



United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service
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MASSACHUSETTS STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MINUTES

December 10, 2020
9:00am – 12:00
Meeting Held Virtually

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

Welcome and Opening Remarks – Dan Wright, NRCS/USDA

Minutes were accepted.

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—Recap of FY 2020:

In fiscal year 2020, MA NRCS was allocated and obligated the following amounts of financial assistance:

- ~\$4.9 million in Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP);
 - \$2.5 million benefitting livestock;
 - \$0.5 million benefitting wildlife;
- ~\$1.1 million in Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) for new irrigation projects and high tunnels;
- ~\$1 million in Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPPEQIP) contracts for the Long Island Sound Project and the Southern New England Heritage Forest Project;
- ~\$680,000 in Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP);
- ~\$2.7 million in Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP-Agricultural Land Easements)
- ~\$840,000 in Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easements)

Shifting to FY 2021, Rita reviewed the highest priority resource concerns that were selected for FY2021 after discussions with partners. Advisory program allocations for FY 2021 are similar to FY 2020 amounts.

For the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), a new Critical Conservation Area (CCA) was established for the Northeast region, and 5 applications were received for a total of \$30 million dollars. Applications will be reviewed shortly.

Kira Jacobs asked for more details on the Critical Conservation Area (“Northeast Forest and Waters”).

Rita explained that the new CCA was created to allow RCPP projects to address:

- Degraded plant condition
- Inadequate habitat
- Water quality degradation

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/programs/financial/rcpp/?cid=stelprdb1254053>

Dan explained that this new CCA is the first for the New England region and is similar to the Chesapeake Bay focused project.

For FY 2021 easement programs, Rita and Helen Castles urged partners interested in commenting on the ACEP ranking questions or the Geographical Area Rate Cap may for WRE should reach out to Helen.

Dan also mentioned that additional efforts have been put into a project that better defines soils of local importance. The “local importance designation” will allow these soils and farmlands to be enrolled in USDA easement programs.

State Resource Conservationist - Tom Akin, USDA/NRCS

Source Water Protection Areas for FY 2021

Washington is requiring that 10% of financial assistance be directed to SWPAs. For projects with conservation practices that benefit water quality, customers will be eligible for a 90% payment rate compared to the normal 75% rate. Criteria used to select SWPAs include:

- Percent HUC 12 in Wellhead Protection Area (Ground) (Source: EPA);
- Percent Farmland within HUC12 Watersheds, (Source: 2016 National Land Cover Database);
- 303(d) Impaired Waters ¼ mile buffer within HUC12 Watersheds (Source: 2014 Integrated List of Waters – Mass DEP, MassGIS Data);
- Sole Source Aquifer, (Source: EPA Designated, MassGIS Data);
- Mass DEP Wellhead Protection Areas, (Source: 2019 Mass DEP, MassGIS Data).

Marianne Piche asked if this project could also include turtle or mussel habitats in the selection criteria. Tom explained that criteria for FY 2021 have already been finalized, but for FY 2022 MA NRCS could definitely include a selection criteria component that would address wildlife and forest practices and wildlife resource areas that overlap with SWPAs.

National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) projects:

Palmer River NWQI project in Rehoboth will be wrapping up in FY 2021. The consulting firm Tetra Tech received a national contract to write 2 additional NWQI watershed plans for Massachusetts:

1) Westport River; and 2) James Brook/Unkety Brook (on the Nashua River mainstem). The goal is to have these watershed plans completed in the middle of FY 2021.

All states must now have 3 NWQI projects, so we have been having conversations with MA DEP and EPA on selecting watersheds for western MA and reviewing recovery potentials for tributaries of the CT river and other western MA watersheds. The South River (Ashfield and Conway) and the Upper Manhan River (Southampton and Westhampton) were selected, and we will be releasing an RFP in FY 2021 to solicit consultants to write watershed plans for these areas to be completed in FY 2022.

Partner Updates

MA Association of Conservation Districts – Michael Leff

Michael's top 3 priorities: Stabilize organization and expand reach; conduct and develop contract projects and initiatives, and boost capacity of 13 Conservation Districts. MACD is assisting NRCS with administrative work on Farm Bill contracts. MACD is also working on a national project with NRCS to develop a guidance document for conservation planners to work with small scale farming operations. As a result of the MACD MA DEP 319 project in the Palmer, a BMP video featuring Iain Ward of New England Consulting Services, (available here: <https://youtu.be/jrbtadraSyc>) was created. MACD is also working on MA DEP 319 projects in the Westport River, Westfield River, and Fort River and Mill River in Hadley and Amherst, and East Branch of the North River (tributary of the Deerfield River). MACD is also completing baseline studies for MDAR APR easements. MACD is also hoping to increase capacity of the 9 active Conservation Districts and rejuvenate the 4 inactive CDs and increase funding sources for CDs.

Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Association – Brian Wick, Executive Director

Brian gave an update on the cranberry industry in Massachusetts and some of the challenges that cranberry growers are currently facing.

New Business

Silvopasture – Integrating Prescribed Grazing into Forest Land – Joan Walker, Whortleberry Farm

Joan Walker gave a presentation on the management concepts of silvopasture. MA NRCS currently doesn't incentivize the cutting of forests to facilitate grazing, however, we are receiving more inquiries. Several participants had questions on protecting regeneration of trees. Mike Downey of MA DCR mentioned that tree regeneration does need to be protected for several years to out-grow the reach of grazing animals. Silvopasture does merit more study and analysis so we can develop side-boards for expanding this conservation practice, and MA NRCS will offer project silvopasture as a CIG topic for FY 2021.

U.S. EPA – Kira Jacobs

Kira presented a new project entitled “Stand Up for Forests” (<https://standupforforests.org/>) designed to improve/protect source waters used for drinking water by protecting and conserving forested watersheds and improving forest product marketplaces.

American Farmland Trust – Nathan L’Etoile

Nathan shared conservation outcome impact models have been put together by their national office. AFT is also going to be working with UMass looking at soil health impacts under solar arrays. And lastly AFT is going to continue working with interested towns on developing lists of locally important soils.

MA Dept. of Agricultural Resources – David Viale

MDAR APR is looking at conserving whole farms including forest lands and is also interested in the local soils initiatives for land conservation.

Trustees of Reservations – Julie Richburg

Julie reported that Trustees would like to develop a process to develop whole farm analyses for their farm properties to determine the best possible land uses including biodiversity and ecosystem services.

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 11:50am.

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