

State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) Meeting
October 6, 2020

Kasey Taylor, State Conservationist

Agency's New Mission and Vision Statement

- Kasey provided a slide presentation of the Agency's new mission and vision statement unveiled in FY20, a broader effort to strategically guide to help our farmers meet the changing needs of agriculture and protect our natural resources for the future.
- The new mission and vision statements more accurately reflect who we are, what we do, and why this critical work is so important to our Nation's producers and will ensure that we are continuing "Helping People Help the Land".
- There are six priorities that we are charged with for FY20 and FY21.
 1. Implement and deliver the 2018 Farm Bill
 2. Streamline our processes and program delivery
 3. Understand our customers' needs and improve customer service
 4. Increase mentoring, training, and experiences for staff, customers, and partners
 5. Expand focused outreach efforts
 6. Elevate the importance of soil health
- Implementation and deliver of the 2018 Farm Bill in the first year, we delivered and funded over \$12.8M in conservation in Delaware.
- The obligated funds addressed the following prioritized resource concerns:
 1. Reduction of non-source point pollutants including nutrients, sediment and pesticides, and impaired watersheds consistent with our total maximum daily loads. As well as reduction of ground water contamination.
 2. Conservation of ground and surface water resources, focusing on irrigation water management systems.
 3. Reduction of emissions such as particulate matter and volatile organic compounds contributing to air quality impairment, focusing on agriculture waste management systems and poultry house management systems.
 4. Reduction in soil erosion and sedimentation in erodible land, focusing on erosion control systems.
 5. Promotion of at-risk species, focusing on habitat recovery and bio-diversity management systems.
 6. Preservation of agricultural lands in the state.
- Streamline our processes and delivery to move forward.
 - Improve tools and develop conservation assessments and plans.
 - Working with our employees and partners, we have completed 331 assessments for the state. They have prepared us to conclude our end of year obligations.
 - Source Water Protection/National Water Quality Initiative; providing incentive practices that relate to water quality and quantity and protect our drinking water sources.
 - We developed out a Delaware Strategic Plan; a roadmap of our goals, objectives, and strategies for implementation through the life of the farm bill.

- Increasing our focus on conservation through partnership with the Delaware Association of Conservation Districts for an expansive resource assessment prioritization as well as helping producers identify and assess needs and objectives specific to their operations for long term sustainability
- To ensure we are better understanding our customer's needs.
 - We worked with our national office and two of our collaboration grants have been accepted and approved. These will increase assistance to beginning, small, historically underserved, and veteran farmers.
 - One agreement will focus on pollinators and the second one will address urban agriculture.
 - We have also started looking at ag innovation which was competed through our competitive agreements to address coastal migration focusing on saltwater intrusion.
 - We are partnering in with our national office, NRCS of the Future for a list of 20 projects that are focusing on conservation practices, stewardship activities, and aligning real time success for where we can increase overall performance and productivity for the agency and provide better tools, technology, and a strengthened workforce.
- To do this, we need to focus on staffing, training and employee certifications for long term success and sustainability.
 - We have increased our staffing. Ending FY19 going into FY20, we were understaffed with 10 vacancies. We have been able to add those staff years back in place.
 - We have been able to revamp how our training is being provided.
 - We continue to work with our Conservation Agricultural Mentoring Program (CAMP), partnering in with core producers to help engage and provide support to our employees.
- Focusing on expanding outreach, we continue to partner with new producers in the state.
 - We have our Collaborative Conservation Grants that will help to provide additional support and assistance to our new, beginning farmers, historically underserved and veteran farmers. In addition to this effort, we have developed an agreement that will focus on urban agriculture in New Castle County and the entire state of Delaware.
 - We have a new agreement that will be the basis for the pilot in the state.
 - As we move the pilot forward, we will be able to share it and expand it out across the state.
- As focus on elevating the importance of soil health, we are proud of our continued collaboration efforts.
 - Through those efforts, we have been able to increase our soil health and expand our group of champions in the state.
 - Delaware has developed a soil health strategy to align with the goals and objectives identified by our soil health subcommittee.

