



United States Department of Agriculture

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Natural Resources Conservation Service  
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## MASSACHUSETTS STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MINUTES

September 21, 2021  
9:00am – 12:00  
Meeting Held Virtually

### Welcome and Opening Remarks – Dan Wright, NRCS/USDA

The meeting was called to order at 9:00 am by Dan Wright, Massachusetts State Conservationist. Dan welcomed and informed everyone that the meeting was being recorded; the recording is available on the MA NRCS YouTube channel at: <https://youtu.be/lolo1fJWNA8>

Dan 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.

Minutes from the December 10, 2020 meeting of the State Technical Committee were accepted.

### Farm Bill Programs – Rita Thibodeau, NRCS/USDA

Dan Wright prefaced the programs discussion with a comment that this fiscal year was particularly challenging due to staffing changes and new business tools; however, MA NRCS successfully obligated all the financial assistance funds that Washington allocated.

Rita Thibodeau gave an overview of the funding programs highlights for FY 2021.

#### Financial Assistance Programs

In fiscal year 2021, MA NRCS was allocated and obligated the following amounts of financial assistance:

- ~\$4.7 million in Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP);
  - \$2.38 million benefitting livestock;
  - \$0.67 million benefitting wildlife;
- ~\$0.53 million in Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) for new irrigation projects and high tunnels;
- ~\$0.5 million in Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP-EQIP) contracts for farmers and forestland owners working through the “Southern New England Heritage Forest Project”, “Collaborative for Private Forestland”, and “Connecting the Connecticut”;
- ~\$487,000 in Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).

### Conservation Easement Programs

- ~\$2.3 million in Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP-Agricultural Land Easements)
- At the date of the meeting, no FY2021 funds had been obligated in Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easements).

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.

For a more detailed breakdown of the MA NRCS Programs in FY 2021, please see the attached meeting handouts.

A question was asked about the EQIP Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG). Rita explained that CIG is intended to provide funding to partners for the development of innovative conservation technology that NRCS can add to the menu of conservation practices to assist farmers. In FY 2021 MA NRCS solicited Requests for Proposals (RFPs) on the broad topic of soil health and water quality, improvements to wildlife habitat, and silvopasture. We did receive project proposals for soil health/water quality and wildlife. We did not receive any responses to the request for silvopasture projects.

Rita also reported:

1. The national RCPP Classic funding opportunity will not be published until sometime in October;
2. FY 2022 program announcements for EQIP, AMA, CSP Classic, ALE, and WRE will be soon with ranking cut-off dates. NB MA NRCS Public Affairs Specialist, Diane Petit posted this announcement to our web page recently:

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/ma/newsroom/releases/?cid=NRCSEPRD1828840>

A question was asked if local data on silvopasture wasn't already available. Tom Akin said that data are available, but we were hoping that the CIG would fund a demonstration project showing the requirements, benefits, and challenges. Because this is a land use conversion (forest → grazed forest) we need to see the details of the cutting and grazing plans (basal area removed, basal area remaining, plan for regeneration, livestock management, fencing, watering systems, exclusion to sensitive areas, etc. NRCS is still committed to exploring silvopasture and perhaps this could be a topic of discussion for the forestry subcommittee.

Marianne Piche asked a question on the percentage of funding dedicated to creating/enhancing wildlife habitat. Rita mentioned that in addition to the \$560,000 of EQIP General funding for forestry/wildlife, all three of the RCPP projects (SHEHF, Collaborative for Private Forestland, and Connecting the Connecticut) brought an additional ~\$526,000 to wildlife conservation projects.

### **MA Farm Service Agency, Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) – Tom Cairns**

Tom Cairns provided an update on the Emergency Conservation Program. The ECP program provides farmers with financial assistance to improve drought conditions, particularly new wells and improved

irrigation systems. ECP is administered by the Farm Service Agency, however, NRCS provides technical assistance/engineering designs to the customers. This year we assisted 78 farmers and provide \$1.8 million dollars. We have also worked on several disaster declarations which will also provide emergency loans to farmers for crop losses. FSA appreciates all of the assistance NRCS has provided in helping serve USDA customers.

## **State Resource Conservationist - Tom Akin, USDA/NRCS**

### Review of Source Water Protection Areas for FY 2021

Beginning with Fiscal Year 2021, NRCS Washington required all states to dedicate 10% of financial assistance to water quality improving conservation practices in to 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).

Please see the meeting handouts for locations of the SWPAs and moneys that were allocated to SWPAs in FY 2021. Tom Akin reported that approximately 2,000 acres of priority conservation practices will be implemented in the selected SWPA areas. Some of the selected SWPAs had no financial assistance funds allocated so we'll revisit the selection of SWPAs for FY 2022 with our partners so that we can also address forestland and wildlife projects.

