

**MASSACHUSETTS**  
**USDA-NRCS**  
**STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING**  
**MINUTES**

Thursday, December 11, 2014

Brigham Hill Community Barn  
Community Harvest Project Inc.  
37 Wheeler Rd.  
North Grafton, MA 01536

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**Present:** 14 in attendance.

Christine Clarke, USDA-NRCS, State Conservationist	Masoud Hashemi, UMASS
Deb Johnson-Hawks, USDA-NRCS, ASRC	Karl Honkonen, US Forest Service
Barbara Miller, USDA-NRCS Program Manager	Jeff LaFleur, MACD
Diane Petit, USDA-NRCS, PAS	Arthur McCollum, US F&WS
Carol Rickless, USDA-NRCS, Secretary	Alan Page, Forester
Peter Church, MA DCR	Jane Peirce, MA Dept. of Env. Protection
Maryjo Feuerbach, US EPA	Marianne Piche, MA Div. of F&W
Ron Hall, MA Dept. of Ag.Resources	Markelle Smith, TNC
	Brian Wick, CCCGA

This meeting was digitally recorded.

Meeting duration: 9:40 A.M. to 11:35 A.M.

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**Welcome & Opening Remarks: Christine Clarke, State Conservationist**

- Christine Clarke, State Conservationist gave a brief update regarding NRCS's administrative transformation and a review of organizational changes in Massachusetts which have reduced staff numbers. She added that NRCS's contribution agreement funding of partners is helping to leverage NRCS's staff's conservation work.

**Review of minutes from the May meeting and Introductions: Christine Clarke, State Conservationist**

- There was one change to be noted to the minutes from the May 28, 2014 meeting. A name was misspelled in the attendance list. The correct spelling is Ted Kendziora of US Fish and Wildlife Service.

- Chris asked for each of the meeting attendees to introduce themselves and give a brief description of their work in collaboration with NRCS.
- Fletcher Clarke, a forester with MA DCR, has been promoted to the Service Forestry Program, but will continue to act as liaison to NRCS until further notice.
- Artie McCollum of the Silvio O. Conte National F&W Refuge will be leaving his position next year due to F&W making his job a permanent position. The job will be posted on the USA jobs website in the future.
- Masoud Hashemi of UMASS asked for information about the new nutrient management regulations.

#### **Review of State Technical Committee Role – Barbara Miller, State Resource Conservationist**

- Barb reminded STC members of the importance of their role in advising NRCS. NRCS partners' input is essential since this information will impact how NRCS spends farm bill dollars. NRCS is required to document input from the state tech committee on specific components of NRCS programs. Essentially, NRCS is asking partners to identify priorities and to determine whether our programs are working effectively. Partners input is needed on: the Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) for the Wetland Reserve Easement Program (WRE), the National Water Quality Initiative, natural resource concerns and their location in the state, ranking criteria for specific sectors (such as cranberry growers or aquaculture) and practices related to these sectors.
- The State Technical Committee is not an official voting body, but an advisory group making recommendations to the State Conservationist.
- GARC market analysis for the 2008 Farm Bill's Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) has been quite expensive in the past, so NRCS has changed to fair market value appraisals this year for the 2014 Farm Bill's Wetland Reserve Easement Program (WRE). NRCS is offering the landowner 90% of land value, not to exceed \$5,000 per acre for a non-active cranberry bog and \$8,400 per acre for active cranberry bogs. This is a bit higher than last year which was 85%. These numbers are what NRCS plans to send to NHQ to justify payment amounts for WRE wetlands easements in Massachusetts.
- Barb asked the STC members to send their comments regarding the new GARC appraisal method and payment rates.

#### **2014 Farm Bill Program Update – Barbara Miller (Power Point)**

- Rules for EQIP will be out in the Federal Register, Dec. 12, 2014. CSP rules came out on November 4, 2014.
- We can send out copies of the EQIP rules to STC members if requested. Comments can be made for up to 60 days after the rule comes out. STC members are requested to read the rules and see if the interpretation of the rules impacts their agency's concerns.
- The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) rule will not be out until January or February 2015. Agricultural Land Easement Program ranking of practices is changing and NRCS will need STC input regarding this change (ALE replaces FRPP).
- An information sheet was given to STC members on the 2014 Farm Bill's new programs and their acronyms.
- Receipt for Service (RFS) – starting on December 1, 2014, NRCS, FSA and RD must provide a RFS when a producer asks for technical assistance. Under the 2008 Farm Bill, the RFS was optional.

The RFS is now mandatory under the 2014 Farm Bill. RFS is a web-based system capturing data on general requests for technical assistance and is tracked by employee and geographic location. The system documents service delivered to USDA customers. The new system may be a reaction to lawsuits that occurred in the past because customers believed they did not get prompt, timely and appropriate responses for assistance from USDA employees.

- Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) - At the present, NRCS is unable to obligate FY15 funds since the authority to operate under the 2008 Farm Bill ended November 4, 2014. When the new rule is released, NRCS will be reauthorized to obligate funds for that program. 2008 Farm Bill contracts will continue to be implemented.
- NRCS does not have funding allocations as of today's meeting as Congress has yet to appropriate our funds
- Agricultural Lands Easement Program (ACEP) - ACEP is a new program combining WRP, FRPP, and GRP. Under ACEP are two new programs; Wetland Reserve Easement Program (WRE) and Agricultural Lands Easement Program (ALE). The statutory funding is less than half that was authorized for the individual programs WRP, FRPP and GRP under the 2008 Farm Bill. Sequestration and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) further reduce funding levels. Regional Equity helps Massachusetts NRCS get a little more funding for ACEP.
- Ranking status for new participants is critical in order to be accepted into the ALE or WRE programs. There is much more competition for preservation since there is only one pot of money now. Nationally, NRCS chooses how to split this one pot based on eligible applications for the various programs. The state of Massachusetts Agricultural Preservation Restriction Program (APR) which partners with NRCS's FRPP did well in 2014. This fact shows continued interest in easement programs.
- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) – Established under the 2014 Farm Bill, RCP is an umbrella program to cover the numerous initiatives that grew out of the 2008 Farm Bill. There is \$400 million allocated for RCP nationwide. After sequester and other reductions, approximately \$364 million is available in FY 2015 to be divided among the national fund pool (40%), the state fund pool (25%), and the critical conservation areas pool (35%). Each year there will be opportunities for funding under RCP.
- RCP funded eight Critical Conservation Areas (CCA) nationwide – those chosen are larger geographic areas and partnerships in the U.S. such as the Great Lakes and Chesapeake Bay areas. Unfortunately, New England was not chosen as one of the 8 authorized CCAs. Only CCA's are authorized to use PL566 watershed rules to help administer RCP.
- The Announcement of Program Funding (APF) for the \$100 million FY2015 state fund pool invited proposals for projects costing up to \$20 million. Due to the amount of interest in the program, proposals have been scaled back considerably. Massachusetts initially had 5 pre-proposals, and currently, there is one full proposal submitted for funding.
- The 2014 Farm Bill repealed WHIP; habitat management and enhancement is now covered under EQIP. NRCS foresees a seamless transition from WHIP to EQIP for assistance to landowners regarding wildlife habitat. The new regulation requires NRCS to spend 5% of EQIP funds on wildlife practices. In 2014, Massachusetts obligated 12% of its EQIP funding for wildlife practices. The 2014 program rule could affect landowner eligibility with implications restricting non-agricultural applications for wildlife practices.

- Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative (CDSI) -Client Gateway (CG) is the new NRCS public website that will provide NRCS clients secure access to conservation plans, practice implementation schedules, financial applications, contract documents and payment information. The Early Adopter Release of the NRCS Client Gateway will begin on January 12, 2015 and will continue through mid-February 2015. Client Gateway (CG) provides the ability for participants to request assistance and interact with their local field office via a secure USDA Level 2 eAuthentication account. Requests made through the Client Gateway will receive the same professional and timely service as face-to-face requests in NRCS field offices. Use of the Gateway is entirely voluntary. Business entity clients will gain access in future versions. Participants are able to view conservation plans, contracts and related conservation information 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) - renewals to CSP contracts are authorized this year and some landowners are taking advantage of this offer. Unfortunately, there is not a lot of use of CSP in Massachusetts because CSP is acreage based and there is not a lot of benefit for small tracks of land. The idea behind CSP is to reward good producers [BM1] for continued land stewardship and help pay for stewardship enhancements. [BM2] Massachusetts forestland owners have the greatest potential to benefit from CSP since their acreages tend to be larger. Contracts are 5 years with the potential to renew.
- Payment Schedules are NRCS's current method of determining the cost of implementing conservation practices and how much NRCS will pay participants in financial assistance programs. Payment schedules are established at the national level with regional adjustments made for economic differences. The regional team assesses specific local practice scenarios such as those required for cranberry bogs and other localized uses of conservation practices.
- For example, forestry practice scenarios cover a large area across the U.S. To create consistency in Massachusetts, Fletcher Clarke and Kate Parsons evaluated the forestry scenarios and determined which ones work best for this region.
- Alan Page of Green Diamond systems commented about carbon negative systems in forestry and asked if they were included in the forestry scenarios. Barbara Miller responded, they are not currently included in NRCS scenarios. Alan continued to say there is a "forest health state of emergency". He stressed that he is a member of the *Arctic Methane Emergency Group* (AMEG) and wants to bring awareness about the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and the threat of severe global warming predicted to occur by mid-century. A combination of aggressive reduction in both CO<sub>2</sub> and methane emissions, to remove CO<sub>2</sub> from the atmosphere, needs to be implemented. CO<sub>2</sub> and methane are exceedingly dangerous for forests. Mr. Page stated that forests will be "flat on the ground in 25 years. We must utilize carbon negative systems to take back carbon and hold it from recirculation for an extended period of time. Government agencies, stakeholders and regulators have no comprehension of the severity of this emergency. The fact that white pine is growing four feet a year is uncommon. Our forests will become positive re-enforcement systems for CO<sub>2</sub> and methane release, which is very dangerous". AMEG's mission is to make stakeholders aware of the emergency in carbon emissions and to let government entities know that acting positively to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> and methane emissions can lead to a solution to the problem of climate change and global warming.

