

NRCS Florida State Technical Committee

Meeting Minutes

June 18, 2020

10 a.m. to 11:30 p.m.

Web Conference

*Presentation slides can be viewed on the [State Technical Committee agenda website](#).

Nina Bhattacharyya, Assistant State Conservationist for Partnerships, NRCS, Intro (nina.bhattacharyya@usda.gov)

- Reviewed rules of engagement for meeting

Juan Hernandez, Florida State Conservationist, NRCS, Opening remarks (juan.hernandez@usda.gov)

- Thanks for opportunity, this is my 9th day of work. Thanks for coming. Looking forward to our face-to-face meeting when Covid-19 allows and it is my commitment to meet in-person as soon as possible. Gained some insight into things we can be doing and are doing and can do better. Encourage State Technical Committee and partners to schedule meetings with me.
- Intent to have at least 2 State Technical Committee meetings annually. Not a fixed schedule. More as needed but at least twice.
- Agenda will be developed in such a fashion and in such a way that your feedback is solicited. Comments can be provided during meeting or after meeting by email.
- My intent is to change how we deliver the EQIP [Environmental Quality Incentives Program]. More details later but the high cut is there will be Conservation Delivery Teams. There will be twelve in the state and funding will be provided according to those teams. The local working group will become vital in allocating our people/funds. I am looking for 3-4 funding pool recommendations for each team. Developing a draft and will reconvene with you on just this subject prior to finalization.
- Looking forward to feedback on potential conservation practices that are underpaid. Using fixed costs not actual costs and some are way below. Identify what is paid below expected average.

Nina Bhattacharyya, Partnership Updates

- Meeting material on the website (Slide includes link)
- Updates from last meeting – partner comments on programs and technical resources and responses from NRCS on the website:
 - Guides are available on using NRCS programs and practices
 - Partner email inbox was developed: SM.NRCS.FLGA2.PartnerInput@usda.gov
- LWG – subcommittee of the STAC. Provide local resource and program priorities

- AFCD helped develop a survey. Survey was distributed to the NRCS local field offices and the Florida soil and water conservation districts. Due to COVID-19, many did not meet. Thanks to those LWGs that did meet and provide recommendations.
- RCPP Review Process – We will get your recommendations to NHQ. Brief refresher provided on RCPP.
- *Question from Adam Bass, Conservation Florida:* Do we know a timeframe for RCPP submission this year.
 - *Nina answered:* the latest information from the national office is a June/July timeframe for an announcement for funding, but no definite date has been set yet. Nina encouraged STAC to sign up for NRCS news releases to learn of funding announcements.

Chakesha Harvey, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, NRCS, Financial Assistance Program (FAP) Updates (chakesha.harvey@usda.gov)

- FAP Overview
 - EQIP – Goals of the program (Slide)
 - EQIP – subaccount and national initiatives (longleaf pine and WLFW) (Slide)
 - Input – local working group and STAC encouraged to provide input (Slide)
 - SUMMARY OF FY19 Program FA (slide)
 - CSP – goals of program (Slide)
 - RCPP – EQIP & CSP – Goals of the program (Slides)
 - High Priority Practices (Slides)
 - May receive increased payment rates—determined by STC
 - Address water quality or quantity resource concerns
 - Solicitation from STAC for practices that need the higher rate
 - Commonly used wildlife practices (Slides)
 - Solicitation from STAC of practices that we are missing or should be considering
 - Practice Costs and Payment Rates (Slide)
 - Provided website link for location of practice costs and payment rates
 - Taking input now for 2021
 - Display of the State Payment Schedules on NRCS Webpage (Slide includes link)
 - Feedback & Input on resources concerns throughout the state.
 - Juan’s input to STAC on key points for 2021 or lack of input. We will make the decision without you but we want your input.
- *Question from Peter Kleinhenz, Tall Timbers* – What is the best email to use for input?
 - *Nina answered:* Partner input inbox (SM.NRCS.FLGA2.PartnerInput@usda.gov). STAC members can also email any of the presenters.

