

Tennessee State Technical Committee Meeting

Webex

August 12, 2020

Minutes

Present:

Derek Alkire, National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF)
Mike Black, Shortleaf Pine Initiative
Dustin Boler, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
Derrick Brasher, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Agency (NRCS)
Brandi Broughton, USDA- Farm Service Agency (FSA)
Katherine Burse, USDA-NRCS
Jamie Carpenter, USDA-NRCS
Katie Commender, Appalachian Sustainable Development
Katherine Diersen, Defenders of Wildlife
Britton Dodson, Tennessee Department of Conservation and Environment (TDEC), Division of Water Resources
Shawna Mitchell Fix, Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute
Kelly German, USDA-NRCS
Pat Gibson, USDA-NRCS
Emily Granstaff, USFWS
J. S. Griffin, Tennessee Association of Utility Districts
Mark Gudlin, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency
Brian Hamm, TDEC, Division of Water Resources
Danny Jones, USDA-NRCS
Sheldon L. Hightower, USDA-NRCS
Leslie Honicker, USDA-NRCS
Zach Luttrell, The Nature Conservancy
Robin Mayberry, USDA-NRCS
Jason McAfee, USDA-NRCS
John McClurkan, Tennessee Department of Agriculture
Steven Morris, USDA-NRCS
Allen Morrow, USDA-NRCS
Andy Neal, USDA-NRCS
Chris Nelson, USDA-NRCS
Bill Norfleet, USDA-NRCS
Mike Oliver, NWTF
Todd Reed, USDA-NRCS
Matt Richards, Tennessee Department of Transportation, Ecology Section
Alex Richman, Tennessee Forestry Association
Chris Roberts, Tennessee Wildlife Federation
Emily Stefanick, Panther Creek Forestry
Tammy Swihart, USDA-NRCS
Tennessee Farm Bureau
Leon Tillman, USDA-NRCS
Chris Wolkonowski, USDA-NRCS
John Woodcock, Tennessee Division of Forestry/USDA-NRCS
Suzanne Senecal, USDA-NRCS

Welcome/Opening Remarks: Sheldon Hightower, State Conservationist, USDA-NRCS

Thank you for being on today's call and/or webinar. I hope that everyone is staying safe and healthy.

- **New TNSTC Member:** I would like to welcome Katie Commender, who is a new member of the Tennessee State Technical Committee (TNSTC). She represents the Appalachian Sustainable Development, which is a non-profit organization in southwest Virginia serving counties in West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina. Agroforestry is one of their main programs.
- **TN-NRCS Personnel Announcements**
 - **Aaron Friend, State Soil Scientist (SSS):** Aaron is Tennessee's new State Soil Scientist. Due to COVID-19, he is currently working from Auburn, Alabama, where he formerly served as a Soil Data Quality Specialist providing quality assurance for the soil database for all parts of eleven states covering 150 million acres across the southeastern portion of the country.
 - **Matt Walker, State Resource Conservationist (SRC):** Matt has been selected as the new State Conservationist for Maine effective September 13th. We have appreciated all his hard work and dedicated leadership in Tennessee. Please send him a note to express your appreciation for his work. An acting will serve in the role until the position is filled.
 - **Chief Matt Lohr:** Chief Lohr will be leaving the agency at the end of this week. We appreciate all that he has done for our agency. He is returning to farming. Associate Chief Kevin Norton will serve as acting Chief starting next week.
 - **New Employees/Pathways Program:**
 - We filled 24 positions in fiscal year (FY) 2020, in which the majority of these positions are customer-facing positions and located in the field offices.
 - We were able to continue with the Pathways and Recent Grad Program this year and had a total of nine interns who started in May and will conclude their internships in August.
- **Meeting with USDA-NRCS Chief and Regional Conservationist:** I spoke with Chief Lohr and James Tillman, Southeast Regional Conservationist, on the phone last week. They appreciate how our partnership is being implemented in Tennessee and for the work that is being done on protecting our natural resources in the State.
- **COVID-19 Update:** At this time, we have 51 service centers in Phase 1. We are practicing social distancing and rotating personnel (no more than 10 per office) in our offices to assist customers. We must ensure that personal protective equipment is available to all employees so they can carry out as much work as is possible. No visitors are allowed in the service centers; only persons who are employed by or assigned to the Farm Service Agency (FSA), Natural Resources Conservation Service, and/or the Conservation District will be permitted on site during Phase 1. We are working with FSA and Rural Development (RD) on the reopening of USDA Service Centers.
- **Programs – Payments:** The field staff processed \$38 million worth of payments. Thank you for making this happen. Tennessee received additional funds for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). We will hear more on this later this morning from the Programs staff.
- **Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program:** We are working with sponsors on recent floods and with 30 sponsors on various storm events in Tennessee.