Committee Introductions

- A round robin of introductions was made starting with NRCS staff, District Coordinators, DDA, and DNREC; there were approximately 41 attendees on the call.

Delaware Strategic Plan 2020-2025

- Kasey provided a slide presentation of the 2020-2025 Delaware Strategic Plan. The plan aligns the goals and objectives to guide the overall narrative of who we are as a conservation partnership and focus on specific deliverables and achievement of those concerns.
 - Goal 1 will realign our vision and mission statement focusing on our customer's needs, foster an environment for our employees to succeed, and collaborate with our partners to meet common goals.
 - Goal 2 provides support by addressing resource concerns by reducing pollutants, improve air quality, work with agricultural producers, improve soil health, and enhance wildlife habitat.
- Q&A
 - Chris Brosch, DDA asked if, were the objectives have changed within the last five (5) years and is the order significant?
 - Kasey replied that the objectives used to be internal to NRCS only as a business plan and we are now expanding them into a partnership effort. Also, the objectives are not in order of priority. It was based on the common occurring need and concern for resource assessments for financial and technical assistance. If there is a sequential order needed, it can be revised.

Jennifer Volk, University of Delaware Cooperative Extension

Jenn provided a presentation on an initiative she's working on, Natural and Working Land Policy Framework. Jennifer DeMooy, DNREC, introduced her to the topic started by the US Climate Alliance. Chris Brosch, DDA and a few others have participated in learning labs.

- Delaware's climate goals; the main goal is to reduce greenhouse gases by 28% below 2005 levels by 2025.
- In order to achieve the climate goals, you have to do more than reduce climate emissions of greenhouse gasses. You also have to maintain and grow your sinks.
- Natural working lands are places where you can have carbon sinks.
- US Climate Alliance has identified natural working lands as cropland, grassland, forests, wetlands, and urban green spaces.
- Jenn would like feedback to help review the document. If you are interested in assisting, she can be reached at 302-730-4000 or via email at jenvolk@udel.edu.
- She is using an NRCS tool called COMET Planner. There are a lot of variations of the tool and this version looks at things on a larger landscape.
- Jenn listed the most common practices for Delaware in accordance with NRCS:
 - Cropland Management (ex: nutrient management, cover crops, tillage)
 - Cropland to Herbaceous Cover
 - Cropland to Woody Cover
 - Grazing Lands

- Restoration of Disturbed Lands
- The COMET tool calculates total greenhouse gas emissions reductions in metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent per acre per year for a total greenhouse gas benefit.
- Jenn is looking at watershed planning documents that have already taken place and have been vetted. She has used Chesapeake Bay BMP progress data downloaded from the CAST tool as well as the Phase 3 WIP goals, non-point source program report, and CREP implementation goals.
- The implementation practices are already being used for water quality benefits. If we can get carbon benefits as well, it could open doors for additional funding to help in getting additional conservation programs on the ground.
- Programmatic goals/strategies have been established to increase implementation.
- Q&A
 - David Baird, Sussex District Coordinator said, looking at the 28% reduction requirement, through your research, have you been able to find the agriculture sector is meeting that or are they close, showing other opportunities?
 - Jenn responded, the 28% is the carbon emission reduction goal for the entire state. Agriculture is a small part of the state's emissions. What she is doing is a separate assessment and only looking at how much may be getting sequestered now and what additional may be done in the future.
 - Richard Wilkins stated that for the Delaware Farm Bureau and Agriculture Stakeholders, it would be imperative to meet with them to get their feedback from the farmers perspective.
 - Jenn replied that she will work with Richard to coordinate a meeting.
 - Kasey stated that this ties back into the strategic plan and to consider looking at a proposal for the Mid-Atlantic CIG.

