



United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service
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MASSACHUSETTS STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MINUTES

June 18, 2020
9:00am – 12:00
Meeting Held Virtually

Participants

- Dan Wright, USDA/NRCS
- Tom Akin, USDA/NRCS
- Rita Thibodeau, USDA/NRCS
- Diane Petit, USDA/NRCS
- Helen Castles, USDA/NRCS
- Rachael Phillips-Barnes, USDA/NRCS
- Holly Nemeth, USDA/NRCS
- Nathan L’Etoile, American Farmland Trust
- Kira Jacobs, US EPA
- Karl Honkonen, USDA/Forest Service
- Alex Hackman, Dept. of Fish and Game/DER
- Brian Wick, Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Assoc.
- Michael Leff, Franklin Conservation District
- Gerard Kennedy, MDAR
- Matthew Reardon, MA DEP
- Bob O’Connor, MA Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs
- Jane Obaggy, MACD
- Chris Egan, MA Forestry Alliance
- Tom Cairns, USDA/FSA
- Ted Kendziora, USFWS
- Mike Davidian, Farmer
- Marianne Piche, MassWildlife
- Matt Reardon, MA DEP
- John Scanlon, MassWildlife
- Deron Davis, USDA/NRCS
- Julie Richburg, The Trustees of Reservations
- Ian Dombroski, US EPA
- Mark Wamsley, Kestrel Trust
- Caro Roszell, MA NOFA
- Rebecca Zimmerer MassWildlife/NHESP
- Markelle Smith, The Nature Conservancy

The meeting was called to order at 9:00 am by Dan Wright, Massachusetts State Conservationist.

Welcome and Opening Remarks – Dan Wright, NRCS/USDA

Update to the January 16, 2020 minutes:

- Karl Honkonen comments: Regarding the NWQI, Buzzard’s Bay project has a program called SepTrack which was designed to track residential septic systems and any issues with them in order to develop solutions to make upgrades if necessary.

Dan welcomed everyone and informed them that the meeting was being recorded. He thanked everyone for attending and participating as partners of NRCS, especially those who have joined the State Technical Committee Meeting subcommittees to provide input on our programs and practices.

Farm Bill Programs – Rita Thibodeau, NRCS/USDA

Financial Assistance Programs:

MA NRCS had originally been allocated \$174,100 for Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA). AMA is used primarily for assisting farmers with installing high tunnels and new irrigation systems. Because of high interest in this program from farmers, MA NRCS was allocated an additional \$700,000 for RMA/AMA. The total allocated funds for RMA/AMA was \$874,100 for FY20.

We were allocated \$211,000 for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and \$62,000 for CSP-Grasslands Conservation Initiative (CSP-GCI). The CSP GCI program replaces the Grassland Reserve Program which encouraged farmers to improve pastures and convert highly erodible corn land to pasture.

We were allocated \$4,125,000 in Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) funding which includes \$50,000 for the New England Cottontail Habitat special initiative.

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG): \$200,000 from our EQIP budget has been reserved for state CIG projects. We received 4 CIG applications; these will be evaluated in the coming weeks.

Rita provided a breakdown EQIP fund pools for practices, and gave a breakdown of where in the state the money is being spent.

Current Contract Obligation Status:

- EQIP - 56 contracts (\$806,968.00) An additional 87 applications for ~\$2.5 million are still being evaluated; we anticipate that all EQIP funding will be utilized this fiscal year.
- CSP Renewal - 1 contract (\$12,879.00)
- CSP-CGI - 8 contracts (\$12,441.00)

Easement Programs:

We were allocated \$2,731,258 in ACEP-Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) funding; we have 10 applications to evaluate. We received \$895,080 in ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) and have 2 applications that are being evaluated.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP): One RCPP grant was awarded to MA Dept of Ecological Restoration out of 2 applications. Alex Hackman from MA DER will give a presentation on the RCPP efforts that will assist with wetland restorations of cranberry bogs.

Kira Jacobs asked a question about the “Top 10 Practice” fund pool. Rita and Dan explained that the practices identified by the State Tech Committee Subcommittee were extremely popular with farmers. These 10 practices received a 90% cost share rate compared to the 75% cost share of the other practices in EQIP. More info will be available after the funding is completely allocated.

