



United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service
Massachusetts State Office, 451 West Street, Amherst, MA 01002
413-253-4350 | fax 855-596-7666 | www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov

MASSACHUSETTS STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

July 24, 2019

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

Participants

- Nicole Viars, USDA/NRCS
- Tom Akin, USDA/NRCS
- Diane Petit, USDA/NRCS
- Dan Wright, USDA-NRCS
- Jessy Gill, World Farmers
- Jane Obaggy, Mass. Assoc. of Conservation Districts
- Kim Lutz, The Nature Conservancy
- Kathy Orlando, Sheffield Land Trust
- Nathan L'Etoile, American Farmland Trust
- Tom Curren, Franklin Land Trust
- Barbara Miller, Franklin Land Trust
- Alex Hackman, Dept. of Fish and Game / DER (Dept. of Ecological Restoration)
- Brian Wick, Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Assoc.
- Tom Cairns, USDA/FSA
- Kira Jacobs, US EPA
- Alicia Grimaldi, US EPA
- Karl Honkonen, US Forest Service
- Gerard Kennedy, MDAR
- David Viale, MDAR (APR program)
- Marianne Piché, MassWildlife
- Rebekah Zimmerer, MassWildlife
- John Scanlon, MassWildlife
- Chris Capone, MA Dept. of Conservation and Recreation
- Louise Legouis, USDA/NRCS

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

Welcome & Opening Remarks – Nicole Viars NRCS/USDA

- There were no corrections to the December 6, 2018 minutes.

Role and Responsibilities of the State Technical Committee – Nicole Viars

- Nicole (acting State Conservationist) 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 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 represents the Massachusetts Assoc. of Conservation Districts (MACD).
- Conservation Districts continue to be vital to NRCS nationally. In MA, NRCS and the state agencies work closely with them on many fronts including outreach.

Farm Bill Programs – Dan Wright, NRCS/USDA

Dan provided handouts that showed percentages of NRCS funding so far (in fiscal year 2019) for various land uses. Last year (in fiscal year 2018), the largest percentage of NRCS funding went to forest land. He mentioned 4 possible subcommittees going forward:

- Land Conservation
- Watershed planning (National Water Quality Initiative)
- Forestry and Wildlife
- Programs subcommittee to help determine ten priority practices

Regional Conservation Partnerships Program (RCPP)

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP): will likely have a pre-proposal period beginning at the start of FY 2020.

Agricultural Lands Easement (ALE) and ACEP

Application ranking questions for Agricultural Land Easement: MDAR can't change NRCS' ranking questions, but they should be present for the discussions of the land conservation subcommittee.

- Alex Hackman: interested in ranking of cranberry-related applications
- Dan W.: everyone is welcome, then will see if subgroups are appropriate

State Resource Conservationist – Tom Akin, NRCS/USDA

Introduced the upcoming American Water Works Association (AWWA) video. NRCS and other entities want to target watersheds upstream of rivers, in order to help farmers upstream. He discussed the Palmer River National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) and its nearby distressed shellfish beds. The U.S. EPA is going to use a DNA method to determine whether pollutants are bovine, human, etc.

The Palmer River Watershed couldn't spend an estimated \$1 million, so those funds are being moved to another NWQI watershed. The Merrimack River is being proposed for a "readiness phase". If that succeeds, EQIP funds will be requested in FY 2021.

Video from AWWA (providers of clean drinking water): NRCS is helping Arkansas and Iowa already. The 2018 Farm Bill should focus 10% of NRCS money on clean drinking water.

Drinking Water Program and NWQI – Kira Jacobs, U.S. EPA

There are 4000 sources of drinking water in New England. Nationwide, there are 170,000. The NWQI started in 2012 and is a joint venture between EPA and NRCS. At first it focused on impaired waters (319 waters), but now it focuses on drinking water protection sources. The National Source Water Protection has 28 members (U.S. Forest Service, EPA, NRCS, etc.).

There is one source water “readiness pilot” program now, in Connecticut (Farm River). MA hasn’t had a watershed approach since pre-Gov. Romney days. The most impaired water source is the Merrimack River (serving 600,000 people in MA and NH). So it serves one-eighteenth of New England’s population

Karl Honkonen (present, from USFS) funded \$300,000 for Merrimack River work in MA and lower NH, to manage and protect upstream forestry. For every \$1 spent upstream for drinking water protection, it saves \$27 for downstream water treatment. MA’s headwaters are the “Pemi” River in the White Mountains Forest. Kira asked about the Salmon Falls project (in NH?). She then presented a “story map”

“Forest on the Edge” report from USFS prioritized private forested areas as highly endangered for conversion to development.

The EPA Drinking Water program gets no direct funding, so it works completely through partnerships. Look at the “Merrimack Conservation website to see partners.

- Tom: NH may join MA in FY 2021 for NWQI work on the Merrimack.
- Kim L. (TNC): Curious if more watersheds can be targeted? Perhaps in FY2020 through New England in the past 10 years). The 319 program requires monitoring that NRCS can’t do, because it’s well beyond the edge of agricultural fields.
- Tom A.: the Westport, MA area knows the conservation planning that Iain Ward did in Rehoboth, and that it was good work.
- Dan: Also, in addition to NWQI, NRCS funding can target Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) riparian areas, EQIP rankings, etc.
- Marianne P.: the Merrimack River area is Blandings Turtle habitat.
- Tom: We’re hoping to hire a conservation planner for the Westford, MA office who will reach out to Merrimack area partner organizations.
- Jane O.: hopes that the Palmer and Westport watersheds won’t be abandoned, so water quality data can be captured there.

