

State Technical Committee Meeting – **03/05/2020**

ALL POWERPOINT PRESENTATIONS ARE ON THE [WEBSITE](#).

**You can listen to the recording of the meeting by dialing:
877.471.6587 or 402.970.2667**

Enter replay ID: 33950394024

**(There is a 4m blank time from the start of the recording to the beginning of the meeting.
You can pause by pressing 8, fast forward 30s by pressing 9 & rewind by 30s pressing 7;
Volume control: press 04 to decrease, 06 to increase.)**

Attendees: Craig Derickson, Brad Soncksen, Tami Nordman, Britt Weiser, Neil Dominy, Annette Sudbeck, Marilyn Tabor, Larry Hodkins, John Hansen, Nicholas Streff, Mike McDonald, Gregory Whitmore, Jeff Steffen, Burdette Piening, Dan Ruterbories, Keith Berns, Andrea Hartman, Kristin Bailey, Tim Kalkowski, Walt Schecht, Kenny Dinan, David Eigenberg, Andrew Baker, Terry Julesgard, Elbert Traylor, Kent Zimmerman, Rich Walters, Jay Seaton, Dustin Wilcox, Dean Edson, Kyle Hauschild, Mike Murphy, Doug Klein, Jana Ingwerson-Laws, Jenny Prenosil, Marcia Trompke, Nate Pflueger, Eric Zach, Doug Jones, Boone McAfee, George Cunnigham, Nadine Bishop, Rick Rasby, Brad Lubben, David Potter, Allen Moore, Georja Kriebs, Misha Mazurkewycz, Troy Kash-Brown, Carla McCullough; **via phone:** Erica Gnuse, Kristi Block, Steve Roth, Shelly Kelly, Andrew Pierson, Ginger Wilson, James Frazee, Neil Moseman, Bruce McIntosh, Mike Crosley, Craig Romary.

WELCOME AND THANK YOU FOR BEING HERE! – Craig Derickson, **State Conservationist, NRCS**

- ❖ Local Work Group Process within our 23 NRDs.
- ❖ Unique challenges this year
 - CART & CD is NEW has delayed our Farm Bill implementation.
 - Farm Bill program looming with lots of pressure on field delivery systems.
- ❖ We have good things going on in Nebraska
 - Good Employees, partners, producers
 - We do a good job of using our financial programs in Nebraska.
- ❖ Appreciate the great crowd today.

Brad & Kent recognized Craig as being honored with the State Conservationist of the Year Award a month ago.

THE NEBRASKA HEALTHY SOILS TASK FORCE – Keith Berns & Mike McDonald, **Soil Health Task Force**

- Formed by LB 243 in April 2019
 - 17 members made of:
 - Ag Producers
 - Educators
 - Policy Makers
 - Environmental Reps
 - Agribusiness
- A commitment to healthy and productive soils and clean water is critical as world population and food production demands rise.
- Improving the health of Nebraska's soil is the most effective way for agricultural producers to increase crop and forage productivity and profitability while also protecting the environment.
- Appropriate planning and coordination are needed to speed up and coordinate the adoption of conservation practices.

Healthy Soils Task Force Mission Statement

The Nebraska Healthy Soils Task Force will develop a positive, proactive plan for soil and water health to ensure an enriched, resilient, and sustainable future for the state of Nebraska.

This will be done through:

- Strategic research and planning
- Input and involvement of key soil health stakeholders
- Development and delivery of a final report to the Governor

➤ **Four Committees**

- Education
- Economics
- Ecosystem Services
- Initiative

➤ **Report to the Governor by the end of 2020**

- Identify realistic and achievable goals and timelines for improvement of soil health in Nebraska
- Issues related to providing farmers and ranchers with research, education, technical assistance, and demonstration projects
- Options for financial incentives to improve soil health
- The contribution of livestock to soil health

Information Gathering and Surveys: Getting input from producers across the state on soil health. Have been doing these at different soil health meetings with producers.

Now giving the survey to this group. EVENT CODE: State Soil

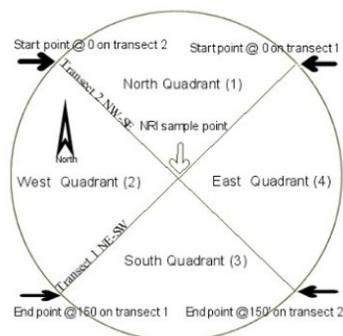
WEBSITE: nda.nebraska.gov; then go to the Health Soils Task Force Link

Q: What happens after the Task Force makes the recommendation 2020?

A: Still unsure but will be exploring action steps on a soil health initiative across NE.

GRAZING LANDS UPDATE – Nadine Bishop, NRCS

- New Tools for Monitoring Grazing Lands
 - RAP: Rangeland Analysis Platform
 - **Developed by University of Montana in collaboration with NRCS and BLM**
 - Interactive, Web APP
 - Free Tool
 - Monitoring Program
 - Covers Western US
 - Estimates Percent of and Changes in the Percent of:
 - Perennial, Herbaceous Vegetation
 - Annual, Herbaceous Vegetation
 - Brush
 - Trees
 - Bare Ground
 - Field Monitoring vs. Area, State, MLRA Monitoring
 - Field Monitoring looks at a representative area as a snapshot in time.
 - Rangeland Analysis Platform looks at a broad area over time.
 - Field Monitoring looks an individual species or groups.
 - Rangeland Analysis Platform looks broad categories of plants – perennial herbaceous, annuals, shrubs and trees.
 - Essential RAP Inputs
 - 1 Landsat Satellite Imagery (1984 - 2017)
 - 4.7 miles / sec
 - 115-mile-wide swath
 - 99 minutes / orbit
 - 16 day / entire earth coverage
 - Updated annually
 - Field Plots
 - NRI and AIM
 - 31,000 + plots
 - Line Point Intercept
 - Measures canopy cover
 - NRI Data Collection
 - 2 – 150' transects
 - Cover recorded every 3' along transect
 - Canopy by species
 - Litter
 - Bare ground



