



United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service
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MASSACHUSETTS STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

January 16, 2020

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

Participants

- Dan Wright, USDA/NRCS
- Tom Akin, USDA/NRCS
- Rita Thibodeau, USDA/NRCS
- Diane Petit, USDA/NRCS
- Helen Castles, USDA/NRCS
- Al Averill, USDA/NRCS
- Deron Davis, USDA/NRCS
- Clem Clay, UMass Extension
- Michael Davidian, Davidian Farms
- Jessy Gill, World Farmers
- Mukaji Ambila, World Farmers
- Lois Bruinooge, The Last Green Valley
- Bob O'Connor, MA Energy & Env. Affairs
- Jane Obaggy, MACD
- Kim Lutz, The Nature Conservancy
- Kathy Orlando, Sheffield Land Trust
- Mark Wamsley, Kestrel Land Trust
- Nathan L'Etoile, American Farmland Trust
- Michael Leff, Franklin Conservation District
- Carolyn Shores Ness, Franklin Conserv. District
- Alex Hackman, Dept. of Fish and Game / DER
- Brian Wick, Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Assoc.
- Tom Cairns, USDA/Farm Services Agency
- Lyndon Nichols, USDA/Rural Development
- Kira Jacobs, US EPA
- Ian Dombroski, US EPA (RI)
- Gerard Kennedy, MDAR
- David Viale, MDAR (APR program)
- Matthew Reardon, MA DEP
- Rebekah Zimmerer, MassWildlife
- Patrick Conlin, MassWildlife
- Chris Capone, MA DCR
- Peter Church, MA DCR

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

Welcome and Opening Remarks – Dan Wright, NRCS/USDA

There were no corrections to the July 24, 2019 minutes.

Dan welcomed everyone and explained that the State Technical Committee (STC) is an advisory body whose purpose is to provide information to stakeholders and give 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 subcommittees to provide more input from partners on specific topics. Dan mentioned two subcommittees that had arisen from discussions at earlier meetings:

- Easements
- Financial Programs

Farm Bill Programs – Rita Thibodeau, NRCS/USDA

Rita distributed folders containing information appended to these minutes. The handouts show:

- Fiscal Year 2019 program funding data
- A map showing the density of obligated conservation practices for each town in Massachusetts, which also shows where there may be more opportunities to work with producers
- Each field office's quantity of applications received vs. funded
- The top 10 highlights of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) interim rules

Program funding data: NRCS MA was allocated \$4,003,750 for EQIP in FY 19, and obligated 90% of that. We received \$218,100 for Agricultural Management Assistance (obligated 99%), \$71,000 for Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP, obligated 14% due to receiving the funds late in the year), and \$134,000 for CSP-Grasslands Conservation Initiative (CSP-GCI, obligated 57%).

CSP: This program rewards farmers for good conservation work they're already doing, plus one or more enhancements of that work. The minimum contract length is five years, and pays a minimum of \$1,500 per year, plus additional funds for implementation of the practice enhancements.

Reminders for CSP classic stewardship threshold eligibility:

- Applicants must meet two resource concerns at the time of contract offer for all land uses included in the operation
- Applicants must also meet at least one additional resource concern on each land use by the end of the contract

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP): The interim rule states that easements in new RCPP projects will be in RCPP only. (In the past, easements were funded via the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, ACEP.) RCPP is now its own standalone program (rather than a program funded by EQIP, ACEP, etc.), so the interim rules are taking longer to develop.

- Dan: Comments on the ACEP interim rule, published January 6, 2020, are being considered until March 20, 2020.
- Kira J.: NRCS should email program rule changes, comment periods, etc. to the State Tech Committee.
- Dan: Yes, we will.

Rita said NRCS has received two RCPP project proposals for FY 2020, to be evaluated next week.

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG): we're considering putting out an RFP for CIG, possibly with a cap of \$150,000 for the state. CIG funds have to be ≤ 5% of allocated EQIP funds.

- Tom A.: So we're looking for ideas about innovative equipment or situations
- Rita: CIG projects often have associated workshops or learning opportunities
- Kira: In Maine, there's a CIG for agricultural chemical storage facilities that's ending soon. It promotes better storage and better communication with the local fire department.

