

**Idaho State Technical Committee  
August 11th, 2020 @ 9:00am  
virtual**

**Adobe Connect**

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**Welcome and Introductions – Curtis Elke, State Conservationist, NRCS**

Curtis covered the upcoming Farmer Satisfaction Survey. This new annual survey is focused on 25 customer facing agencies of which NRCS and FSA are two. The survey can be found at [www.Farmers.Gov/Survey](http://www.Farmers.Gov/Survey). It has 20 questions and should take about 10 minutes to complete. The Survey was announced on Aug. 7 and will stay open for at least 6 weeks and OPM receives 30% response rate. Elke noted that good data is essential to good decision making.

COVID measures update – Right now Idaho has 8 counties showing an upward direction. NRCS is taking it very seriously. Masks are required for NRCS staff. Limited staff are in each office as a safety measure. Meetings are by appointment and in the field. NRCS is currently in Phase 0 and Phase 1 for Idaho. When we reach Phase 2, we may be able to schedule in office appointments with producers

Touching on the reorganization plan, Curtis said that Secretary Perdue has signed the re-org plan and it has been sent to the Hill. NRCS is going from 28 District Conservationists to 17 Team Leads.

Elke also announced the agreement with ISDA for a Nutrient Management Specialist and offered a thank you to ISDA Director Celia Gould for working with NRCS to make this happen.

Other positions that NRCS is in the process of hiring include the State Water Quality Specialist and State Biologist.

Elke touched on Shared Stewardship and introduced the new NRCS State Forester, Chris Town.

NRCS staff is very busy right now. Contracting, obligating, planning is getting done despite COVID.

**Field Office Technical Guide Migration – Update – Bruce Sandoval, State Engineer, NRCS**

NRCS as an agency is moving to be more consistent across the US especially in Section 4 and documents. Now when you go into Section 4 and look at those documents will have the same terminology and format. For example, former Construction Specifications are now Practice Specifications. There are a few straggling issues. When those are complete, Sandoval will send out a notification to the staff and partners to let them know

**Big Water Projects – Update –Sandoval**

- EQIP WaterSmart fund
- Watershed Operations program PLC 6 (Franklin County)
- Working the last phase of Marysville group (\$5-10 million) Funds are not obligated yet, but it is in contracting. Quite a bit of the design work is done. The first mile, mile-and-a-half is already in the ground. When we finish it up it will be 20,000 acres under all 5 phases.

- Keith Esplin noted he is working with landowners in that area on aquifer recharge and asked “Who do I need to talk to?”
  - Sandoval responded: “You can start with me, Dan Murdock, those guys up there, Curtis. If we should be looking at incorporating recharge into the design, let us know. Jake Owens is the DC up there.”
- Raft River (\$25 million eventually)
- City of Cottonwood

### **Working Lands for Wildlife Strategy – Lara Fondow, Acting State Biologist, NRCS**

Sage Grouse Initiative (SGI) – The program has resulted in very successful, landscape scale efforts across NRCS. Thanks to SGI partner efforts, the US Fish and Wildlife made the decision *not* to list Greater Sage Grouse. Science is the backbone of NRCS efforts related to Working Lands for Wildlife.

Easements to tie together those landscapes.

Fondow listed some of the key components of the upcoming 5-year strategy.

- To maintain threat-based approach
- To decide where we want to use particular practices
- To decide what programs to use
- To hold/host workshops
- To utilize tailored communications to get the word out.

Fondow noted that “We have spent \$1.5 Million annually” on SGI.