- RAP Basics
 - Cloud-Computing
 - 215 data layers (soils, elevation, climate, Landsat reflectance, vegetation indices, precipitation, elevation, and more)
 - Random Forests machine learning method
 - Algorithm predicts cover at 30m resolution.
 - NRI-AIM data used to train the model
 - Bare ground
 - Annuals
 - Perennial grasses and forbs
 - Trees
 - Shrubs
 - RAP is a Model, Not Actual Measurements
 - Absolute Mean Error
 - Annual Forbs and Grasses – 7.8%
 - Perennial Forbs and Grasses – 11.2%
 - Shrubs – 6.9%
 - Trees – 4.7%
 - Bare Ground – 7.3%
 - RAP Outputs
 - Charts & Maps
 - Maps showing cover classes
 - Graphs showing % of each cover class
 - Tracks trends over time
 - Useful prioritize workload and identify areas with resource problems.
- SEE SLIDES FOR EXAMPLES
- Rangeland Analysis Platform Take Home Message
 - **RAP Is NOT Intended to:**
 - Replace site specific data and boots on the ground.
 - Be used in place of precise monitoring and management.
 - Be used to quantify rangeland resources or evaluate the effectiveness of treatments.
 - **RAP IS intended to:**
 - Provide historical and spatially complete view of an area
 - Be used to examine land cover trends through time.
 - Be used to assess land cover variability in the area of interest.
 - Be used along with local knowledge and data to inform conservation and management plans.
- RaBET: Rangeland Brush Estimation Toolbox
 - Chandra Holifield Collins & Susan Skirvin– USDA-ARS Southwest Watershed Research Center
 - Funding through NRCS Grazinglands CEAP
 - Efficient, repeatable way to determine woody canopy to document baseline and treatment results.
 - What is Purpose of RaBET?
 - NRCS spent over \$18.6 million on brush management in 2012-2014 nationwide
 - Very little documentation to support need for brush management.
 - Photo Interpretation not measurements
 - Very little documentation to evaluate the success of brush management.

- Landsat imagery - 30-meter resolution
- NAIP Imagery (National Agriculture Imagery Program) – 1-meter resolution
- Use a condensed time window
 - RAP uses year-round imagery.
 - RaBET can use the time window with greatest separation between woody and herbaceous cover.
 - 4-year composites to dampen impact of high precipitation years.
 - Not interested in trends
 - Interested in measurable canopy levels
- Woody cover map tool will be on an automated platform on Google Earth Engine.
- Will produce graphs, maps, and tables.
- Maps will identify different levels of cover by location within an area (pasture, field, paddock) .
- Tables will identify the acres in a defined area by cover class.
- Uses the information used in RAP
- Focuses on tree and shrub levels
- Includes additional local data collection
 - Expanded plots (larger than NRI)
- MLRA Basis
 - MLRA 65 in 2019-2020
 - MLRA 71 and 73 in 2020-2021
 - Large amount of brush management
 - Possibly MLRA 72
 - Woody encroachment at beginning stages
- MLRA 65 Experience
 - 50+ additional data plots
 - Eastern & Central Sandhills
 - Partnership effort
 - Data collection in fall of 2019
 - 7 transect lines per plot
 - 100 m baseline
 - 6 – 70m sidelines
 - Points read every 0.5 meters
 - 1040 points per plot
 - Perennial grass, annual grass, forb
 - Shrubs and trees by species
 - 2 / day
- MLRA 65 Lessons Learned
 - 4 people per team
 - 2 sample locations / day
 - Takes a lot of trees to pick up on transect.
 - Expanded to a belt transect rather than a line point transects
 - Reeds/cattails appear as woody vegetation
 - Mask out
 - Small trees may not be picked up by the tool.

- RaBET Timeline in Nebraska
 - April 2020 – Beta Test
 - June 2020 – Full Use
 - MLRA 71 Data Collection – Summer 2020
 - MLRA 73 Data Collection – Fall 2020
 - MLRA 72 Data Collection – TBD

- Expanded Uses of Information Used in RAP
 - Identifying areas in danger of crossing an ecological threshold.
 - When is the most appropriate time to fund invasive species projects?
 - Before or after a threshold is crossed.

QUESTIONS & Comment

Q: Are there other apps like Grass Snap, how is that data used for this?

A: Yes, if the people collecting the data are actually getting information like cover from the different categories it would be really useful for RABET.

Q: Why doesn't RABET go further east?

A: AIM data is collected on western rangelands only. NRI data farther east is primarily on pastureland and we don't have nearly as many points in the eastern US as in the West. Additionally, we collect different data in grazing land NRI on rangeland than we do on pastureland.

Q: How is RABET used to differentiate ERC from different plants?

A: Since RaBET is set up on a Major Land Resource Area basis, it can be designed differently in each MLRA. In MLRA 65, our primary woody species of concern is eastern redcedar. The tool is developed using only the dormant season satellite imagery, and which will allow the modelers to filter out deciduous shrubs and trees. When we collected data, we identified the different woody plants encountered on the transects. Using this information, the developers will be working on methodology to filter out soapweed, which was the most common woody plant other than Eastern redcedar, based on the color signature of the two species. We found that wetland vegetation has a signature similar to woody vegetation; developers are using wetland maps and ecological site maps to filter out those sites. As the developers move to other MLRAs where deciduous brush is also a concern, the developers may need to run dormant versus growing season scenarios.