Easement Programs Specialist – Helen Castles, NRCS/USDA

NRCS holds more than 3.2 million acres in easements across the U.S., most of which are held in perpetuity. The Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) program has some 30-year easements. These are NRCS's current easement programs:

- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) – conserves agricultural lands and wetlands
- Emergency Watershed Protection - Floodplain Easement (EWPP-FPE)
- Health Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) – helps landowners restore, enhance and protect forest resources on private lands

Changes to the ACEP program in the 2018 Farm Bill:

- Wetland Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE):
 - ▲ 2018 Farm Bill Changes to the ACEP program require further definition of wetland restoration criteria and ranking criteria for WRE applications
 - ▲ Changes to the ranking criteria include points for hydrology, climate change resilience, and water quality
 - ▲ Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) – is developed from an Area Wide Market Analysis completed by a licensed appraiser
- Agricultural Lands Easement (ACEP-ALE)
 - ▲ 2018 Farm Bill Changes to the ACEP- ALE include changes to ALE plans, NRCS is responsible for Highly Erodible Land planning only for an ALE plan
 - ▲ The federal share for an ALE easement is still limited to 50%
 - ▲ The non-federal share may be comprised of several potential components as determined with the final 2018 Farm Bill rules and regulations
 - ▲ Minimum deed requirements will also have changes
 - ▲ In 2020 ranking question adjustment will now include points for the entity contribution

Comments:

- Brian W. & Alex H.: The GARC rate for cranberry bogs (\$13,600 per acre) is good and fair. Has been helpful.

State Soil Scientist – Al Averill, NRCS/USDA: Farmland of Local Importance

Farmland of local importance is new to Massachusetts. Handout (appended) explains this new class.

Important Farmland Classes:

1. Prime Farmland: meets specific chemical and physical national criteria.
2. Unique Farmland: uniquely suited to a specific crop (like cranberries). In Massachusetts, this is recognized only in southeastern MA.
3. Farmland of Statewide Importance: nearly prime farmland soils. Characteristics outside criteria for prime farmland such as steeper slope, surface stones, lower water holding capacity are readily addressed by conventional management practices.
4. Farmland of Local Importance – Important Farmland Class previously not designated in MA
 - a. Land of local concern in addition to prime and unique farmland, and farmland of statewide importance for producing food, fiber, forage or oilseed crops.
 - b. The land must be capable of producing a crop.

- c. A local agency determines whether a soil survey map unit should be considered by the NRCS State Conservationist as farmland of local importance.
- d. The town of Hatfield requested the soil survey map unit, “31A – Walpole sandy loam, 0 to 3 percent slopes” be designated as soil of local importance. It was not originally designated as important farmland because in its natural state it is too wet for crop production. Historical drainage has enabled agricultural suitability. Soil survey standards allow the designation “prime farmland if drained,” but it is applied soil survey wide, and open to misinterpretation. The farmland of local importance is a more specific application geographically.
- e. During the review process, a second soil survey map unit, 8A-Limerick silt loam, 0 to 3 percent slopes was identified.
- f. Once the applicable local official concurs via signature, documentation will be stored in Section II of the Massachusetts Field Office technical Guide.
<https://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/#/details>

Advantages to this new class:

- Program eligibility for ALE/APR
- Consideration of preservation/conservation in local and statewide land use planning and/or regulations.

Designation Process:

- Verify the land is not currently classified as prime or unique farmland, or farmland of statewide importance.
- Document evidence of suitability for the production of food, feed, fiber, forage and/or oilseed crops.
- For map units categorized as poorly, or very poorly drained, document evidence of historical use for crop production. Historical – defined as pre-12/1985 – wetland conservation compliance.
- Formally petition the NRCS State Conservationist for Massachusetts to recognize the soil survey map units representing the land of concern as farmland of local importance. Include documentation.

Comments:

- Dan: will send out a link to electronic Field Office Technical Guide (eFOTG), section 2
- Mark W.: how will these new locally important soils affect APR?
- David V.: the ACEP-ALE ranking subcommittee of the State Tech. Committee could discuss
- Helen: I can add that to the local ranking questions.