She will be reaching out to partners, so that their responses may be included in the necessary submission to NRCS National Headquarters by Sept. 1

### **Easement Application received in FY 20 – Update – Wade Brown, Easement Program Coordinator, NRCS**

There are 7 ACEP-ALE applications in Idaho for FY 2020

- One is an RCPP app in Driggs area – this one is not part of the competitive ACEP-ALE pool
- Applications are coming from Idaho, Blaine, Custer and Franklin counties
- 9,600 acres of offered properties
- \$7.6M worth
- \$2.7 in initial funds – 2 were funded
- Went back to national for additional funding \$2.5M helped cover all but one of the apps
- 8,300 acres of offered parcels

There is one WRE

- 80 acres
- Benewah County
- It will be funded

### **Easement Priority Areas for Idaho, do we need them – Discussion - Wade Brown, Easement Program Coordinator, NRCS**

(Map of priority areas was shared onscreen)

Removing priority areas would allow competition across the state

Brown has spent a lot of time in the field talking to landowners and said he is sensing a shift among landowners statewide about land use conversion.

ACEP applications must be through a land trust that is working with a private landowner. In the 2018 Farm Bill, Congress recognized that land trusts were having a hard time coming up with those funds. The landowner can now donate that 50%.

#### Current Priority Areas

- Blaine county priority area was the original priority area. It has been in place since roughly 2010-11. This priority area came about due to Sage Grouse concerns. The Pioneer Alliance, a very diverse group of stakeholders lobbied in DC to get it created. This area has been extremely successful.
- That area was expanded east into Clark and Fremont counties, also for SGI. It was created under advice from the STAC.
- The priority area in Elmore County was third, also SGI related. It was developed and approved through the STAC process.
- The priority area in Custer County was also SGI related. It was developed and approved through the STAC process.
- The priority area in Bonner County is the only non-SGI area. However, it combines a number of high-value habitat/natural resources. It was developed and approved through the STAC process.
- The priority area in SE Idaho is mostly SGI but also contains the Bear River Corridor as well as other priority species. The Sagebrush Steppe group requested it. It was developed and approved through the STAC process.

Can we handle that through the ranking process? Priority areas + sage grouse funding = no one else can compete.

#### Questions:

- What types of easement requests are being submitted but being overlooked due to funding constraints?
  - Answer:
    - Idaho county. All landowner donations. 2 of 3 were funded. Expecting them to kick off more interest in that area. The Director of Payette Land Trust has had 5 people contact him in the last 3 months about easements. There is also interest in Grangeville.
    - 2 separate landowners – Latah county
    - Canyon County – big property that is going to be very high value. Landowner is willing to donate the Trust's portion (\$10 to 15M)
    - 2 additional landowners just outside priority areas who are willing to donate that 50%
    - Jerome and Minidoka
  - A lot of interest in priority areas still
    - 12 to 15 people on a list who are looking at future easements
  - We want the best of the best.
- Question: Ranking currently seems to be entirely wildlife driven. Do Idaho applications compete only with Idaho applications?
  - **Brown** - First 200 points are nationally determined. The other 200 points are state determined and can be changed.

- **Palazzolo** – One of the reasons we went to priority zones in the beginning was to create a concentration of acreage
- **Brown** – That can be handled within ranking as well. Focus on the resources that make an area a priority rather than the polygon.
- **Kassib** – We'll be sharing some of those ranking questions at the Dec. Meeting

### **Local Workgroup Report in FY 20 – Discussion**

Elke kicked off the discussion of the Locally-led Workgroup reinvigoration effort

- Hired Ray Ledgerwood to train staff and partners
- Then hired facilitators for LLG meetings
- Worked well and we plan to do the same again.

Fondow noted:

- The Facilitated component was good. Being the first one there was a bit of a learning curve
- It was important for them to know they have a voice
- Building relationships

Top results from the LLWG across the state were:

- Water quality/quantity
- Forestry
- Soil health

Are we focusing in the right direction? It is important to have a diversity of interests

Recommendations from STAC members:

- Spread them out so partners can attend a little bit
- Some groups take big picture view, others are more self-interested
- Some semantic issues
- Mixed meeting, virtual could lead to higher participation