Additional Personnel Announcements: Jamie Carpenter, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, USDA-NRCS

The Programs staff has two new additions. Pam Hoskins is the new Easement Manager replacing Allen Persinger and Emily Leonard is one of our new Management Analysts.

- ***Pam Hoskins, Easement Manager:*** I am glad to be here and part of the team. I have been a district conservationist (DC), most recently in the Woodbury field office. I have close to 29 years with the agency all of which was field work. I am excited to work with this new team.
- ***Emily Leonard, Management Analyst:*** I am new to the agency. My career consists of six years in the Navy with two deployments. I have a master's degree in policy management. I am excited to be part of the team and to help with the financial assistance (FA) payments for EQIP and CSP. I am looking forward to working with everyone.

Conservation Efforts for the Laurel Dace and Its Habitat: Shawna Mitchell Fix, Science Coordinator, Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute (See attachment.)

I work for the Tennessee Aquarium Conservation Institute as the Science Coordinator and spend the majority of my time in the field looking for threatened and endangered fishes throughout the Southeast.

- ***Additional Comments***
 - In 2019, a number of agencies met to work towards protecting the watershed on Walden's Ridge and to educate one another on the different aspects of protecting present species. We have had 10-12 meetings preCOVID-19 and have had other meetings virtually since that time. We have started to work with one of the district conservationists with NRCS, Justin Howard, who has worked with this group to bring change on Walden's Ridge. I am confident that this group will make a positive difference on the Ridge.
 - Last year, we sent 25 invitations to landowners of whom only 4 attended. However we learned a lot from those farmers and have a better understanding of what approaches that we should take to work successfully with them. Pioneer farmers are working with us and are helping other farmers to understand that we are trustworthy. In early 2020 we applied for a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant for which we received \$90,000. We will purchase two crimper crop rollers to help vegetable farmers lay cover crops between their rows. The cover crop rollers will be available to loan out to farmers. We also plan to hire technical assistance within the next few months to work directly with farmers on Walden's Ridge. This is the first ag grant that the Aquarium has received and will hopefully make a lot of difference for lots of people.
 - We are waiting on the announcement for Regional Conservationist Partnership Program (RCPP) so that we can implement innovative ideas on both Walden Ridge and Sequatchie Valley, where there is a lot of vegetable farming but also some cattle. This will be a multi-partner effort.
- ***TN-NRCS's Comments: Sheldon Hightower***

Thank you for the presentation and for the collaboration with Justin Howard and Leon Tillman on efforts to improve the Laurel Dace habitat.

**ECP (Emergency Conservation Program) and CRP (Conservation Reserve Program):
Brandi Broughton, Agricultural Program Specialist, USDA-FSA (See attachment.)**

- **Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)**
 - **Continuous CRP and General CRP:** Only the Continuous CRP re-enrollment offers and the General CRP offers must be submitted by August 21, 2020. September 11, 2020 is the deadline for NRCS to return Conservation Plan of Operations (CPOs) to FSA for contract approval by September 30, 2020.
 - **CRP Grassland:** CRP Grasslands is a new program, for which there were only a few accepted offers. September 11, 2020 is the deadline for NRCS to return CPOs to FSA for contract approval by September 30, 2020.
 - **SAFE Proposal:** Tennessee submitted a SAFE (State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement) Proposal, CP38E, Bobwhite Habitat Restoration Practice. If the proposal is approved, it will be effective in fiscal year (FY) 2021. We would like to thank Mark Gudlin of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) and Robin Mayberry of USDA-NRCS Tennessee for participating in this effort.
 - **Non-Emergency Programs:** Opportunities for non-emergency programs are available to producers. Please contact your local FSA county office to determine eligibility.
- **Emergency Conservation Program (ECP):** The recent May disaster affected five counties in Tennessee. Please contact your local FSA county office for additional information.
- **TN-NRCS's Comments – Sheldon Hightower, USDA-NRCS**
Thank you for the presentation. We appreciate FSA's partnership on programs and for their assistance with recovery efforts for Tennessee's recent tornadoes.

ACEP (Agricultural Conservation Easement Program): Derrick Brasher, Easement Coordinator, USDA-NRCS (See attachment.)

FY20 FB Payments to Date: Melanie Mitchell, Management Analyst, USDA-NRCS (See attachment.)

EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentive Program): Kelly German, Resource Conservationist, USDA-NRCS (See attachment.)

Many of the slides are repeats from the last Tennessee State Technical Committee (TNSTC) meeting, as we are still going through program with few changes. At the next TNSTC meeting, we will have final numbers for fund pools and the number of contracts.