CRAIG'S COMMENTS:

- There is a growing appreciation in the last few months of the amount of science & data that is coming into this work dealing with addressing the woody species encroachment of our tall grass prairie it continues to be a big threat to our livestock industry & the grazing of animals as well as birds & species of concern. I think we are close to an opportunity to expand what we have been doing in NE using our programs for brush management & prescribed burns to take that to a higher level to a landscape initiative to expand over several states.
- We have made good progress with the ERC in Nebraska.
 - Good Local support and activity
 - Strong partnerships
 - Valuable services – based data and tools
- Opportunity to accelerate and expand what Nebraska has been doing using our programs for brush management & prescribed burns to take that to a higher level to a landscape initiative to expand over several states.
 - Talking with the partners today about leveraging & backing this initiative.

NEBRASKA GRAZING LANDS COALITION – Tim Kalkowski, board chair, NE Grazing Land Coalition

- Purpose
 - Dedicated to the enhancement of grasslands, the Nebraska Grazing Lands Coalition is comprised of ranchers and private landowners all focused on creating public awareness and improvement of the grazing lands in Nebraska. The organization's top focus is to provide voluntary technical assistance and educational opportunities on grazing land management. Healthy Nebraska grazing lands translate directly into forage for livestock habitat for wildlife, economic benefits for landowners and rural communities, clean water for much of the Great Plains.

- Structure
 - Non-for-profit board of at least two representatives from 6 regions of NE (Southeast, Northeast, Southwest, Panhandle, North Central, and South Central, NE) WE also have advisors on our Board of University Extension and Nadine Bishop from NRCS sits on our board. Ron Bolze is our coordinator and we have quarterly meetings.
 - We get our funding from grants through the Nebraska Environmental Trust and World Wildlife Fund has provided grant dollars for specific projects. We have partnered on several projects with NRCS, NE Cattlemen, Sandhills TF, University of NE, Center for Grasslands Studies, World Wildlife Fund, Nature Conservancy, and NE Game & Parks.

- Major Projects
 - One of our original projects was Rangeland monitoring where we would send out a trained consultant to teach a producer about monitoring which would include plant identification, plant counts, plant diversity, and soil health.
 - Our current grant program is centered around eradication of eastern red cedars in the areas of the state where encroachment is a major issue. We have hired two burn bosses that will help create a burn plan and provide educational opportunities concerning how to do a proper burn. We also have two burn trailers that have equipment with the necessary tools for a successful and safe burn. Education concerning proper rest and rotation before and after a burn is critical part of the process. Burn bosses are Alex Petersen and Doug Weisenhunt.
 - We offer a mentoring program where we will try to match a student trying to learn about ranching and range management with an existing producer that excels in these areas.
 - We do an annual traveling road show where we will have a guest speaker do 8 seminars over the course of a week (2/day). Last year our guest speaker was Shane New that talked about cover crops.
 - Three cover crops studied with NE Extension with 8 producers across NE>
 - Annual summer grazing tour
 - Working on a web-based grazing management tool to help monitor rotational grazing systems.
 - Publicity campaign with a video to showcase Nebraska grazing lands, conservations, and stewardship targeting 5th & 6th graders.
 - Sponsored Holistic Resource Management workshops
 - Generational Transition
 - Partner with WWF
 - Task Manager – Bethan Johnston
 - Clinics

➤ **National Tour**

- 3 days, June 14-16, starting in North Platte with an evening banquet
 - Day 1 – Rex Ranch, Connealy Angus, UNL Gudmundsen research facility, and concluding with an evening meal at Niobrara Valley Vineyards in Valentine, NE.
 - Day 2 – Shovel Dot Ranch, Gracie Creek Ranch, Switzer Ranch and Calumus Outfitters and then back to North Platte for a final banquet.
- We will cover NE history, networking, ranch management, range management, agritourism, conservation easements, and generational transition.

➤ **Conclusion**

- Just want to thank Craig, Nadine, and all the staff for all the support that NRCS gives our group. I think our goals mirror what NRCS is trying to accomplish and we hope for a long and continued partnership based on conservation and stewardship.

CRP GRASSLANDS UPDATE & CRP MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES – Doug Klein, Price Support & Conservation Programs Chief, FSA & Ritch Nelson, State Wildlife Biologist-Forester, NRCS

➤ **CRP**

- Not a lot to update on at this time
- CRP Grassland signup
 - March 16 – May 15, 2020
 - Media release early next week.
 - Different – CP Practice 88
- 2018 FARM BILL
 - Mid-contract management – do our contracts now need them.
 - Cost share that use to have is no longer available now.
- Just finished last Friday general CRP sign-up
 - Approximately 2400 offers in Nebraska
 - No acreage #s
 - Ranking process has not started as of this meeting, however, should in the next few weeks.

➤ **CRP Management**

- Overview
 - Management (formerly called Mid-Contract Management) is required on all “suitable” practices in CRP
 - No cost-share assistance will be provided to conduct Management
 - The State Conservationist can recommend CRP practices to be “exempt” from Management with proper approval at state and national levels – gathering input today to go to FSA State Committee in two weeks
 - Expanded opportunity for grazing and haying on various CRP practices may be useful to accomplish management
- Recommendations
 - Basically – allow options for setting back plant succession as was offered in previous years:
 - Tillage or Disking
 - Site Specific Herbicide Use
 - Prescribed Burning

- High Intensity – Short Duration Grazing
- Haying (as a standalone practice on diverse grass/forb stands)
- Inter-seeding of additional forbs or legumes
 - Optional to increase or prolong benefits
 - Only required when needed to maintain the appropriate plant composition required by that conservation practice.
- Exempt Practice Recommendations
 - CP-8A Grass Waterways
 - CP-12 Food Plots
 - CP-5A Field Windbreaks
 - CP-16A Shelterbelts
 - CP-17A Living Snow fence