**Farm Bill Program Results, FY2014 – Deb Johnson (Power Point)**

- NRCS funded EQIP with \$2.5 million in 2014. Five years ago EQIP was funded at \$5 million due to a large volume of applications. This year NRCS funded 145 contracts totaling 8500 acres.
- The *EQIP14 Distribution by Fund* chart depicted how the money was dispersed: the majority of funding (2/3) went to traditional agricultural contracts on cropland (32%), farmsteads (7%), and pasture and hayland (11%). Forestland contracts received 23% with another 2% for Forest Management Plans. Much of the funding that went to forestry also included wildlife and invasive species control practices. The wildlife category on the chart depicts only the 1% dedicated to the New England Cottontail and Bog Turtle Initiatives. The amount spent for wildlife practices in both forestland and wildlife categories totaled 12%.
- Historically Underserved (HU) clients, including beginning farmers, limited resource farmers, and disadvantaged farmers, received 15% of the FY2014 EQIP funds. HU applicants only compete with other HU in those designated funding pools and are offered a higher payment rate not to exceed 90% of the practice cost. EQIP statute requires NRCS dedicate at least 10% of its annual allocation to HU applications. Approximately ½ of the funds for HU contracts were for livestock practices. The rest of the funds for beginning farmers came under the cropland (aquaculture and cranberries) and pastureland areas. Except for the HU pools, funding, for the last several years, has been by land use, historically it was broken down by commodity.
- Special Emphasis funding went to 10 energy projects (3%), 33 high tunnels of less than an acre of total land area (4%) and organic farming (2%). There are not as many applications due to a payment limitation threshold in organic farming. Organic farmers are limited to \$20K a year or \$80K total over the course of the farm bill. Organic projects often cost more than \$80K, so they are free to apply under the General EQIP fund pool and compete against non-organic farms.
- Pest Management practices accounted for 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the cropland and beginning farmer contracts.
- The ranking criteria still prioritizes the resource concerns identified by the State Technical Committee, including: water quality (especially impaired waters and drinking water), water conservation, invasive plant species control, soil health, wildlife habitat, and farm energy.
- *Contract Acres by Fund* –EQIP contracts covered a total of 8400 acres. 52% of acreage was in Conservation Activity Plans-Forest Management Plans. The other 4000 acres was in agricultural land (32%) and forestland (16%) forestland.
- Alan Page commented that 99% of forest management plans haven't been funded enough to carry them out fully over the long term. He said that \$100 million for a million acres is needed and he believes NRCS underfunds forestry. He urged STC members to visit his website <https://sites.google.com/site/commongoodforestry/> to learn more.
- Deb responded that NRCS doesn't have the financial resources to offer large sums of money for forestry alone. She added that NRCS obligated \$40,000 for forestry management plans last year.
- National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) - The initiative originally had a goal of using 5% funding for FY14. The actual amount used was 0.4%. Jane Peirce of MA DEP asked where does the rest of money go that is slated for use on NWQI? Barb responded that NWQI is independently funded national money and MA received \$27K at the beginning of 2014. Since NWQI receives national money we can ask for more if needed and must send back unused money.

