

# State Technical Committee Meeting 5-21-2019

## Agency Responses

### **NRCS Actions based on State Technical Committee Recommendations from 5-21-2019**

- Source Water Protection
  - The 2018 Farm Bill includes provisions for NRCS to identify local priority areas for source water protection (SWP). This includes providing increased incentives for practices that relate to water quality and quantity and dedicating at least 10% of NRCS funds to conservation programs to focus on SWP priority areas.
  - Based on committee input from May 2019, NRCS evaluated Basin Management Action Plans (BMAPs) and aquifer recharge areas to assess the level of impact of agriculture in those areas. The agency used these resources along with other datasets to select source water protection priority areas for FY 2020.
  - Based on committee input from September 2019, NRCS will consider the following datasets when making modifications to the source water protection priority areas for future fiscal years: minimum flow levels, water use caution areas, surface water intake from state and private forests, important ecological sites (e.g. RAMSAR wetland sites), aquifer recharge areas in other parts of the state, and coordinate with FDACS/FDEP to consider BMAP updates.
- Partners have requested resources related to NRCS programs, practice standards, and general processes. NRCS will provide the State Technical Committee information in advance of the meeting to help inform recommendations. In addition, NRCS has developed guides to help partners navigate our website and technical resources which can be viewed as part of the meeting material for the March 2020 meeting.
- The State Technical Committee will have additional ways to provide input regarding NRCS program and natural resource priorities. NRCS Florida is creating a partner email box to submit recommendations.
- NRCS Florida is evaluating the conservation project ranking process to consider the proximity of the project area to priority areas within the state. Recommendations provided during the May 2019 meeting along with future recommendations will be reviewed for consideration in program ranking.
- NRCS is partnering with USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service to target feral swine removal on private lands. Conservation planning can be designed to address habitat protection and enhancement.
- Soil health is a priority for NRCS and the agency is moving forward with a number of measures to promote it, they include:
  - Soil health is a mandated training for Certified Conservation Planners. Florida staff completed required training which will assist field office staff to provide technical assistance for different types of organic systems.
  - The Florida NRCS State Office acquired a portable rainfall simulator to use at different producer properties, conservation districts, and local working group meetings in the state.

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- NRCS Soil Health Division has ongoing studies to establish which soil parameters and assessment methods will provide the most consistent results and thus recommendations for soil health. A major goal of the division is to identify methods to increase organic matter for water conservation and carbon sequestration.
- Soil health is being added as a purpose for prescribed grazing practices.
- NRCS presented at four area workshops to strengthen partnerships and capacity of the soil and water conservation districts.
- NRCS held two Regional Conservation Partnership Program workshops to provide partners with an overview of the program and application process.

### General remarks:

- Recommendations for ranking, priority areas, practices, and resource concerns will be kept on file and NRCS will review and evaluate for 2018 Farm Bill program implementation.
- Partners that are interested in learning more about NRCS programs can visit the following webpages:
  - [Program Landing Page](#): this will give you an overview of the programs and initiatives we have available in Florida. Here are websites for specific programs along with brief descriptions:
    - [Environmental Quality Incentives Program](#) (EQIP): NRCS works with producers and forest landowners by providing one-on-one assistance to plan and implement improvements on their properties. The agency develops a conservation plan made up of different conservation practices that help protect natural resources while also improving the agricultural operation. Through EQIP, producers can apply to NRCS for funding to cover part of the cost of implementing conservation practices.
    - [Conservation Stewardship Program](#) (CSP): NRCS provides financial and technical assistance to farmers for maintaining and improving existing conservation systems as well as adopting additional conservation activities.
    - [Agricultural Conservation Easement Program](#) (ACEP): ACEP helps landowners, land trusts, and other entities protect, restore, and enhance wetlands, grasslands, and working farms and ranches through conservation easements. This program includes both our Wetland Reserve Easements and Agricultural Land Easements
    - [Regional Conservation Partnership Program](#) (RCP): NRCS and partners leverage funds, resources and expertise to help producers install and maintain conservation activities (this can include conservation practices or easements). Partners submit a proposal to NRCS identifying the project area, partners involved, resource concerns, and conservation activities to be

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implemented. If a proposal is approved, NRCS and the partner enter into an agreement and start implementing the activities.