NOTE: These practices either require substantial maintenance and/or it is not practical to implement management

- CP-88 Native Grass in CRP Grasslands (management not required)
- Haying and Grazing as Management
 - Haying as a “stand alone” practice on “block” enrollments with adequate diversity, limited sod-forming grass, etc.
 - Limit haying to 50% of the total acres (in block) if used as management
 - Allow haying to count as management on grass “buffer” practices where authorized – filter strips, contour buffers, field borders, cross wind trap strips, prairie strips, and “narrow” buffers on wetlands
 - Grazing must be “high intensity – short duration” if intended to apply as management on “block” enrollments
 - Grazing during the nesting season does not count as management
 - Allow incidental grazing to be considered management on grass “buffer” practices where authorized
 - Dormant season grazing on “diverse stands” during November or March/April may be considered management
- Management on Tree Practices
 - Management in initial enrollment period will focus on herbaceous vegetation diversity
 - Management in subsequent re-enrollments will use thinning, pruning, interplanting of shrubs, etc. for more diversity and creation of snags and small brush piles to accomplish management
 - Not significant acres of riparian forest buffer or block tree plantings in Nebraska affected by these options
- Management on Pollinator Habitat
 - Treat small areas of pollinator (<10 acres) different than those 10 acres and larger
 - Hay only a portion (i.e. 50%) in any given year
 - Graze only a portion (i.e. 50%) in any given year during growing season
 - Grazing of entire pollinator habitat allowed during dormant season
 - Other management techniques must not diminish forb diversity (i.e. herbicide use) unless interseeded to replace forb diversity
 - Implement outside of growing season if possible (tillage, burning, etc.)
 - On larger blocks, only treat 50% of acres in any given year

- Haying and Grazing NOT as Management
 - Nesting season grazing is allowed at 50% stocking rate – will be estimated using forage production data or clipping
 - Incidental grazing is allowed on grass “buffers” during gleaning of crop stubble AND during the dormant season for small grains
 - Dormant season grazing may occur during November and also March/April – but limit to 50% of the contract acres (except <10 acres)
 - A site-specific grazing plan may be used to target an invasive species. Invasive species will be defined by the list generated by the Invasive Species Council.

QUESTIONS & Comment

Q: Was the general sign-up numbers about what you expected, higher or lower since the rates were quite lower?

A: With the lower rental rates we were expecting lower signups numbers.

Always been a cost but appreciate the availability to get the herd up on the CRP land last year with the floods & it saved a lot of herd.

Q: On the dormancy of grazing is it 50% of contract or 50% acres on the farm?

A: The guidance we put forth is 50% of the contract but the intent is to preserve a portion of the habitat in a given area on the landscape. Therefore, we can be flexible when it makes sense to mix and match areas grazed and not grazed to accommodate fence locations but still maintain some undisturbed habitat in proximity.

Q: Are they treating the filter strips & prairie strips differently?

A: To some degree, yes. A filter strip has a very specific purpose to buffer a stream. Portions of a prairie strip may be serving another soil or water quality function PLUS it is intended to provide wildlife habitat. Due to the secondary purpose of a prairie strip to provide wildlife habitat, including habitat for pollinators, we can consider how those areas will be established and managed through the CRP contract.

PROGRAM UPDATES – Brad Soncksen, ASTC– Programs, NRCS (Highlights)

❖ Farm Bill Implementation

- Input on Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) Rule (comments were accepted through January 13, 2020)
- Input on Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Rule (comments were accepted through February 17, 2020)
- Input on Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) Rule (comments accepted through March 6, 2020)
- Input on Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) Rule (comments accepted through April 13, 2020)
- Comments will be reviewed to determine if further adjustments to the rule are needed.
- [www.nrcs.usda.gov /Releases/News Releases](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Releases/News%20Releases)

❖ CSP

- CSP – Nebraska
 - Results of 2019 General Signup
 - Applications = 614
 - New Contracts = 226

- Acres in contracts = 467,707
 - Contract obligations = \$22 Million
- Results of 2019 GCI signup
 - New contracts = 246
 - 73 different counties
 - Contract obligations = \$1.5 Million
- FY2020 Initial Allocations
 - CSP Classic = \$10 Million
 - CSP Renewal = \$8.6 Million
 - CSP-Grassland Conservation Initiative = \$3.4 Million
- Results of 2020-1 GCI signup (November cutoff)
 - Applications = 210
 - New contracts = 183
 - Contract obligations = \$1.3 Million
- GCI signup 2020-2 (March 6th cutoff)
- CSP Renewal signup (March 20th cutoff)
- CSP Classic signup (May 29th cutoff)
- Funding
 - \$700 million in FY19
 - \$723 million in FY20
 - \$750 million in FY21
 - \$800 million in FY22
 - \$1 billion in FY23
- CSP Applicant Eligibility
 - Be the operator, owner, or other tenant of an agricultural operation in the FSA farm records management system (§1470.6(a)(1))
 - Share in the risk of producing a crop; share in the crop available for marketing from the farm; and participate in the daily management, administration, and performance of the operation (§1470.6(a)(2))
 - No more operator of record waiver
- CSP Stewardship Threshold Eligibility
 - For CSP general applications, an applicant must meet or exceed the stewardship threshold on all land uses included in the operation for both of the following:
 - At least two resource concerns at the time of contract offer
 - At least one additional resource concern by the end of the contract
- CSP Application Process
 - Contract Renewal
 - During the first half of the fifth year of the initial contract period, NRCS
 - may allow participants to apply and compete to renew their initial contract
- **CSP Applicant Eligibility – Renewals (MAJOR CHANGE)**
 - Eligible participants who choose not to renew their initial CSP contract cannot compete for a new CSP contract for two years following expiration of their initial contract (§1470.26(c))