- **High Priority and Source Water Protection Practices**
 - We need the committee's feedback on the following:
 - **High Priority Practices** – Should TN-NRCS offer payment rate for high priority practices and which practices should be included on the list?
 - **Source Water Protection Practices** – Should TN-NRCS offer payment rate this year and which practices should be added to or removed from the list?
 - Please send your comments to Kelly German (kelly.german@usda.gov), Jenny Adkins (jenny.adkins@usda.gov), and Sue Senecal (suzanne.senecal@usda.gov).
 - Prior to submitting the list of these practices to Sheldon for FY2021, we plan to have a meeting in September. If you wish to participate in this meeting, please email me and Jenny.

RCPP (Regional Conservation Partnership Program): Kelly German, Resource Conservationist, USDA-NRCS (See attachment.)

CSP (Conservation Stewardship Program): Bill Norfleet, Resource Conservationist, USDA-NRCS (See attachment.)

Top 5 Resource Concerns for FY2020: Please provide your feedback to me at bill.norfleet@usda.gov if we need to change the top five resource concerns, which include:

- Concentrated Erosion
- Degraded Plant Condition
- Soil Quality Limitation
- Terrestrial Habitat
- Wind and Water Erosion.

TN-NRCS's Comments – Sheldon Hightower

I would like to thank Jamie and the Programs Staff for their reports today. NRCS staff have learned a new assessment tool this year to rank Farm Bill applications.

Tennessee Department of Agriculture Update (TDA): John McClurkan, Administrator, Land and Water Stewardship (LWSS) Programs

It is good to be on the call today. I want to thank all of you for the information provided and for the partnership with NRCS.

- **TDA LWSS Programs' Update**
 - **Funding:** We are creating amendments to contract and obligate \$6 million at the State level for Tennessee's new fiscal year as of July 1st. The funds have been entered into our financial system. On Monday, we were informed that several have final approval. FY2021 will be challenging as well as FY2022. We will monitor funds.
 - **Contribution Agreement Employees:** TDA is working with TN-NRCS to provide funding for contribution agreement employees in 30 soil conservation district (SCD) offices across Tennessee. The FY2021 agreement has been executed.
 - **Streambank Stabilization:** At the last session, legislation passed by the Tennessee General Assembly regarding streambank stabilization practices, designed in conformance with conservation practice standard (580) and Chapter 16 of the USDA-NRCS Engineering Handbook and that constitute a federal action. This will be covered by a Tennessee Department of Environmental and Conservation (TDEC) general permit and will not require mitigation as per the recent publication in Chapter 589. TDEC has held a public hearing on this topic; the anticipated date for the issuance of the general permit is December 2020. This will help our producers, as the process of obtaining a state permit is more streamlined. Additional information is available at <https://publications.tnsosfiles.com/acts/111/pub/pc0589.pdf>.
- **TN-NRCS's Comments – Sheldon Hightower**

We appreciate TDA's help in putting conservation on the ground. We requested additional funding \$7.0 million for EQIP and received \$4.5 million. We also requested an additional \$3 million for CSP and received over \$1 million. States will determine the amount of financial assistance (FA) that can be used after August 14th and determine if there is an opportunity for additional funds.

Additional Business

- **Tennessee Division of Forestry: John Woodcock, Rural Forest Management Program Specialist**
 - **Seedling Orders:** The East Tennessee Nursery changed its beginning order date to September 1 for the online and hard copy application forms.
 - **Grant Programs:** The D’Addario/Promark Play, Plant Preserve, and the Huber Trees for Tennessee are the available seedling grants and tree planting programs in Tennessee this year. Funds for the Southern Pine Beetle Initiative and rural forestry Tennessee Agricultural Enhancement Program have been allocated. If additional funds become available, there will be an October reallocation period for the landowners whose requests were denied in May. We will have another signup period for the Duck and Elk River Watershed Forest Initiative (DEWI) during the month of September. DEWI is a hybrid of the Elk and Duck River Watershed Buffer Initiative.
- **Tennessee State Technical Committee – Grazing Lands Subcommittee Meeting: Tammy Swihart, State Grazing Specialist, USDA-NRCS**

I would like to invite everyone to join us for this afternoon’s State Grazing Lands Subcommittee Meeting from 1-2 p.m. During this initial meeting, we will discuss the committee’s structure, goals and objectives and then focus on what needs to be accomplished in the future.

Final Comments: Sheldon Hightower, State Conservationist, USDA-NRCS

- Thank you to all the presenters and to everyone for joining us today. The meeting minutes and presentations will be up on our website within 30 days of this meeting. Our next meeting is on November 10, 2020. At this time, we are not sure as to the type of format it will be. We will keep you updated.
- We appreciate our partnerships and their efforts in conservation. We look forward to our next meeting. Stay healthy.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 11:40 a.m.

Minutes prepared by Sue Senecal, USDA-NRCS

Attachments:

- Farm Service Agency (FSA) – Conservation Programs Update – STAC Meeting – August 11, 2020
- Conservation Efforts for the Laurel Dace and its Habitat
- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) – Programs Combined