### National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) updates:

The Palmer River NWQI project in Rehoboth is almost complete; there are just a few conservation practices remaining to be installed. These will be completed in early FY 2022. In August 2021 Tetra Tech delivered 2 NWQI watershed plans for the Westport River and James Brook/Unkety Brook (on the Nashua River mainstem) watersheds. MA NRCS will intersect USDA customer data with the priority catchment areas identified in the watershed plans to prioritize outreach efforts to potential customers.

With the assistance of MA DEP and EPA, MA NRCS issued an RFP in early FY2021 requesting watershed plans for 2 tributaries of the Connecticut River. NRCS received 2 proposals for the South River (Ashfield and Conway) watershed and 2 proposals for the Upper Manhan River (Southampton and Westhampton). MA NRCS selected the Franklin Regional Council of Governments to write the watershed plan the South River; this project will begin in October 2021 and conclude by March of 2023. MA NRCS did not make a selection for the Upper Manhan watershed, however, water quality data recently obtained shows improved water quality for this watershed.

## **Partner Spotlight – MA Association of Conservation Districts, Michael Leff**

Michael Leff shared with the committee that MACD received a grant from the NRCS National office to write a Small Farm Engagement Guide. The goal of the guide is to furnish service providers with

guidance on successfully engaging landowners and increasing conservation on the ground. The guide is in its final editing stages and will be released soon. For more info on the guide please contact Michael.

As an example of successful landowner engagement, Michael shared the MACD video featuring Iain Ward of New England Consulting Services, available here: <https://vimeo.com/485216167/26c4533f1e>

that was a result of the MA DEP 319 project in the Palmer River watershed.

## **New Business**

### **MA Dept. of Agricultural Resources – David Viale**

David Viale gave an update that MDAR is moving forward with a Statewide Farmland Action Plan. The formation of the plan was recommended by the MA Food Systems Plan that was written in 2014. David shared that MDAR has hired the Donoghue Institute at UMass to assist with plan facilitation. American Farmland Trust and the MA Food Systems Collaborative will also assist. The goal is to complete the plan by June 2022. The planning process will look at the pace of conservation on MA farmland, addressing access to farmland, looking at food security, and the economic viability of farm businesses. A series of stakeholder listening groups and summits will be held over the next year to gather input. The plan seeks to build on the recommendation of the MA Food Plan, the Healthy Soils Action Plan and the Resilient Lands Initiative that was led by MA EOEEA.

David said that MDAR is currently in the research phase of the project and asked the group to help identify subject matter experts who could help point MDAR to resources and guide the consultants to relevant data sources and metrics for progress. MDAR will forward a list of experts to the consultants, who will engage them in interviews, analysis, and comments on the plan.

David also asked whether the State Tech Committee could be considered a subject matter expert in some way for the plan (whether in creation of the plan or implementation). For example:

- a. In creation of the plan, perhaps the committee could serve as a subject matter expert? and is interviewed by the consultants? or discusses drafts of the plan and develops feedback?
- b. In implementation of the plan: The State Tech Committee considers recommendations and findings of the plan and how it might influence NRCS programs.

Dan Wright asked for a timeline on identifying the SMEs. David said they're trying to finalize the list of SMEs by early October. Please reach out to David if you have any suggestions.

A committee member asked how this plan will dovetail with Resilient Land Initiative and the Healthy Soils Action Plan. The consultants will definitely consider integrating those plans if applicable. Bob O'Connor mentioned that the Resilient Lands Initiative is not yet final/is still being reviewed by various Commonwealth secretariats (Transportation, Housing and Public Health). The soils action plan is closer to being approved and hopefully will be released concurrently.

### **Formation of an Urban Agriculture Subcommittee – Dan Wright, STC**

Dan Wright announced that MA NRCS is seeking volunteers to serve on an urban ag subcommittee. Washington has a staffed urban ag office, and MA NRCS would like to establish an urban ag office here in MA that might also assist other states. In addition to establishing a subcommittee we will also engage with our sister agency at FSA to establish a county committee for urban ag. Please reach out to Dan if you're interested. Ted Kendziora shared a US Fish & Wildlife Service link for urban ag:

<https://www.fws.gov/urban/>

Dan also mentioned that a lot of emphasis is being put on climate smart agriculture and increased federal funding which could double our national conservation budget. Additional funding may also be available for additional watershed operations projects on Cape Cod.

## Partner Updates

### MDAR – David Viale

MDAR just recently wrapped up their annual monitoring of APR properties. David announced that they've streamlined the process and have engaged MACD and its staff to monitor the APR easements that were funded with federal assistance. An additional 10 APR applications will be reviewed soon. MDAR is also revisiting the topic of agritourism and hoping to have actionable spring of 2022.

### Trustees of Reservations – Julie Richburg

Julie Richburg reported that Trustees of Reservations has engaged American Farmland Trust and the Regenerative Design Group to complete soil health productivity analyses for their properties. The plans will identify soil health properties and evaluate current land uses to determine best benefits agricultural production as well as enhanced wildlife/biodiversity and ecosystem services. The plans should be completed in early 2022. Trustees will also be hiring an agroecologist to spearhead their rotational grazing and soil health programs; checkout their website or contact Julie [jrichburg@thetrustees.org](mailto:jrichburg@thetrustees.org) for more information.