Chris Brosch, Delaware Department of Agriculture, Nutrient Management Commissioner

- Chris reported that Jimmy Kroon has replaced retired Deputy Secretary Austin Short as Administrator for the Ag Lands Preservation Foundation. Jimmy has provided Chris with the following statement:
 - Jimmy reported that the last two years, round 23 and 24, have been two of the largest in the history of the preservation program in terms of farms and acres. Between those two years, they have selected 178 farms and preserved nearly 15,000 acres of cropland and forests. The recent success of the program has increased due to partnership with USDA NRCS, Ag Conservation Easement Program; which has obligated \$7.8M in funding for Delaware easements. This has enabled the Aglands Preservation Program to increase their selection list and acres by over 40% for the state.
 - To dated, we have settled on 80 of 130 round 23 easements and the round 24 easements are currently being surveyed.
- *Nutrient Management*
 - A COVID update, for the supply chain issues that we have suffered in our poultry industry; those issues are behind us now.

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- in the months of May/June and August/September, one of the Delaware integrators was faced with staffing shortages and facility issues that forced him to shut down processing of poultry. As a last resort, they were forced to depopulate and compost in the field over 2.5M birds in Delaware.
 - They have been in contact with the integrators and farmers to make sure that the investment that they made to properly compost those animals was done under their supervision. They have been completed successfully.
 - Farmers that have gone through this process have been compensated for their birds and some of their time that was used to maintain the houses to ensure proper composting conditions.
 - The Department is making these issues prominent in our communications to our congressional delegation as well as the governor's office. No update provided but they have been listening. They are investigating methods to help the poultry industry and the growers of chickens in the state to overcome the financial strain that this pandemic has placed on them.
 - *Cover Crop Contribution*
 - This year's budget was cut from \$2.9M to \$1M, they were able to leverage that with a National Fish and Wildlife foundation grant of \$250,000 additional funds to be spent in Delaware River Basin, the Delaware Estuary.
 - They are going to be investigating what the additional investment opportunities for quantifying or qualifying benefits to Delaware wildlife.
 - Chris asked the committee to think about how to quantify wildlife improvements as a result of cover crops to consider additional funding.
 - *Nutrient Management Commission*
 - They are still meeting monthly virtually.
 - At the last meeting, September, they approved a change in cost share payments for the movement of frozen mortality on poultry farms that utilize farm freezers.
 - They opened their manure relocation program to help offset the costs of hauling away frozen mortality from farms invested in farm freezers. That cost share was iterated at 75%.
 - Greener Solutions has asked the commission to allow them to integrate the cost share payments and do the applications for their clients and after deliberating, the commission approved that for the next year. If it's successful and funding is conducive to continuing that, they plan to do so.
 - *4R Alliance*
 - Thanks to partnership with the Delaware/Maryland 4R Alliance, the commission was supported financially to do a test questionnaire with producers in our state. They did a two-step questionnaire through targeted farmer interaction with the 4R Alliance and in partnership with the University of Delaware to test questions related to conservation activities surrounding nutrient management plans that have not been traditionally captured in nutrient management plans.
 - They are cost shared or voluntary actions of farmers to enhance nutrient management on their farm.

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- They worked with the 4R Alliance to develop a set of questions that a farmer could interpret.
 - They reached out to ten farmers with an in-person survey and have analyzed the responses to simplify the questions and cut down the number of questions and then sent a test questionnaire out to 1/10 of their customers annual report respondents for the nutrient management programming.
 - The results were compiled and reduced to a single page of yes/no or fill in the blank questions that will be discussed during tonight's commission meeting as an addendum to their annual report.
 - This will successfully help with the counting deeds that farmers have put on the ground.
 - Farmers filling out the questionnaire will be rewarded with additional continuing education two credits for responding to and returning the questionnaire.
 - The questionnaires will be mailed out towards the end of December, prior to Ag Week.
 - The approved questionnaire will be announced through a press release.
 - Live meetings will be scheduled with consultants from NRCS and the private sector to assist farmers with filling out the questionnaire.
 - The focus of the questionnaire is annual practices and understanding buffer strips.
 - More information will be provided once the commission has taken a final look.
 - Q&A
 - Richard Wilkins remarked on the potential for assistance to contract poultry producers, he is working with other states, major poultry states, farm bureaus. He said that they have a large number of legislators and administrators that see there is a need for equitable assistance to contract livestock producers. It is in both chambers' legislation of the Hero's Act and the potential legislation from the Senate to authorize; one chamber - \$1.25B and the other chamber - \$750M. Both chambers need to agree on the legislation.
 - The backup plan is that Secretary Perdue and his staff admitted there was a need for equitable assistance to contract livestock producers'. Their hands are tied because of the enabling rules that the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) says the producer must have ownership of the livestock to be eligible to use CCC funds.
 - There is legislation written that will give the enabling language to allow the Secretary of Ag to use CCC funds; to use some of the CFAP funding that has not been utilized yet.
 - They were hoping to attach this to the continuing resolution but, has not be approved. The plan now is to use additional COVID-19 assistance to make up for 75% of revenue lost for poultry producers.
 - Kasey stated that we continue to receive CFAP funds through FSA. FSA can provide updates or questions on CFAP. Please contact FSA for assistance.