Roney Gutierrez, Assistant State Conservationist for Easements, NRCS, Easement Program Updates (roney.gutierrez@usda.gov)

- ALE (Slide) – Partner driven program
- WRE (Slide) – Landowner & Tribe driven program
- ALE Changes in the Farm Bill (Slide)
- FY2019 Easement Summary (Slide)
- FY2020 Easement Program Status (Slide) – Maintenance of the easements through the years
- STAC Feedback (Slide) Please provide your feedback via email on ALE & WRE ranking criteria, GARC, WRE CUAs

Questions and Comments:

- *Question from Charles LaPradd, Miami Dade County:* is there an option for AGI waiver for Agricultural Land Easements (ALE)?
 - *Roney replied:* yes, the participant can request an AGI waiver.
- *Question from Susan Carr, North Florida Land Trust:* Does Florida NRCS determine what is a grassland? Specifically, what is a grassland vs. a forestland and how much grassland must be present for a property to be eligible for ALE program. For example, pine woodlands of north Florida don't always fit neatly into grasslands vs. forest land distinctions.
 - *Roney replied:* many properties have clear distinctions between grasslands which include mostly grass species vs. forestland that is primarily forested. Where it can become a question is for situations where trees are more sparsely populated and there are grasses and the landowner may be grazing that area periodically. The line is drawn on a case by case basis. There are criteria where biologists and foresters make that call. Wherever they make that call, the forestland cannot be more than 2/3 of the property. If it's more than 2/3 forestland, then it is not eligible. *Juan added:* if lands are primarily forested, there are other easement programs that are not ALE or WRE but focus on forestland. *Roney added:* forest easements are only offered through the Regional Conservation Partnership Program. If partners are interested in pursuing forestland easements with landowners, they will need to submit an RCPP proposal.
- *Question from Gene Altman, Southwest Florida Water Management District –* Does NRCS intend to resume use of the EQIP contract payment estimator?
 - *Chakesha replied –* the field offices have the EQIP contract payment estimator for use as a tool for them. It is optional for the field to use but is available for them to get a quick estimate.
- *Question from Julie Morris, The Florida Conservation Group –* Question on appraisal for WRE. – If the acreage is exceeded under pasture and improved pasture for the GARC rate, will the easement purchase price be 70% of appraised value or 70% of GARC.
 - *Roney replied:* if there are not enough comparables from the market analysis to inform a GARC rate for WRE for a certain land use (e.g. type of cropland), then NRCS will have to do an appraisal for the property. We cannot use the GARC.

NRCS will hire an appraiser to appraise the fee value of the property. We will then apply the percentage of the easement that came out of the GARC to that fee value. For example, per the market analysis if the average value of the easement compare to the full value is 70% for a given land use, we'll take that percentage and apply to the appraised fee value of that property.

- *Question from Lance Arvidson, Common Ground Ecology* – for ALE Appraisals, are they done by 3 independent appraisers or USDA staff?
 - *NRCS response:* the Partner is responsible for getting the appraisal and we have specifications to provide to the partner. We do not get involved in the manner the appraisal is obtained, but it must meet our specifications.
- *Question from Melissa Hill, Alachua Conservation Trust* – Is there a formal NRCS definition of Ag Land?
 - *Nina responded:* yes, we will provide the NRCS definition of agricultural land as part of the NRCS responses to the meeting.
- *Question from Susan Carr, North Florida Land Trust*, regarding national bulletin on refining source water protection local priority areas for fiscal year 2021, is Florida NRCS working on this? Does the State Technical Committee have input on these priority areas? How will these priority areas factor into easement eligibility?
 - *Nina responded:* NRCS Florida is reviewing the bulletin and following the process identified to refine the local priority areas. We will be looking to the State Technical Committee to provide input once we go through that process. We will be using EPA data to help with the refinement process. The way the source water protection area relate to our programs is that per the Farm Bill, NRCS is to allocate 10% of program funding (EQIP, WRE, ALE in some cases, and RCPP)
- *Question from Erica Hernandez, Alachua Conservation Trust* – How is the 2/3 forestland calculated [for ALE]? Is this based on the tree species, size, canopy cover, or density? Are there guidelines?
 - *Roney replied:* yes, there are guidelines. We can make that available to the STAC.
- *Gene Altman* - Does NRCS still update the unit rates for each component of the EQIP contract payment estimator on an annual basis?
 - *Chakesha replied:* yes, updated annually off the payment schedule.
- *Gary Ritter, Florida Farm Bureau* – Does FL NRCS work with FDACS office on program cost-share dollars to help in development of BMPs in state BMAP programs.
 - *Nina replied:* yes, we have been having conversations with FDACS Office of Agricultural Water Policy to better coordinate our programs. NRCS recognizes the importance of doing conservation work within the Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP) areas. We used the BMAPs to identify source water protection areas last fiscal year and will continue to refine the source water protection priority areas within those areas.