- [Conservation Innovation Grants](#) (CIG): competitive grants that drive public and private sector innovation in resource conservation. CIG projects inspire creative problem-solving that boosts production on farms, ranches, and private forests - ultimately, they improve water quality, soil health and wildlife habitat.
- Various Initiatives: [Working Lands for Wildlife](#), [National Water Quality](#), [Longleaf Pine](#), [Gulf of Mexico](#)

Questions and Answers from May 2019 meeting:

1. Can CSP be used to encourage follow through on existing initiatives?

Many of the CSP Bundles are directly aimed at fostering existing initiatives such as Longleaf Pine, Working Lands for Wildlife, etc., and are not limited to the specific geographic area of the initiative.

2. Why is Healthy Forest Reserve Program not available outside of Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)?

The NRCS national office identified states that are approved to receive Healthy Forest Reserve Program funding. At this time, Florida is not one of the selected states.

3. Can Longleaf Pine Sandhill be classified as Grassland of Special Significance for ALE-GSS purposes?

Under the 2014 Farm Bill, longleaf pine sandhill was categorized as an eligible land type for Agricultural Land Easements – Grasslands of Special Significance (ALE-GSS). In order to qualify, the properties continued to have to meet the forest land restrictions placed on ALE. Forest land was limited to no more than two-thirds of the easement area and was defined as land cover or use category that was at least 10-percent stocked by single-stemmed woody species of any size that would be at least 13 feet tall at maturity. Under the 2018 Farm Bill, NRCS will make updates to land eligibility based on program policy guidance.

4. What is the definition for At-Risk vs. T&E species?

**At-Risk Species:** Any plant or animal species listed as threatened or endangered; proposed or candidate for listing under the Endangered Species Act; a species listed as threatened or endangered under State law or Tribal law on Tribal land; State or Tribal land species of conservation concern; or other plant or animal species or community, as determined by the State Conservationist, with advice from the State Technical Committee or Tribal conservation advisory council, that has undergone, or is likely to undergo, population decline and may become imperiled without direct intervention.

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**Threatened and Endangered Species (T&E):** Species listed under section 4 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA).

Under certain programs, NRCS may broaden the eligibility requirements for participation beyond section 4 of the Endangered Species Act. For example, under the Healthy Forest Reserve Program, eligible land can include land that supports habitat for T&E species (according to the definition above) and also habitat for a selected species that is not listed under section 4 of the ESA, but is a candidate for such listing, or the selected species is a State-listed species, or is a species identified by the Chief for special consideration for funding. NRCS defines a State-Listed Species as a species listed as threatened or endangered under State endangered species laws, a candidate for such listing, or a species listed in a State wildlife action plan as a “species of greatest conservation need”.

5. Why are there no “soil health” conservation practices?

NRCS Soil Health Division has ongoing studies to establish which soil parameters and assessment methods will provide the most consistent results and thus recommendations for soil health. When adopted, it can be expected the agency will establish a 'soil health' conservation practice and make a concerted effort to have producers use the methodology to monitor their systems via EQIP incentives.

6. The Presentation indicates no RCPP-EQIP or CSP projects/funding in 2018. Was the absence of those programs attributable to lack of funding, lack of eligible projects or other factors? Are RCPP-EQIP or CSP projects in the planning process for FY 2019 or FY 2020?

There were no RCPP-EQIP or CSP funded contracts in 2018 due to a change in NRCS staff. In FY 2020, there will be RCPP-EQIP and CSP application periods announced for active RCPP agreements.