Brooke Jones, Farm Bill Program Specialist

Brooke provided a presentation on the Ranking Pools for 2019 versus 2020

- In 2019, there were 40 ranking pools and we spent \$7M.
- For 2020 the ranking pools were consolidated into 17 ranking pools. We consolidated all of our beef/dairy/other with and without land ranking pools into a single livestock ranking pool and all of our individual conservation activity plans (CAPs) ranking pools into a single ranking pool encompassing all of the available CAPs and we spent over \$6M.
- In 2020, we also added urban ag.
- We are nationally mandated to spend 5% of our funds in Beginning Farmer/Limited Resource Farmers; 66% went to beginning farmers and 30% went to socially disadvantage farmers
- The national mandate required us to spend 50% on livestock practices; 79% went to livestock practices.
- The national mandate required us to spend 10% on wildlife; 2% went to wildlife practices.
 - Brooke is looking for ideas to expand wildlife practices. If you have any idea, please contact her.
 - Funding levels are consistent with less funding.
- In 2020, six of our 17 ranking pools were fully funded; \$7.3M in requests were unfunded; 169 applications.
- AMA - \$90,000 was allocated. We requested an additional \$200,000. We spent \$286,000.
- CSP
 - In 2018, many producers renewed.
 - 2018 – 2020 saw a steady level of approximately \$200,000+ every year.
 - In 2020 we will be providing more CSP outreach. We will target 5% of beginning farmer and ranchers and socially disadvantaged farmer and ranchers.
- Total funds obligated in 2020 were:
 - EQIP \$6,806,257
 - CSP \$367,583
 - AMA \$286,788
 - ACEP \$5,426,198

Karri Honaker, Assistant State Conservationist, Programs

- FY21 Programs
 - Going into FY21, the Programs team will be analyzing prior year funding using the State Resource Assessment (SRA) tool with a target to analyze the budget to increase funds.
 - They are looking to increase EQIP funding to \$10M over the next 3 – 4 years.
 - Funding requested for FY21
 - EQIP \$8 million
 - CSP \$1.7 million
 - ACEP (ALE: \$2.6 million, WRE: \$384,000)
 - AMA \$150,000
- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

- In 2018, RCPP was a standalone program that will use \$300M annually.
- RCPP has two funding opportunities:
 - State/Multi State
 - Critical Conservation Area (CCA)
- Delaware will receive a state allocation of \$3.4M, subject to change.
 - This includes CCA funding of \$247,553 in the Chesapeake Bay area.
- RCPP grows and enhances partnerships; in FY21, we will partner in collaboration meetings to discuss RCPP projects
- Goals and Timelines for FY21
 - The highest priority is to set the basis for implementation for the year for programmatic activities.
 - The goals for contracting activities will be set to be completed earlier; target: June 1, 2021.
 - Ranking completed by January/February 2021.
 - The payment schedule must be finalized and out for public consumption prior to setting batching dates.
 - Ranking criteria will be posted for at least 30 days prior to batching deadlines
- Payment Schedule
 - The FY21 payment schedule is at the national office for review.
 - Work to begin on the FY22 payment schedule in the first quarter of FY21.
 - Additional practices available in FY21 include (this is not an all-inclusive list)
 - 116 -Soil Health Management Plan -Written
 - 216 -Soil Testing
 - 368 -Emergency Animal Mortality Management (new scenarios)
 - 656 -Constructed Wetland
 - 658 -Wetland Creation
 - 659 -Wetland Enhancement
 - 808 -Soil Carbon Amendment
- Source Water Protection (SWP) Practices
 - Practices may receive up to 90% in SWP areas.
 - FY21 practices are consistent with the 32 practices in FY20.
 - There is an opportunity to select 10 additional high priority practices but must meet certain requirements.
 - Seven (7) high priority practices have been identified for FY21; same as in FY20.
 - 329-Residue and Tillage Management, No-Till
 - 390-Riparian Herbaceous Cover
 - 391-Riparian Forest Buffer
 - 393-Filter Strip
 - 605-Denitrifying Bioreactor
 - 604-Saturated Buffer
 - 620-Underground Outlet
- Kasey stated that in FY20, the budget needs were reviewed using the SRA tool. This accounted for our total employees and our deliverables. Our total conservation assistance funding was impacted due to the staffing shortage.