### UMass Extension – Clem Clay

Clem Clay updated the committee that UMass will be hiring a production agriculture faculty position within Extension soon. Extension will also be hiring an Urban Agriculture extension educator, bringing in a new director of the soil testing lab with hopes of expanding services to include soil health testing.

### American Farmland Trust – Emily Cole

Emily Cole shared details on the progress of the AFT soil health project. <https://farmland.org/ma-soil-health-program/> The project's goals are to , determine the best way to provide financial technical assistance to farmers and what are the farmers' greatest barriers to soil health practice adoption? So far they've distributed 14000 # of cover crop seed, collected 70 soil health samples to analyzed by Cornell University's Soil Health Testing Lab. AFT is also working on a regional RCPP grant focusing on regenerative agriculture and soil health projects across New England. AFT will soon begin working on an EQIP- CIG grant with urban producers.

## **MA Association of Conservation Districts – Michael Leff**

Michael Leff shared that MACD will soon be hosting lunch-time meetings aimed at conservation district staff – recruitment of CD supervisors and board members. The MACD annual meeting will be held virtually on Nov 30<sup>th</sup> from 3-5pm. If you'd like to attend or have agenda items, please reach out to Michael.

## **MA Department of Conservation and Recreation, Service Forestry Program – Jennifer Fish**

Jennifer Fish provided updates from MA DCR service forestry program; they are working on climate smart forestry, and the Nature Conservancy/American Family Forest's forest carbon program. DCR has also completed 3 publications for forest land owners (available here: [DCR climate forestry - https://www.mass.gov/guides/climate-forestry](https://www.mass.gov/guides/climate-forestry): 1) setting goals; 2) adapting to changing conditions, and 3) a publication focusing on resiliency and forest carbon. They are also working on how to adapt Forest Management Plans that include criteria on climate smart forestry. Jennifer also expressed an interest in forming a Forestry subcommittee. If anyone is interested in being part of the subcommittee please contact Tom Akin at [Thomas.Akin@usda.gov](mailto:Thomas.Akin@usda.gov).

## **MassWildlife – Marianne Piche**

Marianne Piche gave an update on the New England Cottontail program. MA is on track to reach acreage goals by 2030. Outreach to landowners using the TELE methodologies (Tools for Engaging Landowners Effectively) <https://www.engaginglandowners.org/> is ramping up. MA NRCS recently awarded a CIG grant for NEC research to SUNY ESF. Researchers will be looking at the intensity of cuts and characteristics of habitats that may affect competition between NEC vs. eastern cottontail. Marianne also informed the group that Working Lands For Wildlife species initiatives may not happen at a national level, however, these initiatives and funding pools can be established at the state level. Marianne is supportive of MA NRCS continuing to dedicate EQIP funds for NEC.

## **MA Department of Environmental Protection – Matt Reardon**

Matt shared with the committee that MassDEP will be hiring a watershed outreach specialist to assist with 319 program outreach efforts. Matt's former position as "Nonpoint Source Program (NPS) Manager" at DEP will also be advertised soon. The MassDEP NPS group has also recently released the fall Section 319 Nonpoint Source Competitive Grants Program Fall Request for Proposals. Apre-RFR meeting will be held soon; check out their web site at: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/grants-financial-assistance-watersheds-water-quality#section-319-nonpoint-source-competitive-grants-program>

## **U.S. EPA – Kira Jacobs**

Kira Jacobs reminded everyone that the "Stand Up for Forests" project is designed to improve/protect source waters used for drinking water by protecting and conserving forested watersheds and improving forest product marketplaces. There are some free outreach materials that your organization can download and use: <https://standupforforests.org/>

Kira reported that the national Source Water Collaborative (which includes NRCS, EPA, NACD, and USFS) recently wrapped up its 9-month forestry "Learning Exchange" which featured a series of webinars and resources. To access the recordings visit: <https://sourcewatercollaborative.org/connect-with-others/learningexchange/>

Kira will give a presentation on Source Water Protection Areas and protecting drinking water supplies with ag and forestry conservation at the Northeast National Association of Conservation Districts' annual meeting Oct 31 – Nov 3<sup>rd</sup> in Portsmouth, NH.

[https://mcusercontent.com/c2dcc90be01c524e9007fa08/files/bd714bd5-0f97-1d36-a10e-2427590c74bc/Draft\\_Agenda\\_NACD\\_Northeast\\_Regional\\_Meeting.pdf](https://mcusercontent.com/c2dcc90be01c524e9007fa08/files/bd714bd5-0f97-1d36-a10e-2427590c74bc/Draft_Agenda_NACD_Northeast_Regional_Meeting.pdf)

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 to him or his staff if there are any questions.

The meeting adjourned at 11:35am.

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#### 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](mailto: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](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/ma/technical/stc/?cid=nrcs144p2_013981)