

State Technical Committee Meeting

USDA State Office, 344 Merrow Road, Tolland, Connecticut

January 22, 2020

MEETING NOTES

In Attendance:

Thomas Morgart , Javier Cruz, Joyce Purcell, Arde Ramthun, Debbie Surabian, Carol Donzella, Jim Hyde, Carol Grasis, Abbie Cadman, (NRCS) Doug Emmerthal, Erik Bedan, Chris Martin, Lisa Wahle, Joe Wettemann, (DEEP), Peter Beringer, (USDA-FS), Abbie Maynard (CAES), Kira Jacobs (EPA), Joe Walsh (Aquarian Water), Wayne Woodard (TNC), Chris Sullivan (SWCD), Lilian Ruiz (CSWC), Denise Savageau (CACD), Chelsea Gazillo (AFT), Eric McPhee (CTDPH), Lois Bruinooge (TLGV)

Welcome/Opening Comments/Review Agenda/Minutes – Thomas Morgart, STC

Tom welcomed everyone and wished all a Happy New Year; he gave a brief update on the 2018 Farm Bill Rollout

Subcommittee Reports

Easement Subcommittee – FY2020 ACEP-ALE Ranking – Wayne Woodard, Sunny Valley Preserve

Wayne reported on the subcommittee members and their review process of the 2020 ACEP-ALE Ranking criteria. Recommendations included the addition of sugarbush under the national criteria, changing climate change resiliency to climate change mitigation, adjusting points for water quality and infrastructure. The methodology for the 2020 ACEP-WRE GARC was also approved.

2018 Farm Bill Discussion – Tom Morgart

Tom reported on the new ACEP Buy-Protect-Sell option. Unfortunately, the state is not allowed to participate as they are not an eligible landowner; however Land Trusts can. Tom feels there is a lot of opportunity out there to save farmland before its lost forever.

National Conservation Practice Standards – Review/Comment – Arde Ramthun, SCE

Arde reported that 170 national practice standards were to be reviewed by the end of December 2019; some were found not acceptable (i.e., greenhouse insulation must be inflammable and heavy use protection for feedlots which applies to the mid-west). Connecticut has 100 practice standards that are being migrated to a document management system. Partners are welcome to comment on the state standards, too.

Interim Rule for EQIP and ACEP Notification – Joyce Purcell, ASTC-Programs

On January 6, 2020, CCC and NRCS published an interim rule in the Federal Register that made changes to the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) regulations.

Changes to EQIP include:

- Creating incentive contracts and payments for incentive practices to better support locally led conservation needs
- Requiring NRCS to offer an advance payment option for historically underserved producers
- Raising the payment cap for producers participating in the Organic Initiative to \$140,000 for contracts entered between fiscal 2019 through 2023
- Expanding the Conservation Innovation Grant program, which is funded through EQIP, to include opportunities for On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials and Soil Health Demonstration Trials

EQIP Comment Date: Submit comments on or before February 17, 2020.

Changes to ACEP for agricultural land easements include:

- Increasing authorizing assistance to partners who pursue “Buy-Protect-Sell” transactions
- Requiring a conservation plan for highly erodible land that will be protected by an agricultural land easement
- Flexibility for partners to meet cost-share matching requirements

UPDATE (ACEP): Effective: January 24, 2020 – Comments Date: The comment period for the Interim rule published January 5, 2020, at 85 FR 558, is extended. We will consider comments that we receive by March 20, 2020.

Policy is being developed as comments are received.

RCPP – Proposal evaluation process is March – June 15th for FY 2019 - proposals that are selected for funding for the 2019 agreement to be completed in June. New announcement for Program Funding for FY 2020 proposals to be announced in June or July.

Tom Morgart - Partners will have the opportunity to influence some aspects of the agreement, at the project level.

Source Water – Javier Cruz, ASTC-Field Operations

Next source water meeting January 29th

There is some confusion of the plans to meet the criteria. More public outreach will be provided to address specific resource concerns – select criteria and source water protection plans – area wide resource concerns for the public.

Gypsy Moth Update – Forestry Division Representative

Peter Beringer – Current focus is on the cleanup of dead and fallen trees. Tariffs are affecting timber prices of trees in Connecticut with a reduction of 60% that was sold to China. Due to lack of lumber from the United States there is an increase in the black-market activity.