- CSP Land Eligibility
 - Public land associated with other eligible lands which is under the effective control of the applicant, and which is a working component of the producer's agricultural or NIPF operation is eligible for enrollment in CSP (§1470.3 *Eligible land* definition)
- **CSP Supplemental Payments**
 - New opportunity for supplemental payment for Advanced Grazing Management (AGM) (§1470.24(b))
 - The required grazing management enhancement (E528) is paid at the normal enhancement payment rate
 - Advanced Grazing Management Enhancements will have two payment scenarios:
 - The basic enhancement scenario (100%)
 - An "SU" payment scenario (150%)
 - **Advanced Grazing Management (AGM)**
 - **Definition:** The use of a combination of grazing conservation activities which may include management-intensive rotational grazing, that provide for:
 - improved soil health and carbon sequestration,
 - drought resilience,
 - wildlife habitat,
 - wildfire mitigation,
 - control of invasive plants
 - water quality improvement.
 - Authorizes payment for **cover crop activities** be paid at not less than 125% of the annual payment amount.
 - Authorizes supplemental payments for **resource conserving crop rotations** that will not be less than 150% of the annual payment amount.
- **CSP Planning – Conservation Activities**
 - **Comprehensive Conservation Plan**
 - Provides for a 1-time payment to develop a **comprehensive conservation plan**.
 - **Definition:** A plan that meets or exceeds the stewardship threshold for each priority resource concern across all land uses included in the operation.
 - A person or legal entity may not receive, directly or indirectly, payments that in the aggregate exceed \$200,000 for all CSP contracts originally obligated during fiscal years 2019 through 2023 (§1470.24(g))
 - Removed the \$40,000 annual payment limitation
- **CSP Contract Limits**
 - CSP contracts with joint operations (FSA business types 2 or 3) may have a contract limit of up to \$400,000 over the term of the initial contract period (§1470.24(h))
 - **Note:** This change is not retroactive to contracts enrolled in FY2019, which only allowed the higher contract limit for joint operations using an Employer ID number

❖ **CSP-Grassland Conservation Initiative**

- **Purpose:** Assisting producers in protecting grazing uses, conservation and improving soil, water, and wildlife resources and achieving related conservation values by conserving eligible land through grassland conservation contracts.
 - Must meet or exceed stewardship threshold for not less than 1 priority resource concern
 - Eligible for 1, 5-yr term
 - Annual payments of \$18/ac

❖ **EQIP**

- **EQIP General Application Cutoff = March 13, 2020**
- Proportion of EQIP funding:
 - Livestock: 50% (reduced from 60%) of the funds under the program shall be targeted at practices relating to livestock production and grazing management practices
 - Wildlife Habitat: At least 10% (increased from 5%) of the funds under the program shall be targeted at practices benefitting wildlife habitat.
 - Clarifies that contracts entered into solely for wildlife practices can be up to 10 years in length
 - New provision in FB allows terms up to 10 years for establishment of one or more annual management practices:
 - For postharvest flooding, or
 - That maintain hydrology of temporary and seasonal wetlands for waterfowl and migratory birds
- **EQIP Payments and Payment Limitations**
 - **Payment limitations:**
 - Aggregate payments cannot exceed \$450K
 - Payment limitation is not cumulative with prior Farm Bills
 - Organic payment limitation (NOI) increased from \$80K to \$140K with no annual payment limitation for contracts entered into between fiscal 2019 through 2023
 - **Contract limitations:**
 - \$450K contract limit with a person or legal entity
 - Joint operations and group projects may be eligible for \$900K contract limit
- **Expanded eligibility** regarding with whom NRCS can enter into an EQIP contract.
 - NRCS may enter into EQIP contracts with a State, irrigation district, groundwater management district, acequia, land grant–Merced, or similar entity. NRCS has defined these entities as “**water management entities.**”
 - Only applicable when supporting a water conservation or irrigation efficiency project
- **Payment Limitation Waivers:**
 - **Water management entities** may be eligible for AGI or PL waiver of up to 900K between FY 2019 through FY 2023 for water conservation projects based on:
 - Number of producers who will benefit
 - Conservation value
 - Non-federal assets
 - Extent of progressive practice implementation

- Other criteria determined by the Chief
 - AGI waiver will be approved concurrently with PL waiver
- **EQIP Incentive Contracts**
 - Incentive contracts, and payments for incentive practices, was created to better support locally led conservation needs.
 - Conservation Incentive Contracts (**incorporation of CSP-like program policy**)
 - Producers must address at least **1 priority resource concern**
 - Provides **annual payments** for certain incentive practices to attain increased levels of conservation
 - Provides **practice payments** to implement an incentive practice
 - **Contract length:** Not less than 5, no more than 10
 - **EQIP Incentive Contracts - High Priority Areas**
 - Section sets out the process and requirements for **establishing high priority areas within each State** that form the backdrop for the new incentive contracts.
 - Requires that NRCS, in consultation with the State Technical Committee, shall **identify up to 3 priority resource concerns for each land use** within a given high priority area.
 - NRCS shall **identify which practices qualify as incentive practices** for each land use within each high priority area based on the priority resource concern(s) identified for that land use.
 - **EQIP Incentive Contracts**
 - Payments are made of two components:
 - **Incentive practice payments** for adopting and installing practices
 - **Annual payments** for managing, maintaining, and improving incentive practices during the contract period
 - Aggregate payment limitation:
 - **May not exceed \$200k** total payments to person or legal entity
 - Payment Limitation may not be waived
 - **Currently on hold to announce EQIP Incentive Contracts**
 - Policy and business tools under development
 - Rollout timeline and implementation instruction to be released Spring 2020
 - High Priority Areas
 - Priority Resource Concerns
 - Applications can be accepted but cannot be ranked at this time
- **EQIP High Priority Practices**
 - State Conservationists, in consultation with the State Technical Committee, have the **option to select up to 10 high priority practices, which may receive increased payment rates**. A high priority practice must meet one of the following criteria:
 - Addresses specific causes of impairment relating to excessive nutrients in ground or surface water;
 - Addresses the conservation of water, to advance drought mitigation and declining aquifers;

- Meets other environmental priorities and other priority resource concerns identified in habitat or other area restoration plans; or
- Is geographically targeted to address a natural resource concern in a specific watershed.