Kira said the program is focused on chronic vs. acute pollution / release. The greatest threat to drinking water is conversion of land to homes. The American Water Infrastructure Act was passed in 2018. Walmart is the largest conserver of land in the country. It’s easier to raise funds if you know how much is needed from partners.

- Nate L.: NRCS is great for leveraging funding. Can they state the percentage of needed funds they can cover so the amount still needed can be identified?
- Tom: Maybe a “NWQI Identification Subcommittee” needs to be formed.

- Kira: The Connecticut State Conservationist had extra \$600,000 in discretionary funding, and \$200,000 of that funded NWQI work in the Farm River.

Cranberry Bog Restoration – Alex Hackman, MA Dept. of Ecological Restoration

Alex described a targeted, measured, partner-based program stemming from dam removals and restoration of abandoned cranberry bogs to wetlands. The Eels River Headwater Preserve Restoration Project was their first project; the partners were Town of Plymouth, NRCS and USFWS. Restoration activities in the bogs included dredging to construct a stream channel to reestablish natural conditions, filling of former artificial side channels, reconstruction of a re-connected floodplain, removal of dikes and water control structures, replacement of undersized culverts, extensive wetland plantings (including 17,000+ Atlantic white cedar trees), and re-establishment of rare wetland communities.

Cranberry bogs face a lot of pressure from solar farms, sand mining, residential development and abandonment. Most bogs won't revert back to "nature" because of their many compacted sand layers added over the years for crop production. So there are strata of plants that prevent natural restoration to wetlands, and there are ditches that interrupt restoration. So you end up with forests with ditches, not wetlands. He mentioned "legacy farming effects".

The "Tidmarsh Farms" project was finished in 2016. There are 17 projects that DER could restore right now if it had the funding, but it doesn't. DER would like to organize regional researchers to answer this basic question: "Are we removing nitrogen pollution?" (So, a learning lab of sorts.)

DER's goal is to protect, restore, and transition to public open space. The NRCS funding mechanisms that made these projects possible were:

A Letter of Cooperation in 2018

A Technical Services Match Agreement

They hope to fund future projects through a proposal in FY2020 under the RCPP program.

- Kim L.: how does "learning lab" information get out to the right places?
- Alex: we're getting some information about microbial activity, but there are other questions with no answers yet
- Nate: how is DER getting funding to convert active agricultural land to non-agricultural land? (The Cranberry Task Force asked if there were other feasible alternatives, and there weren't.)
- Alex: the reason for funding is because these are peat lands.
- Karl H.: in 2005, Mass. tried to create a "Wetland Banking Program", where every 1 acre of wetland that's disturbed gets mitigated by a different 5 acres. But the program went nowhere.
- Tom: NWQI is an EQIP subaccount.
- Dan: WRE could be ranked with EQIP
- Matt R.: It would be good to target Buzzards Bay, which is affected by cranberry farms' nitrogen drainage.

Nicole: Meeting wrap-up and Round Robin is next.

Karl: LSR grants, which close in mid-October, are eligible to states that have finished 10-year State Plans.

Peter C.: DCR is almost done with the first draft.

Brian W.:
1. The Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Assoc. tries to keep growers in business.
2. Always looking for alternative tools or funding streams
3. Help growers develop exit strategies if they can no longer keep farming

Nate: There isn't a set of standards (as of now) for how or when to take farmland out of production.

Dan: an RCPP project could include development of such standards.

Matt R.: I am the new non-point discharge person at the Mass. Dept. of Environmental Protection.

John S.: MassWildlife's habitat program: reestablishing natural disturbance processes, enhancing prescribed fire processes, and grasslands expansion.

- Tom: Are private landowners interested in prescribed fire?
- John: Yes, especially the land trusts with several hundred acres or more. We've done 500 acres on MassWildlife lands in 2019.

Rebekah Z.: At MassWildlife, I evaluate NRCS projects for threatened and endangered (T&E) species. We'd like to do more coldwater stream buffers.

Tom Cairns: At FSA, we manage farmers' acreage reports and work on loan programs.

Tom Curren: I'm now the new Executive Director of the Franklin Land Trust. I was previously the director of the New England Land Consortium for the Pew Trust.

Kira: Announcements:

1. Nov. 6-7: a 2-day workshop with US Forest Service on forest and climate change impacts. It will include DCR partners in Leominster.
2. Aug. 25-27: National Assoc. of Conservation Districts in Foxwoods, CT

Alicia G.: I'm the coordinator at US EPA for Region 1, working on invasives, burial at sea, [and many other tasks].

Nate: AFT will have a new employee on Aug. 5. Emily Cole will connect climate change to EQIP practices. Pro solar and land conservation decisions.

1. Working on locally-important soils in CT, in order to qualify for ACEP.
2. Needs a comprehensive land protection plan.

Kathy O.: locally important soils would be really important and useful.

Agricultural producers need to hear that they're not the only or main contributor of pollutants.

Kira: really values farmland for land protection. (wants Kathy O.'s contact info.)

Marianne P.: works with NRCS on wildlife habitat management, and with Rebekah, too. Private and town lands are eligible for prescribed burning. Turtles really need wetlands protection. The WRE program is critical.

Kim: TNC is just about to finish Fannie Stebbins' WRE project. It's the largest contiguous floodplain in CT River watershed.

Dan: Want to mention that, under the new Farm Bill, 10 priority practices can exceed the published % payment rate.

Gerard K.: final rules re: targeting APR rules are a priority task. There are also 2 public hearings on Agricultural Composting on Aug. 12 and 14th.

Jane O.: working with US Forest Service

The meeting was adjourned at 12:00 pm.

Minutes compiled by Stephanie Wilsen (NRCS) on July 24, 2019.