Marianne Piche asked a question about the level of funding devoted to wildlife projects. Rita said that the goal is allocate 10% of EQIP funding and was confident that there were enough applications to reach that goal.

The issue of prescribed fire was raised by John Scanlon. John said that the cost of liability insurance for the practitioners is exorbitant; there now is only one vendor remaining in MA. John said that he would like to involve other partners to discuss how we could utilize fire more effectively because it is such a valuable tool. Ted Kendziora from USFWS expressed interest in participating in future discussions on prescribed fire.

Easement Programs Specialist – Helen Castles, USDA/NRCS

ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) Program

Helen went over changes in the 2018 Farm Bill that affect the WRE program. Helen discussed the creation of a “Wetland Restoration Criteria and Guidance” (WRCG) document that will be shared with partners. The WRCG includes information on the State Technical Committee review of:

1. WRE Eligibility
2. Ranking Criteria
3. Waivers
4. Restoration

Helen also discussed identifying common Compatible Use Authorizations (CUAs) for landowners that enroll their properties in WRE; this allows them to certain activities such as mowing trails, installing wildlife structures or managing invasive species. Helen encouraged partners to send her comments on the WRCG document. It will be distributed separately from the meeting minutes.

Marianne Piche asked a question about layering EQIP or CSP activities on land that has received WRE funding. Helen said that EQIP/CSP could not be used on WRE restored lands.

RCPP Cranberry Bog Program – Alex Hackman, Dept. of Fish and Game/Division of Ecological Restoration

MA DER was received a \$10,000,000 RCPP from NRCS (pending) and DER is matching this with over \$10,000,000 from partner contributions for RCPP Cranberry Bog Conservation and Habitat Restoration Project in Southeastern MA. There are 19 partners involved with this RCPP project.

- Many less productive bogs are retiring due to multiple factors. They are located on historical wetlands which are degraded with several feet of sand fill over them;
- Early restoration efforts are showing tremendous successes;
- The key elements for the RCPP application are to build upon these earlier efforts:
 1. Land Protection (WRE easements);
 2. Wetland Restoration (design, permitting, implementation);
 3. Landowner/Grower Coordination (CCCGA);
 4. Learning (monitoring, measurement, outcomes);
 5. Develop a grower-based restoration construction industry.

The goal is to implement over 1,000 acres of land protection and wetland restoration.

Project Updates:

1. New projects are currently coming in online;
2. Just received a \$25K USGS Cooperative Agreement to investigate nitrogen removal occurring in wetland restoration process.

Karl Honkonen asked via chat if the project will be looking at carbon sequestration or soil organic matter gains on the restored wetlands. Alex replied that they will be looking at changes in soil carbon; however the focus will be on soils, plants, and water quality, and predominantly nitrogen fluxes from bog restorations.

Marianne Piche asked how many restoration projects are expected to be completed with this RCPP; Alex estimates that 10-15 projects will be completed.

Karl Honkonen asked if there was a forest management component of this project. Alex said that yes, some of the wood thinned from adjacent upland forest was being added to wetland restoration projects. Helen said that because of the nature of the WRE easements, that only cranberry cropland is currently included in the easements. Julie Richburg asked if the Atlantic White Cedar seedlings were being negatively affected by deer. Alex said that deer were excluded with fencing and that mice were a bigger problem because of root girdling.

ASTC for Field Operations - Rachael Phillips-Barnes, USDA/NRCS

Dan introduced Rachael Phillips-Barnes, the newly appointed ASTC for Field Operations to the committee. Rachael gave a brief summary of her career with NRCS.

State Resource Conservationist - Tom Akin, USDA/NRCS

Update on National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) projects:

Due to the successes of the NWQI project in the Palmer River watershed located in Rehoboth, the Westport River watershed was selected as the next NWQI project area. Massachusetts Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) received a MA DEP 319 Grant to expand the project into the Westport area. Tetra Tech received a national contract to write several watershed plans in the Northeast and has begun working on the Westport River NWQI project. The goal is to have this watershed plan in place by January 2021. Tetra Tech is also writing the watershed plan for the James Brook/Unkety Brook HUC 12 located in the Westford area. The goal is to have this watershed plan in place by Spring of 2021.