### **Cheatgrass Challenge Update – Projects awarded – Lori Kassib, Programs, NRCS**

Kassib noted there were some really good proposals

- 10 total, 8 selected
  - Some tweaks to get them obligated
    - The selected proposals were prepared to hit the ground running and well posed for success
    - We hope that those who were not selected will come back next year with additional information and demonstrate readiness to participate.
  - Overlay of the project areas on state map
  - Crooked Creek/Birch Creek is the poster child for how this can work
  - Herbicide treatments, fire breaks, seeding/plantings, prescribed grazing were the typical practices in the proposals.
  - Monitoring – this will help us tell the story of our successes
- Special initiative – partners came together to leverage resources this year
- \$400,000 EQIP funds along with NFWF funds. Total of \$1.6M over the next 3 years

### **High Tunnel Applications– Discussion – Ron Brooks, EQIP Program Manager**

Brooks presented a history of the practice nationally and in Idaho

- Idaho obligates roughly \$500,000/year for high tunnels

- There may be a need to adjust the cap
- Popularity has grown and so has availability – more reasonable prices from more vendors.
- Options include:
  - Reduce cap to in the vicinity to \$4000/high tunnel
  - Reduce overall allocation to high tunnels
- 2020 – 75 to 80 applications statewide that will be funded out of a total of 165 apps
- What are the resource concerns being addressed?
  - Plant health/vigor and productivity even on a tiny scale.
  - Soil health, erosion control
- Who are the primary customers for high tunnels?
  - It has encompassed a wider and wider variety as the definition of cropland has evolved
- NRCS Idaho staff member Cheryl Simmons is helping on the Urban Ag side but also with the tribes
  - The point was raised that at the Northwest Indian Ag Committee meeting, tribal representatives mentioned being very interested in high tunnels, but meeting roadblocks around land control issues and in a few other instances.
    - NRCS staff will look into how we can help with roadblocks where we can.
- Is there any way to reexamining the ranking questions, so people aren't taking advantage of taxpayer funds?
  - We continue to refine the process
  - Screening may be an available route rather than ranking
- Ranking/screening questions will hopefully be presented at December meeting

**Drinking Water Priority Areas and Source Water Priority Areas – Marshall Thompson, SUEZ Vice President and General Manager**

- Source water map – drinking or food processing water
  - Zone of delineation
  - Significant sources of potential contamination
  - Likelihood of contamination occurring
  - Work with communities and Rural Water to develop protection plans
  - Nitrate management
- Increase awareness of groundwater quality issues across the state
- Increased collaboration
- Encourage conservation practices to help improve drinking water source
- Positive outlook for increased collaboration with various stakeholders
- Suez overview
  - Has a plan to meet DEQ and EPA requirement
  - Emerging contaminants (not yet managed or not in Idaho)
    - POFA (Teflon production/firefighting foam)
  - Suez serves about 250,000 residents in TV with approx. 100,000 connections
  - There are also fair number of irrigation hook-ups
  - Dual hook-ups onto property can sometimes lead to cross contamination
  - 22% of Suez's water comes from surface water, rest is groundwater
    - 3 treatment plants – remove iron and manganese
    - 2 treatment plants – PERC removal

**Sub-committees: what are they and who is on them, discussion**

- Consolidating some of the committees to better encompass the resource concern.
- The current list will be sent out to the STAC, so members can update their information, join or withdraw from subcommittees.

#### **Snow Survey Update – Danny Tappa, Senior Hydrologist**

- 3 new SNOTEL stations on tap
- New employee: Erin Wharton – Water Supply Specialist

#### **Soils Update**

- U of I shared position – Jesse Jamison in Twin Falls
- Soil Health Strategy
  - ArcMap
  - Soil Health related practices – in-field resource assessments
- Tech note has been released on soil health indicators and lab procedures
- Tech note has been released on how to complete and in-field soil health assessment

#### **Participants**

- NRCS Staff
- The Nature Conservancy
- Bureau of Land Management
- Idaho Dept. of Fish and Game
- US Fish and Wildlife Service
- Congressman Fulcher staff
- Idaho Rural Water
- DEQ
- EPA
- Potato growers group
- Association of Idaho Cities
- Idaho Dept. of Lands
- Idaho Forest Owners Association
- Land Trust of the Treasure Valley