***Selection of practices to receive higher payment should incentivize conservation practices that have high potential for conservation but are underutilized.**

▪ **EQIP High Priority Practices: (Maximum of 10 practices allowed)**

- 314 – Brush Management
- 327 – Conservation Cover
- 328 - Conservation Crop Rotation
- 332 – Contour Buffer Strips
- 338 – Prescribed Burning
- 386 – Field Border
- 391 – Riparian Forest Buffer
- 393 – Filter Strip

* Only applies to “very low density” scenario for practice 314

- 395 – Stream Habitat Improvement or Management
- 412 – Grassed Waterway
- 472 – Access Control
- 590 – Nutrient Management
- 595 – Pest Management
- 657 – Wetland Restoration
- *420 – Wildlife Habitat Planting
- *604 – Saturated Buffer

* Practices 420 and 604 are Not Available in FY2020

○ **HEMP**

▪ **Regulation:**

- USDA’s AMS published an interim rule for the Establishment of a Domestic Hemp Production Program on October 31, 2019
 - Provides specific details for both a process for the submission of State and Indian tribal plans to USDA and a process for producers in a jurisdiction without an approved plan to apply for authorization directly from AMS.
- AMS will notify FPAC agencies, including NRCS, when it approves a State or Tribal plan, and such approval will be posted to the AMS hemp website at <https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/hemp/state-and-tribal-plan-review>.

▪ **Production:**

- Producers may be authorized to produce hemp by a State or Indian Tribe which has a USDA-approved plan for the domestic production of hemp.
- Producers may seek authorization to produce hemp directly from AMS if they are in a State or territory of an Indian Tribe that authorizes hemp production, but such State or Indian Tribe does not have a USDA-approved plan.
- All producers will be required to be licensed through the State, a Tribe, or AMS.

○ **SOURCE WATER PROTECTION**

- Source Water Protection Language in the 2018 Farm Bill
 - The Secretary shall encourage the protection of drinking water sources through the following methods:
 - **Identify local priority areas for drinking water protection** in each state
 - In collaboration with State Technical Committees and **community water systems**
 - May address water quality or quantity concerns
 - Provide increased incentives for practices that relate to water quality and quantity and **protect drinking water sources while also benefitting producers**
 - **Dedicate at least 10% of the total funds available** for conservation programs (with the exception of CRP), each year beginning in FY 2019 through FY 2023, to be used for source water protection.
 - Addresses **excessive nutrients**, and other impairments of drinking water sources (**ground water or surface water**).
 - Addresses the conservation of water to advance **drought mitigation**
 - Practice incentive payments for this initiative will go to **EQIP eligible owners/operators** of agricultural land who install conservation practices relating to **water quality and quantity**.
 - Is geographically located to address a national resource concern in a specific watershed.
 - Focus of initiative is the protection of community water systems that is defined by 25 people or more, 15 or more service connections, year-round.
 - In Nebraska, 99% of municipalities use ground water as their source of drinking water.
 - Groundwater Management Areas – may be eligible if they encompass several community water systems.
- **Identifying State Local Priority Areas**
 - State Conservationists have worked with either the drinking water program or interested utilities/public water systems in their states to identify priority areas.
 - Utility/state partners assisted NRCS in developing delineations for the priority areas
 - Sizes vary depending on whether it is a surface water or ground water source, and by the size of the population it serves
 - States have used a variety of approaches in determining local priorities.
- **Source Water Protection Practice List: *Practices with potential up to 90% c/s rate.**
 - 327 - Conservation Cover
 - 328 - Conservation Crop Rotation
 - 332 - Contour Buffer Strips
 - 340 - Cover Crop
 - 342 - Critical Area Planting
 - 355 - Well Water Testing

- 386 - Field Border
 - 390 - Riparian Herbaceous Cover
 - 391- Riparian Forest Buffer
 - 393 - Filter Strip
 - 412 - Grassed Waterway
 - 449 - Irrigation Water Management
 - 590 - Nutrient Management
 - 635 - Vegetated Treatment Area
 - 656 - Constructed Wetland
 - 351 - Water Well Decommissioning
 - 430 - Irrigation Pipeline
 - 441 - Irrigation System, Micro irrigation
 - 442 - Sprinkler System
 - 512 - Forage and Biomass Planting
 - 550 - Range Planting
 - 595 - Integrated Pest Management
 - 657 - Wetland Restoration
 - 659 - Wetland Enhancement
- **EQIP Allocation FY2020**
 - **2020 Mandatory Distribution**
 - Source Water Protection – 10%
 - Wildlife Initiative – 10%
 - Historically Underserved – 10%
 - Livestock – 50%
 - **FY2020 STATEWIDE FUND POOLS**
 - Seasonal High Tunnel
 - Organic
 - Energy
 - Conservation Activity Plans
 - Animal Feeding Operations
 - Tribal
 - HEL Treatment
 - **FY2020 PARTNERSHIP FUND POOLS**
 - National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI)
 - 4 Projects = \$1.3 million
 - Water Smart (Bureau of Reclamation)
 - 1 Project – URNRD = \$150,000
 - Forest Service (Joint Chiefs)
 - 1 Project – UNWNRD, MNNRD, ULNRD = \$342,000
 - **FY2020 General EQIP Allocation = \$23 Million**
 - Local Work Groups = \$14 Million
 - Wildlife (10%) = \$2.3 Million
 - Historically Underserved (10%) = \$2.3 Million
 - Source Water Protection (10%) = \$2.3 Million
 - Animal Feeding Operations = \$1.0 Million
 - HEL Treatment = \$500,000
 - Conservation Activity Plans = \$200,000