We have been having conversations with MA DEP and EPA on selecting a third NWQI watershed for western MA and reviewing recovery potentials for tributaries of the CT river and other western MA watersheds. We hope to have more information at our next State Tech Committee meeting.

Forest Resilience Program (FRP) – Bob O’Connor, MA Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs

In order to create more resilient forests that can store more carbon, a range of forestry practices need to be implemented. The results of the performed practices are verified by experts and forest modeling as well as research.

The FRP will incorporate work from multiple partners (Nature Conservancy, Mass Audubon, DCR Working Forest Initiative, American Forest Foundation, Mass Woodlands Institute, and the New England Forestry Foundation) to promote carbon storage and resilience practices.

The goal of the FRP is to create access to carbon credit programs for small, forest ownerships to be rewarded for implementing practices that promote forest resilience

Private foresters will be trained on writing Forest Resilience Plans and assisting landowners with the implementation. The resilience practices will be coordinated with NRCS and to dovetail with the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). In the next 6-8 months we hope to pilot the program in the Northwestern corner of MA. This area includes 21 towns that are some of the most rural, forested, and low-income in MA. A lot of forest stewardship plans already exist in this area, and the hope is that these plans can be elevated to the level of climate resilient forests.

Marianne Piche asked, what are the practices involved in creating climate resilient forests? Bob said that low-intensity thinning, creating regeneration gaps with large wood retention, establishing reserves, reducing threats from invasive plants/insects, and reducing deer browse.

Michael Leff from the Franklin County Conservation District said that they would be interested in assisting with outreach to local foresters in the area.

Partner Updates

U.S. EPA – Kira Jacobs

Kira participated in a national NRCS webinar on Source Water Protection Areas. This is an opportunity to target specific HUC12 watersheds with Farm Bill funds that improve/protect source waters used for drinking water.

U.S. Forest Service – Karl Honkonen

Finishing up the award of a \$170,000 Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) grant for southeastern MA Pine Barrens Alliance called “Rebuilding the Massachusetts Coastal Pine Barrens”. Deadline may need to be extended due to delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

MA State Forest Action Plan is being developed. The deadline was extended from June 30, 2020 to December 31, 2020. The objectives outlined in the forest action plan drive LSR grants in the future.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – Ted Kendziora

Ted said that USFWS will have funding available for projects that benefit at risk species, especially pollinators (for example the New England Pollinator Program) or salt marsh sparrow. If partners have projects that landowners need financial assistance to implement, they should reach out to Ted.

MassWildlife – Marianne Piche

Marianne gave an update on the Tools for Engaging Landowners Effectively (TELE) project; this is an effort to improve outreach to landowners to participate in conservation work.

MA Dept. of Agricultural Resources – Gerard Kennedy

COVID-19 has revealed how vulnerable our food supply system is to disruption. The state announced the availability of a \$36 million Food Security Infrastructure Grant program. The application is on-line and will award funding to build resiliency in the agriculture and fisheries sector. Applications will be accepted on a rolling basis, so please check it out.

Dan Wright thanked everyone for participating in the state tech committee meeting and for providing input on NRCS programs. Dan encouraged everyone to reach out if there are any questions.

The meeting adjourned at 11:25am.

About the State Technical Committee

The State Technical Committee advises the NRCS State Conservationist on the technical guidelines necessary to implement the conservation provisions of the 2018 Farm Bill. Committee membership includes representatives from federal and state agriculture and environmental agencies, agricultural producers, UMass Extension, nonprofit organizations and agribusiness.

State Technical Committee meetings are open to the public and are held as often as necessary to advise and implement NRCS conservation programs. For information about upcoming meetings, please contact Tom Akin at the NRCS State Office at 413-253-4365 or thomas.akin@USDA.gov. More information and meeting minutes are available on the MA NRCS web site:

https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/ma/technical/stc/?cid=nrcs144p2_013981