Discussion followed about what the pre-1985 and post-1985 rules were regarding Highly Erodible Land (HEL) and conversion of wetlands

State Tech. Committee can choose ≤ 10 conservation practices to receive a 95% cost-share rate – Dan Wright & Rita Thibodeau, NRCS/USDA

Dan discussed a new feature of the 2018 Farm Bill. State Conservationists can designate a 95% cost-share rate to no more than ten conservation practices. Rita shared Tom’s slide (appended) showing 15 suggested practices that might be more widely used if they had a 95% cost-share rate.

- Mike D.: Agricultural chemical mixing facilities via NRCS are too expensive now.

- Rita: perhaps manure waste storage facilities
- Mike: prioritize practices that give farmers the most “bang for the buck”
- Dan: This is an example of where the FAPD subcommittee could advise us and provide input.

RCPP update: “Accelerating the pace of conservation in the Southern New England Heritage Forest” in CT, MA, RI – Lois Bruinooge, The Last Green Valley

Introduced herself as the executive director of “The Last Green Valley, an organization whose RCPP project is dedicated to conserving land in the area designated as the Southern New England Heritage Forest (SNEHF) in 2010 by the Massachusetts Governor’s Council.

Lois described the project’s goals, method and progress. They wanted healthy forests to be chosen for conservation, because the landowners have to keep the Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP) easements in perpetuity. They included the bird habitat assessment components for forest management plans as well, because most of the landowners in The Last Green Valley value their forestland’s health and wildlife management (not their timber value).

The SNEHF covers parts of Worcester and Hampden Counties, so they’re reaching out to landowners and foresters in that area. The MA contact person for the RCPP is Christopher Riely (working with Ed Hood of the Opacum Land Trust). So Christopher is working with the conservation planners in Holden and Hadley.

State Resource Conservationist – Tom Akin, NRCS/USDA

Update on the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI), a component of the EQIP financial assistance program. MA NRCS initially submitted a request for a “Readiness Phase” NWQI project for the Stony Brook HUC-12 watershed in Middlesex county. The readiness phase would have created a watershed assessment and work plan for the watershed; however, Massachusetts Dept. of Environmental Protection (DEP) suggested that this was not a good choice due to lack of flow in the Stony Brook. During certain periods of the year flow disappears because of aquifer overdraft/excessive water withdrawals by residents and businesses. Therefore, MA DEP and US EPA will work with NRCS in the very near future to select a different HUC-12 watershed in the greater Merrimack River watershed that has a high number of agricultural acres.

In late November 2019, NRCS MA also submitted a NWQI “Readiness Phase” request for the Westport River watershed to support MACD’s MA DEP 319 grant in this area. The goal of this 319 grant is to replicate the successes of the Palmer River NWQI; the NWQI for the Palmer River watershed is wrapping up. US EPA has analyzed some water quality data collected after the installation of conservation practices. US EPA analyzed the data with a “Phylo-Chip” technology that identifies the origin of waterborne pathogens, e.g., livestock, waterfowl or human). The data show that the primary contributors of the pollutants are not coming from livestock, rather from human (septic) and waterfowl sources. There is still water quality-related conservation work to do in the Palmer River watershed, and although there no longer is dedicated NWQI EQIP funding for the Palmer NWQI, farmers can still apply for EQIP financial assistance to implement conservation practices on their farms.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:45 pm.

Action items:

1. Dan will email notices about program rule changes, comment periods, etc. to the State Tech. Committee.
 2. Dan will send out the link to the electronic Field Office Technical Guide (eFOTG), section 2
 3. Helen will add "Farmland of Local Importance" to the ACEP-ALE local ranking questions.
 4. Rita will contact the subcommittee volunteers.
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Minutes compiled by Stephanie Wilsen (NRCS) on January 16, 2020.

About the State Technical Committee

The State Technical Committee advises the NRCS State Conservationist on the technical guidelines necessary to implement the conservation provisions of the 2018 Farm Bill. Committee membership includes representatives from federal and state agriculture and environmental agencies, agricultural producers, UMass Extension, nonprofit organizations and agribusiness.

State Technical Committee meetings are open to the public and are held as often as necessary to advise and implement NRCS conservation programs. For information about an upcoming meeting, call the NRCS State Office at 413-253-4365. More information available at https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/ma/technical/stc/?cid=nrcs144p2_013981