- Working Lands for Wildlife = \$100,000
- High Tunnels = \$100,000
- Organic = \$100,000
- Tribal = \$100,000
- Energy = \$25,000

❖ RCPP

- 375 Active Projects
- 2,000 partners
- \$1 billion NRCS Investments
- \$2 billion in non-NRCS investments
- Provides mandatory funding at \$300 million (from \$100 million)
 - 50% of available funds for state or multi-state projects
 - 50% of available funds for projects within critical conservation areas
- Removed National funding pool
- Removes 7% funding contributions from covered programs
- Adds CRP and Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act as covered programs
 - Land enrolled into the new CSP-Grassland Conservation Initiative is not eligible
- **Agreements can be for longer than 5 years** if longer period is necessary to meet the objectives of the program
- **A partnership agreement may be renewed** for a period not to exceed 5 years.
- Provides ability to renew partnership agreements through an expedited non-competitive process **if Secretary determines that a project has met or exceeded the objectives** of the project and extension is requested by the partner.
- **Existing Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) projects in Nebraska**
 - Ogallala Aquifer & Platte River Recovery (5 Years, 2015 – 2019)
 - CPNRD, TPNRD
 - \$ 1.7 million
 - Current balance = \$23,000
 - 1-year extension approved
 - Expires 05/13/2021
 - Renewal Application TBD
 - Regional Grassland Bird & Grazing Enhancement Initiative (5 years, 2015 – 2019)
 - Missouri, Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa
 - \$ 885,000 (Nebraska allocation)
 - Current Fund Balance = \$160,000
 - Expires 09/30/2020
 - Cropland Cover for Soil Health and Wildlife – NGPC
 - Initial Allocation = \$700,000
 - Current Balance = \$18,000
 - Expires: 12/31/2020
 - Approved for Renewal
 - (Approved funds = \$700,000)
 - Agreement being developed
 - (potential 5 years into 2025)
 - Next signup in FY2021

- Republican Basin Conservation Partnership – LRNRD
 - \$2.1 million allocated
 - Additional FA approved = \$500,000
 - Current balance = \$509,000
 - Application deadline was January 17, 2020
 - Expires: 08/08/2020
- Divots in the Pivots – UBBNRD/RWBJV
 - Combination of ACEP-ALE, ACEP-WRE and EQIP
 - \$1.8 million
 - Expires 09/30/2022
- Wahoo Creek Water Quality Sites 26 & 27 – LPNNRD
 - \$1.5 million
 - Active Status
- Papillion Creek Site WP-1 Dam – PMRNRD
 - **\$4.4 million**
 - Active Status
- **FY2019 RCPP APF released September 3, 2019**
 - Applications were due December 3, 2019
 - 4 proposals received involving Nebraska
 - RCPP Award Announcement mid-March 2020
 - Partnership Agreements finalized mid-June 2020
 - Next APF anticipated July 1, 2020

❖ **National Water Quality Initiative**

- Wahoo Creek - Saunders
- Bazile Creek – Antelope, Pierce, Knox
- Big Sandy Creek – Little Blue NRD
- Turkey Creek – Lower Big Blue NRD
- FY2020 NWQI Allocation = \$1.3 Million
 - Big Sandy FA = \$206,059
 - Wahoo Creek (Implementation) FA = \$289,970
 - Wahoo Creek (Readiness/Planning) TA = \$50,000
 - Bazile Creek FA = \$401,717
 - Turkey Creek FA = \$390,951
- FY2020 Application Cutoff Dates
 - Big Sandy = May 22, 2020
 - Wahoo Creek = April 17, 2020
 - Bazile = March 13, 2020
 - Turkey Creek = March 13, 2020

❖ **CONSERVATION INNOVATION GRANTS (CIG)**

- History of CIG
 - Originally authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill
 - First grants awarded in 2004
 - Reauthorized in 2008, 2014 and 2018
 - On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials (and Soil Health Demo Trial) added in 2018

- **What is Innovation in a CIG Context?**
 - Developing and demonstrating approaches and technologies that, **based on initial research and testing, have a high likelihood of success.**
 - On-farm demonstrations and field tests
 - **Originally meant to be a bridge between research and wide-scale adoption**
 - On-farm research added in 2014, but only in-field, applied conservation research.
 - **Transfer** of an approach/technology **from a proven ag sector or geography to a new one.**
 - **Demonstration** of a new technology that has shown promise in controlled settings.
 - **Demonstration** of a new approach for financing private lands conservation.
 - **Demonstration** of a new approach for incentivizing producer adoption of conservation practices and systems.
- **What do we try to avoid in CIG?**
 - Traditional outreach and education projects
 - On-farm conservation activities that are funded through EQIP
 - Projects with no field-based or demonstration component
 - Funding the same partner twice for the same idea
 - Funding projects that are intended to lead to commercially available tools or products (i.e., bias toward tools and products available to producers for free)
- **CIG Classics**
 - Funds the development of promising approaches and technologies—which may or may not be successful!
 - Funding rarely provided directly to producers
 - Projects often include small-scale pilots or demonstrations
 - National and State competitions
- **CIG On-Farm Trials**
 - Funds the implementation and evaluation of innovative approaches, systems and practices that we know provide a conservation benefit.
 - Funding must be provided directly to producers to offset implementation risk.
 - Partners must complete both conservation and economic evaluations.
 - Soil Health Demo Trial awardees must agree to use consistent assessment methods.
 - National competition only.
- 2020 On-Farm Trials funding announcement released May 15, 2019
 - 2020 On-Farm Trials Award recipients announced November 26, 2019
 - 4 Nebraska projects approved
- 2020 CIG “Classic” funding announcement released May 30, 2019
 - 2020 national CIG Classic funding announcement to be released by April 1, 2020