- *John Halvorsen, Timberland Investment Properties* – How will we know when EQIP dollars are approved for the program?
 - *Kesha replied:* we have recently started our pre-approval process and we will have the final numbers on what was approved by Sept. 30.

Juan's closing remarks

Thanks so much for the good questions! Refreshing and welcoming. Engaging in such an impersonal medium. Looking forward to face-to-face. Value your input. For those that may have an interest in this topic, the American Farmland Trust has developed a national report and are doing webinars for each state called "Farms Under Threat". Florida's webinar will be released on June 26th at 1:00. You can view this on the American Farmlands Trust website, Farms Under Threat.

Comments and Questions received via email after meeting:

Peter Kleinhenz, Tall Timbers Research Station & Land Conservancy provided the following comments:

- As Tall Timbers has conducted outreach to contractors and practitioners related to prescribed burning, we have received a few common threads of feedback. First, is that prescribed burning, especially in the Panhandle is increasingly being utilized as a management tool. Interest really is growing at a rapid rate. Second, the rates applied to prescribed fire should be increased. Due to long-term fire suppression, the vulnerability of lands surrounding prescribed fire sites to wildlife has been increasing for some time. A few high-profile burn escapes illustrate this. As a result, prescribed burn rates must account for the additional costs that contractors and other burn practitioners must absorb. A private lands burn team member at Tall Timbers provided the following information:

"A reasonable number for vendors is a minimum of \$3500 per day to make a profit plus about \$500 to write the burn plan, initial site visits, etc. That number is derived by amortizing equipment, insurance, paid labor, plus a meager profit (like 15%IRR). Fire breaks would not be included. This means that larger acres typically get burned as they are profitable when the NRCS cost share is \$21-25/ac. For example, a 100 acre burn is approaching that threshold. However, smaller properties (of which most NRCS potential projects fall under) do not get burned as a result of current pay rates.

As more landowners, particularly those with smaller acreage, look to implement burning, the above information should be considered to incentivize a greater number of sub-100 acre burns in order to improve habitat and reduce wildfire risk.

Melissa Hill and Erica Hernandez, Alachua Conservation Trust

- Local working groups from the technical committee: Is there a way for a representative from ACT to join one of these working groups?
- Feedback and Questions on ACEP ALE Program:
 - Provide a checklist next fiscal year to include all items that entities need to provide for their application.
 - What activities are considered agricultural for an ACEP ALE GSS? (example: planted pine, row crops, cattle). Does this definition define thresholds, proportions densities that help define these categories? Can this definition please be shared publicly with partners?
 - How does NRCS FL calculate what is considered forested land according to the new ruling that a property may not have more than 75% forested land. How is 75% cover calculated? Is it a density of specific tree dbh and height? Stem count? Canopy cover? Is a GIS analysis done to determine this?
 - Does this mean that planted pine does not count as agricultural land? Is this because planted pine is only part of HFRP program and not eligible to ALE cost shares?
 - Sandhill ecosystems on the ALE application are rated highest on the ALE GSS and regular ALE ranking sheets. These ecosystems are over 90% removed for the southeast and we think it's really great that NRCS is emphasizing the importance for their protection. While these ecosystems have highly diverse ground cover of perennial grasses and forbs, they also naturally have pine and some oak open canopy. We understand that a dense canopy would preclude these ecosystems from being considered GSS but these ecosystems are pine savannahs, they are grasslands with trees. These pine trees help manage the sandhill by contributing pine needles for carrying fire, and support listed species like red cockaded woodpeckers. It would be unusual to see an intact sandhill without pine trees. Nothing in the ranking sheet deters points for having appropriate native canopy. This ranking value seems to be in conflict with some of the rules. The rules do not seem like they would work to actually protect many sandhills unless they've been logged. We see two issues here, a disconnect between the rules and actually protecting sandhill communities, and how to determine the proportion of forested to grassland and agricultural cover and how this is calculated to determine if the property meets the rules.
 - What are the allowed proportions of natural community to agricultural land?
 - If a property is a designated grassland (like a longleaf pine/wiregrass ecosystem), then does it not count as forested land?
 - ACEP ALE GSS Supplemental Ranking Worksheet:
 - Ranking Factor A: Is this determined by a specific data layer?
 - Ranking Factor B: Is there a time window of relevancy for crop history? Example after 90 years it restarts as habitat has been able to recover. If

not, it could be useful to determine an alternative metric for "Biodiversity" and crop history is not always a strong correlation for a site past a certain amount of years.

- Can an internal handbook that defines and brackets many of these questions be shared?