- Alan Page added that charcoal can improve the productivity of agricultural systems in relation to water quality.
- *EQIP funding by County* –The chart shows how the Farm Bill money was distributed geographically across the state. 40% went to the west, 40% to the south east (cranberries), and the central state 20%. In Worcester County the money went to water quality concerns related to livestock. In FY2014, NRCS received 116 EQIP applications; 58 were funded (50%).
- Two state-based Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) were funded for a total of \$150K: an energy project with CET, advancing the farm energy program; and an UMass Cranberry Station grant to evaluate soil moisture devices in cranberry bogs.
- 2015 EQIP is expected to have similar funding levels and funding pools.
- Action: Re: Water quality conservation, endangered species, and soil. Marianne Piche asked, “Can you show acreage and funds that went into those priority resource concerns”? Deb will get the information to Marianne.
- Information on 2014 Farm Bill - EQIP (payment schedules, application evaluation and ranking tools) will be posted on the NRCS website.
- Chris offered to meet with Alan Page at a later time to discuss his concerns about forest health.
- Barb responded to Masoud Hashemi’s earlier question about the new nutrient management regulations. She noted that the Massachusetts nutrient management regulations are supposed to come out in January 2015. Barb said she saw some guidelines and believes the regulations will be based on these guidelines. MDAR wants to use UMASS Best Management Practices (BMP) guidelines and publications for nutrient management, but UMASS is not confident it has the information needed for the new regulations. The new regulations will affect who can write the BMP plans and the ability to deliver technical assistance. At present there is no information available on how questions will be answered when the new regulation comes out.

**Water Quality Certainty: Christine Clarke, State Conservationist**

- Christine went over the background of Water Quality Certainty (WQC), a voluntary program that was created 2 years ago to provide assistance with water quality issues, enhance public awareness and provide incentives for participation in a regulatory program through EQIP. Farmers in the past have been concerned about regulating entities and the fines they may receive if they implement certain conservation practices that have an effect on watershed protection. Once WQC is finalized, landowners can adopt practices to protect water quality. Under this partnership, farmers will receive technical assistance. A Memorandum of Understanding with partner organizations, regulators, state, local governments and federal agencies was created to increase collaboration to mitigate pollutants to watersheds through wise land uses. MA Department of Agricultural Resources, MA Environmental Protection, MACD and NRCS signed this Regulatory Certainty MOU in March 2014. This is the first of its kind in this region. In Massachusetts, the Palmer River Watershed (Rehoboth) is a water quality pilot to enhance water quality protection. Locally collected water quality data is being used to determine planning needs. Agricultural technical liaisons are working with farmers and local groups to assist landowners in creating a conservation plan and to help them apply for cost share programs like EQIP. This process assures implementation and monitoring of the conservation plan.
- At this time, state regulatory agencies see value in Water Quality Certainty. Massachusetts DAR and DEP, MACD and NRCS will use Commonwealth Quality as a mechanism. The farming community will use Commonwealth Quality to assess practices that affect water quality issues. [Commonwealth Quality](#), a brand designed by the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources, serves to identify locally sourced products that are grown, harvested and processed in Massachusetts using practices that are safe, sustainable and don't harm the environment. Commonwealth Quality-certified growers, producers, harvesters and processors not only meet stringent federal, state and local regulatory requirements, but also employ best management practices and production standards that ensure consumers receive the safest, most wholesome products available.
- Since *Commonwealth Quality* is an existing infrastructure the certainty group is using the model in conjunction with the National Water Quality Initiative to further its goals. An extension agent may be assigned to work with farmers who may not be involved in WQC.
- Water Quality has no metrics at present to determine if goals are being reached due to the geographic size of the Palmer River Watershed and the small size of the farms. Focusing on agricultural operations with high numbers of pollutants near monitoring sites and educating farmers and the equine industry is important to measuring the success of Water Quality Certainty. Looking at nutrient management is also another aspect of assessing Water Quality.

**Discussion:**

- Alan Page stated that there is a mediation group under MDAR. He met with Mark Stinson of MA DEP to express his concerns about access to forests which can be limited due to wetlands. Chris asked the STC members to meet with Alan after the conclusion of the meeting to discuss this topic in depth.

**Final Comments & Actions – Christine Clarke, State Conservationist**

- Action: State Technical Committee members review the December 2014 minutes and notify Carol Rickless, NRCS Secretary, of any corrections required.
- Action for Deb Johnson: Water quality conservation, endangered species, and soil. Marianne Piche asked, “Can you show acreage and funds that went into those priority resource concerns”?
- Action: STC members send their comments to Deb Johnson, ASRC regarding the new GARC appraisal method and payment rates.
- Action: STC members are requested to read the rules and see if the interpretation of the rules impacts their agency’s concerns. Rules for EQIP will be out in the Federal Register, Dec. 12, 2014. CSP rules came out on November 4, 2014. NRCS can send out a link to the rules if requested. Comments can be made for up to 60 days after the rule comes out. .
- Action: NRCS will need STC input regarding The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) rule which will be out January or February 2015. Ranking for Agricultural Land Easement Program practices (ALE took place of FRPP) is changing. Send input to Deb Johnson, ASRC.
- The next meeting will be in the spring of 2015.

**The meeting was adjourned at 11:35 am.**

Attachments:

STC12112014 pdf