Program Allocation Update – Joyce Purcell

Initial Funding:

- EQIP - \$5,389,675 includes New England Cottontail (NEC) and National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) initiatives
- ACEP – \$3,668,963
- AMA - \$114,800
- CSP - \$64,000

Program Updates – Carol Grasis, RC

Carol reviewed some of the 2018 Farm Bill changes for the programs Hemp, Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA), Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

Carol – States can select up to 10 conservation practices to be eligible for 90% practice payment rate. Possibly for practices that are not popular or not utilized to often.

Tom Morgart – Discussion - What is your input on high priority practices? There is an opportunity to provide up to 15% additional funding.

- Young forest management practices - tree mitigation work – endangered species
- Nutrient management – composting facility, waste storage facility, fence
- Nitrogen bio reactor – removing hydrogen and nitrogen – subsurface tiling
- Riparian forest buffer – suggest incentivizing this practice

- Anything to be removed from the list or added?
- Something they couldn't get funds for anywhere else – something only NRCS pays for
- Payback period for energy sources

Resource Conservation Updates – Abbie Cadman

- 2020 Payment Schedule
Payment schedule websites are complete for EQIP, RCPP-EQIP & AMA. In waiting are CSP and ACEP. This is a high priority. Updates will be listed on the NRCS CT website
- The 2021 payment schedule is in development.
- Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) / Conservation Desktop (CD)
Version 3 of the Conservation Desktop was released on 1/23/2020. The toolkit will be removed in March 2020. All training is complete. (for now).
- Planners will utilize CART to assess clients' resource concerns, planned practices, and site vulnerability as part of the conservation planning process and will rank client

applications for NRCS program funding. CART ranking applies to all programs, including easements.

- CART- is being used for ranking and application evaluation, geospatial and questions based. Release for planners is scheduled for 1/23/2020

Conservation Innovation Grants – Joyce Purcell

- The \$75K state cap award had been removed – 50% match is required. The state can identify CIG priorities for their competitions
- Thomas Morgart – Asked the committee if they want to put a cap on Connecticut for CIG
- Wayne Woodard – If priorities are set CIG on up to \$200,000 and will consider larger if the project is worth it.

Emergency Watershed Protection Program – Flood Plain Easements – Arde Ramthun

- Flood Plain Easements/ Watershed Dam Rehab –
 - EWP-There are two projects on Dam Rehab: Clinton is waiting on permits and Chester is ready
 - Flood plain easements are in phase/round 3 with 44 properties enrolled. Currently title searches, AAI's, and appraisals are being done
 - Watershed dam work on Farm Brook Dam in Hamden
 - There was a public meeting about the Norwalk River Dam No. 2 (known locally as Great Swamp Dam) to discuss rehabilitation planning efforts was in January. Norwalk Rehab plan is ¾'s done

RCPP Updates – Joyce Purcell/Partners

- Water security UCONN – Some contract implementation to be done
- Long Island sound extended one more year – until May 2021
- Lois Bruinooge – Looking for technical assistance money. Habitat easements bring in landowners with forest. Brought in all three Audubon's – 24 projects are under contract
- UCONN - Path to Pathogens – are looking for water quality producers for projects
- UCONN is doing GIS on source water protection
- Lilian Ruiz; CSWC – nine sub-awards, all have requests for extension except one
- Land easements grants – six or seven applications. One large property is ready for an easement. Going to open applications for more easements. Looking to close on three properties in 2020

Partner Reports –

- DEEP - hired Fire Control Officer
- USDA – Bill Purcell - District Conservationist Danielson; Michelle Hendricks, Assistant State Conservationist for Management and Strategy has retired her position open; Jule Dybdahl, Business Service Specialist now working for FSA, his position open; NRCS will

be hiring a forester and soil conservationist soon to fill vacancies

- Kira Jacobs EPA
- Denise Savageau CACD – DEEP meeting, looking to regulatory program. Losing staff – how can the partners help? Need training for new staff
- Lilian Ruiz; CSWC – Workshop - US Climate Alliance. Work is being done in all the states- CT went to working lab. Was able to get in with health for Connecticut. Informs and supports GC3.
- Thomas Morgart – Long Island Sound is doing a \$21M budget study. Farmers budgets are small – trying to match with EQIP and other programs – Creative ways to match government funds to get on the ground.

Next Meeting: To be determined.