❖ ACEP

- **Current NRCS Easement Programs**
 - Agricultural Conservation Easement Program
 - Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP-ALE)
 - Wetland Reserve Easement (ACEP-WRE)
 - Emergency Watershed Protection Program – Floodplain Easements (EWPP-FPE)
 - Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)

- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) – Easement Authorities
- **Repealed NRCS Easement Programs**
 - Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) - 1992
 - Emergency Wetlands Reserve Program (EWRP) – 1993
 - Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) – 1996
 - Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) – 2002
- Funding: \$450 million each year (\$2.25 billion); increase of \$225 million
- **Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP-ALE)**
 - Combines the purposes and functions of FRPP and GRP
 - NRCS provides funds to eligible entities for the purchase of agricultural land easements.
 - Eligible Entity holds the easement
 - US obtains a 3rd party right of enforcement
 - Eligible Entity responsible for monitoring, management, and enforcement
 - **Purpose:**
 - Protecting the agricultural use and future viability, and related conservation values, of eligible land by limiting nonagricultural uses of that land that negatively affect the agricultural uses and conservation values.
 - **Added Buy-Protect-Sell Transaction**
 - Eligible entity shall hold the ALE but transfer ownership of the land to a farmer or rancher that is not an eligible entity within 3 years after the date of ALE acquisition.
 - Removed requirement of an agriculture land easement plan
 - Still requires conservation plan only for land that is highly erodible cropland.
 - **Removes requirement of 50% cash match associated with charitable donations.**
- **Wetland Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE)**
 - Same purposes and functions as WRP
 - NRCS purchases easements directly from private and Tribal landowners through a reserved interest deed in eligible land to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands and associated lands.
 - US holds the easement
 - NRCS responsible for monitoring, management, and enforcement
 - Compatible Use Authorizations
 - The authority to grant CUAs has been specified in the regulation (§ 1468.38(d))
 - **CUAs are time limited and may be modified or rescinded by NRCS at any time.**
 - In evaluating CUAs, NRCS will consider whether the CUA will **facilitate practical administration and management of the land and ensure that the CUA furthers the easement functions and values.**
 - Water management has been added to the list of specific examples of compatible uses identified in the ACEP regulation.

- **Grazing as Compatible Use:**
 - Can follow either a WRE conservation plan or “a grazing management plan that is consistent with the WRE plan and has been reviewed at least every 5 years”.
 - Allows ‘Alternative Plant Communities’
 - Must be hydrologically appropriate native community or alternative naturalized vegetative community.
 - Eliminate the 30% restriction on restoration of alternative plant communities.
- **25 years of NRCS Easement Program Accomplishments - Closed Easements**
 - As of end of FY 2019:
 - Over 22,750 easements
 - On over 4.8 million acres
- **2019 SPRING FLOODING**
 - EWP – Floodplain Easement Program
 - Sign up ended October 31, 2019.
 - 28 active applications on approximately 6300 acres.
 - Cost estimates exceed \$20 million for purchase and restoration.
 - Nebraska received an initial allocation of \$4.7 million.
 - Approval of applications is pending.
- **FY2020 ACEP - Nebraska**
 - Application cutoff – April 3, 2020
 - FY2020 allocations
 - ACEP-ALE = \$580,000
 - ACEP-WRE = \$2.8 million
 - Ranking tool being revised - CART
 - Easement State Tech Subcommittee meeting - TBD

❖ **2020 LOCAL WORK GROUP MEETINGS –**

- Meetings completed in January/February 2020
- **Allocation provided to 23 Local Work Groups**
- ***LOCAL WORK GROUP AGENDA ITEMS:***
 - Priority Resource Concerns
 - Fund Pools - Ranking Tools – Screening Tools
 - Revised ranking process for FY2020 – CART
 - Practice Payment Schedule
 - Local issues

QUESTIONS & Comment

❖ **CSP -**

Q: 1.) What was the change for land eligibility? **2.)** Who is eligible?

A: 1.) Public lands are now eligible when part of the participants Ag operation. **2.)** Landowners and Operators who contribute to the day to day management and have a financial risk in the operation.

Q: 1.) Do you have an example of what is called a rescue conserving crop rotation? 2.) Advanced Grazing Management?

A: 1.) The addition of a small grain crop to a standard corn-soybean rotation. 2.) Incorporates a higher level of rotational grazing as one example.

❖ **SOURCE WATER -**

Q: Does this include both the quality and the quantity?

A: YES

❖ **EQIP -**

Q: What is considered high priority practices?

A: Critical practices needed to treat priority resources that are underutilized. Higher payment rates are applied to increase incentive to apply these practices.

Q: How do we get the priority resource concerns?

A: Through analysis of the environmental conditions of Soil, Water, Air, Plants and Animals.

Q: Are the RC just for EQIP or CSP too?

A: Priority resource concerns are a consideration in all financial assistance programs including EQIP, CSP, and others.

Please send any further questions or comments to Tami Nordman @ tami.nordman@usda.gov

FUTURE 2020 MEETINGS:

June 4, 2020 @ UNL Extension Office, 444 Cherrycreek Rd, Lincoln

September 10, 2020 @ NE Game & Parks Outdoor Education Center, 4703 N. 44th St, Lincoln

December 3, 2020 @ NE Game & Parks Outdoor Education Center, 4703 N. 44th St, Lincoln