira J.: Susan Stein directs the USDA National Agroforestry Center for the U.S. Forest Service and is very helpful. She helps develop research and outreach efforts about "Forests on the Edge" [informs planning of large-scale land use efforts by national, regional and local agencies and organizations].

Possible subgroup #3: Form a subgroup that will focus on forestry issues.

RCPP Projects and Update – Jane Obbagy, MACD

MACD has 2 RCPP projects for doing conservation planning:

1. Long Island Sound watershed RCPP project
2. Ground based water quality implementation RCPP project (Worcester County, MA)

The Long Island Sound RCPP project is looking for a new project manager. (Judy Preston has left and not yet been replaced.)

- Kira J.: NRCS, via the L.I. RCPP, protects drinking water via a waiver from the Healthy Forest Reserve Program (in addition to protecting habitat). HFRP has lots of facets. The project was conceived by Denise Savageau, president of Connecticut Association of Conservation Districts.
- Jane O.: It has real potential to be a showcase project.

Worcester RCPP project:

- Dan W.: Jeff LaFleur applied for this project, and just under \$1 million was awarded for it.
- Jane O.: Sue Phinney was hired to establish contact with farmers that aren't working with NRCS at this time. It's a long process to make farmers comfortable with the NRCS process. The project is still early in the process.

Update on conservation districts:

6 districts have gotten funding awards from Mass. EOEEA.

- Brian W.: CCCGA has worked with Plymouth Conservation District on some issues.
- Jane O.: I was shocked to learn that no EQIP funds had been awarded to farms in Dukes County, because there are plenty of farms there.

WRE and EQIP Usage – Brian Wick, CCCGA

- Our organization (Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Association) has 350 - 400 growers.
- Pricing is tough, with competition from Wisconsin and Quebec.
- EQIP is the most important NRCS program for CCCGA.

- WRE is oversubscribed, because there is so much demand to retire cranberry bogs.
- Current tariffs have not helped the market.

MassWildlife Priorities – Marianne Piché, MassWildlife

The partnership between NRCS and MassWildlife began in 2006, and I started in 2008. MassWildlife provides habitat management assistance. I work on WRE and EQIP applications, and I'm also the Working Lands for Wildlife liaison. I conduct outreach to landowners. MassWildlife's priorities:

- Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) is needed for U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service funds
- BioMap 2

Working Lands for Wildlife species: (showed a map of the focal areas for the following species, which could be considered for listing under the Endangered Species Act)

- New England Cottontail
- Bog Turtle
- Northeast turtles

Young Forest Initiative RCPP Project – Patrick Conlin, MassWildlife

This RCPP project has established state and local ranking questions for RCPP applications. Between Oct. 2017 - Dec. 2018:

- Thirty-eight landowners expressed interest in seven counties
- that interest was turned into nine habitat plans
- Five applications were submitted for approx. \$106,000 total in RCPP funds (covering 588 acres). Most of the funds have been used.

More applications will soon be in the queue. We need to narrow our outreach and zoom in on key things. There are two focal bird species: American Woodcock and Golden-Winged Warbler.

- Jane O.: Is there a way to synchronize our groups' outreach to landowners? Sounds as if we're all trying to reach many of the same landowners, and they might suffer from response fatigue.
- Chris C.: Conservation districts could be that conduit!
- Kira J.: Are there local working group meetings in Massachusetts?
- Chris C.: Never, except when they're paid.
- Kira J.: I haven't seen people regularly attend local working group meetings anywhere, except for one in south Maine.

NHESP Program – Rebekah Zimmerer, MassWildlife

I'm the NRCS review biologist for the Natural Heritage Endangered Species Program (NHESP). That position was held by Brian Powers until recently. The program examines the impact of projects to rare species. We respond under MESA. Our data from NRCS in FY 18:

- 66 data releases
- 21 conservation plans incorporated NHESP review
- 2 MESA, 1 Notice of Intent
- 3 forest cutting plans
- 8 Northern Long-Eared Bat (NLEB) batches

Additional things I can do: site visits, early consultations, outreach, and explaining MESA to NRCS staff.

- John Scanlon (MassWildlife): Three Dept. of Fish and Wildlife staff members are partially funded by NRCS. Partnership seems to be working well. The need for the Young Forest RCPP is great. The markets don't support conservation work enough to keep species numbers high.

Adaptive Management in Soil Health (Update) – Kate Parsons, NRCS/USDA

Presentation of results for Adaptive Management for Soil Health study. In 2017, 4 farmers participated in no-till trials. In 2017, a Hadley farm saw an average of -0.23 ton/ac yield decrease for the no-till over three fields, while in 2018, they saw an average of a +0.17 ton/ac yield increase for the no-till over the same three fields. This farm plans to plant 145 acres no-till in 2018 and 100% of their acreage in 2020. For the 4 farmers, the no-till averaged 0.9 ton/ac better than the tillage.

In 2018, there were 3 new participants. All 7 farmers (using 17 fields) were testing in corn fields, and tillage was done via plowing or disking. (1 farmer did vertical tillage, which stirs the soil very gently.) The no-till averaged 0.3 ton/ac less than the tillage. This included one outlier where the no-till averaged 6 ton/ac less due to weed competition.

- Overall the adaptive management practice has been very successful in promoting no-till and achieving adoption.
- There were also 2 farmers who tested different cover crop mixes through adaptive management. In one of these trials, hairy vetch became an issue for a farmer that was trying to terminate it via rolling/crimper and no herbicides. The mixes with hairy vetch were successful in providing sufficient nitrogen for the corn crop however.

Massachusetts joined with New Hampshire to allow farmers to get 2 free bags of cover crop mixes to trial on their farms. There are 5 seed mixtures – two to be planted in June for grazing or for a full-season cover crop; one to be planted after early vegetables are harvested; and two to be planted by Sept 15, after early corn silage or vegetable harvest. This program will be rolled out to the planners in early January, 2019.

Possible partnership: Form a Massachusetts partnership for no-till farmers? (Some other states are implementing soil health alliances like this.)

- Rebekah Z.: Will farmers crimp the hairy vetch later? (it grew 7-10 days longer than winter rye)
- Kate P.: Not sure, they'll probably stay away from it in the future.
- Jane O.: Someone told me that more pesticides are needed for no-till farming.
- Kate P.: 99% of farmers who try no-till are already using pesticides. They still need to use herbicides, plus residual (weed suppressor) to keep weeds down. Gerard's Agricultural Climate Resiliency & Efficiencies (ACRE) program has been helpful.
- Gerard K.: Are farmers who air-seeded cover crop still interested? I've heard this year's results were better.
- Dan W.: The biggest issue is timing (for applications, conservation plans, and flight plans).
- Tom A.: The aerial applications of cover crop do well in great soils, and not so well in poor soils. The no-till drill gives the farmer certainty.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:00 pm.

Minutes compiled by Christine Clarke and other NRCS staff on December 6, 2018.