- We saw a reduction of funding from FY19 to FY20 of \$200,000. We are catching up the shortfall with a potential \$8M request for FY21.
- We have been able to leverage the FY20 staffing shortfalls by utilizing the agreement with the Conservation Districts to address critical resource concerns.
- Kasey also reported that Agland Easement Funding; the initial projection of \$2.6M, we are having conversations with DDA and they have shared that they are looking \$5M, if not higher, in assistance.
 - Karri stated, we will also have an opportunity for funds assessments throughout the year to increase funding.
- Kasey provided an update on the ongoing works that we have with NRCS, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and United States Geological Survey (USGS).
 - The three agencies are working in a collaborative effort to look at monitoring and assessments for best management practices identified within the Chesapeake Bay, as well as, addressing specific objectives that have been intended and prescribed through the practice standard. Terrell Erickson, NE, Region Conservationist, NRCS and Cosmo Servidio, Regional Administrator, EPA are leading this effort to increase engagement and communications within the Chesapeake Bay.
 - Three (3) core teams are being stood up and moved forward:
 - Funding team; Denise Coleman, PA STC ,
 - Water quality/monitoring team; Kasey Taylor, Dr. Kellner, Kelly Shank and others from the Chesapeake Bay
 - Workshop Team – This team will be led by Dr. Terron Hillsman, STC, MD. The NRCS, EPA, and USGS have formed a monitoring team to evaluate water-quality monitoring programs, and data analysis efforts, to achieve several objectives. The objectives include: Identify opportunities to further coordinate federal and state water quality monitoring programs, and interpretation of results, to assess the benefits of agricultural conservation practices on the health of local streams and the Chesapeake Bay.
 - Identify watersheds with the greatest needs and opportunities for monitoring the benefits of conservation work on local and Chesapeake Bay water quality.
 - Provide recommendations on how to address gaps in current monitoring and analyses.
- Local Work Groups (LWG)
 - The Programs team along with the Ecological Sciences team and Kasey have set up the following dates for quarterly State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) meetings.
 - 2/11/21
 - 5/13/21
 - 7/22/21
 - LWGs will be required to submit minutes by December 1, 2020.
 - Beginning in FY22, LWG meetings will be held earlier in order to provide updates to the end of year STAC meeting.

- David Baird, Sussex Conservation District, asked that based on the timelines provided, are you looking for something within the next 60 days and in the summer months?
 - Karri replied that yes, she would like to use the LWG meeting notes real time during for FY21. If we were to wait, we may not be able to get anything incorporated into items like the ranking criteria, etc. that affect the ranking of applications, in turn, contract implementation.
 - Karri and David will meet to discuss further.

John Bushey, Easement Specialist

- The Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) is the standard enrollment for WRP
 - For FY20, the GARC is \$5,000 for cropland and \$2,600 for woodland based on the FY20 areawide market analysis.
- ALE/WRE Ranking – waiting on templates from NHQ.
- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program Wetland Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE)
 - The Wetland Restoration Guide was discussed at the last State Technical Advisory Committee meeting. All inputs and edits have been established.
 - Alternative communities, applicable to any restored sites including both wetlands and uplands except for:
 - Existing forest shall not be converted to non-forest except where the existing forest is within 2 feet of mean sea level and occurs directly adjacent to existing tidal marsh. The conversion of forest within 2 feet of mean sea level to non-forest will facilitate migration of native tidal marsh, and;
 - Non-forested areas adjacent to perennial and non-channelized intermittent streams will be established to riparian forest buffers of at least 150 feet in width or the width of the geomorphic floodplain plus 50 feet, whichever is greater.
 - ACEP-WRE does not have a minimum size for eligibility, but applications of less than 10 acres will be given lower priority, except when the following applies:
 - The land currently provides habitat for rare, threatened, or endangered species; or,
 - Enrollment will result in the restoration of unique or rare wetland types (e.g. Delmarva Bays); or,
 - The land is integral to restoration on a contiguous parcel, and the total area of the combined parcels is 10 acres or more.
 - Marsh Migration Eligibility (MME) includes cropland, active pasture, and forest land below 2-ft above mean sea level (AMSL).
 - Lands enrolled under MME eligibility must be paired with directly adjacent lands with elevations between 2-4 ft AMSL.
 - The acreage enrolled below 2-ft AMSL shall be no more than the paired acreage where marsh migration will be allowed to occur.
 - The WRPO must include provisions to allow for marsh migration within the areas below 2-ft AMSL and the paired lands above 2-ft AMSL
 - The lands above 2-ft AMSL may have primary or adjacent land eligibility.

- Tidal marsh may be considered eligible for enrollment in support of marsh migration when needed for management (e.g. phragmites control) or restoration.
 - Cropland, including CRP/CREP land capable of being cropped, and woodland enrolled under MME will have standard GARC rates applied, as applicable.
 - Tidal marsh of up to 10 percent of the total easement area will received the woodland rate. If the tidal marsh exceeds 10 percent, an appraisal will be required for the easement.
 - Lands enrolled under MME criteria must meet all other program eligibility requirements.
- Please share any feedback with John no later than October 31st.

Jayne Arthurs, State Resources Conservationist

- National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI)
 - NWQI is USDA's premiere water quality initiative.
 - NRCS works with other agencies/partners for watershed planning, implementation, outreach, and monitoring efforts.
 - \$514,000 has been obligated for the Clearbrook – Nanticoke River Watershed project.
 - The projects must have established watershed plans and assessments.
 - We will request Clearbrook – Nanticoke River Watershed be removed from NWQI for FY2021.
 - For FY22 they will develop funding readiness plans for the Cow Bridge Watershed in Sussex and the Drawyer Creek/Duck Creek Watersheds in New Castle.
- If anyone is interested in being a part of the planning committee for NWQI for FY22, please contact Jayme.
- David Baird asked if FY21 projects established in FY21 will be funded in FY22?
 - Jayme responded that they are finishing readiness plans in FY21 to establish funding in FY22.
 - If there are questions, please send an email to Jayme, Kasey, or Ivy.

Heather Beaven, Resource Conservationist

- Conservation Reserve Program/Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CRP/CREP) Contact Management
 - CRP/CREP is managed by FSA and NRCS provides technical recommendations.
 - Management activities are required by the end of year 6 for a 10-year contract or before the end of year 9 for a 15-year contract.
 - CRP/CREP Contact Management options for years 6 - 9 are:
 - Over Seeding
 - Strip Disking
 - Prescribed Burning
 - Targeted Herbicide Application
 - Moist Soil Management

Control non-native invasive vegetation

Tree Thinning

- NRCS recommends that the type of vegetation established, and the age of the contract be the primary considerations when recommending contract management.
- NRCS will submit their contract management recommendations to FSA outlining when contract management is and is not needed to enhance plant diversity and optimize wildlife value.
- CREP/CRP CP-4D Permanent Wildlife Habitat NRCS Recommendations
 - CP-4D is a primarily herbaceous practice.
 - In the past woody plant invasion has been a common problem on CP-4D sites.
 - NRCS recommends that participants have the option for 5% tree/shrub allowance. NRCS/TSP will educate landowners to avoid volunteer woody species invasion.
- If you have any questions, concerns, or comments please contact Heather, Jayme, or Ivy.