

# State Technical Committee Meeting Notes

Tolland NRCS/FSA State Office \* October 29, 2015

## **In Attendance:**

Kira Jacobs (EPA), Judy Wilson (DEEP), Karl Honkonen (USDA-FS), Javier Cruz (NRCS), Abbie Maynard (CT Ag Experiment Station), Mike O'Neill (UConn), Mark Edmonds (NRCS), Greg Weidemann (UConn), Bryan Hurlburt (FSA), Devon Marsden (FSA), Tom Worthley (UConn), Lisa Bassini (WLA), Wayne Woodward (TNC), Rick Jacobson (DEEP), Paul Rothbart (DEEP), Abbie Cadman (NRCS), Carol Grasis (NRCS), Joyce Purcell (NRCS), Tom Morgart (NRCS), John Guskowski (RC&D), Robert Hust (DEEP), Chris Martin (DEEP), Nancy Ferlow (NRCS), Diane Blais (NRCS), Arde Ramthun (NRCS), Jim Hyde (NRCS), Joe Wettemann (DEEP), Doug Emmerthal (NRCS) and Ted Kendziora [via conference call] (USFWS)

## **Welcome/Opening Comments – Tom Morgart, NRCS State Conservationist**

Tom Morgart welcomed everyone to the meeting, and gave an overview of his background and experience with NRCS. He is looking forward to working with the partners on the State Technical Committee, and shared his goals for the state. He would like to focus on:

- Delivering excellent conservation services through RCPP and programs. He would like to see an innovative approach for things done in Connecticut.
- Strengthen and modernize conservation delivery so staff can be more efficient.
- Enhance and expand our scientific and technical expertise. He would like to see a focus on energy. He wants us to ensure we have sufficient technical expertise before we market a practice. He would like program applicants to have a design in hand prior to the contract becoming final, so they have a better idea of the costs to install and the contract is more likely to be successful.
- Broaden our outreach to customers. We have expanded into forestry, Morgart would like to reach more Historically Underserved producers.

## **Review Agenda/Review Minutes – Joyce Purcell, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs**

Copies of the minutes from the last meeting (Jan. 14, 2015) were provided. All minutes are posted on the Connecticut NRCS webpage.

## **Farm Bill Program Updates**

### **Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) and 2016 Payment Schedule – Nancy Ferlow, State Resource Conservationist**

#### CIG

- 2015 CIG – one state CIG Grant awarded to the Eastern Connecticut Conservation District.
- Edge of Field Monitoring – calibrating a small monitoring system to a larger monitoring system used by UConn. A question was asked about what is being monitored. The grant will be looking at cover crops, manure management, buffers to affect nutrients and sediments, to evaluate practices which have been installed. Fields will only be a couple of acres in size.
- 2016 CIG – it generally opens in February for state level grants. Please contact Nancy Ferlow if you have any questions. National CIG opens earlier for projects for more than \$75,000.

## 2016 Payment Schedule

- All offered practices and payment rates will be on eFOTG, Section 1 and our website as soon as possible. We need to finalize what practices we are offering for 2016.
- (798) Seasonal High Tunnel is now (325) High Tunnel System. In 2016 we are offering a stationary high tunnel and a movable high tunnel. The movable tunnel will slide on rails and will help with salt build-up and desertification that can develop under standard tunnels.
- Forest Management Plan Conservation Activity Plans (CAPs) have been reorganized, so that they are grouped “20 acres or less” instead of “50 acres or less” as they were previously.
- Agricultural Energy Management Plan CAPs have simplified scenarios, compared to what was offered in 2015.
- (340) Cover Crop. The number of available scenarios has been reduced for FY2016 from what was available in FY2015.
- Practices NRCS could offer in 2016 that currently are not offered:
  - Short Term Storage of Animal Waste and By-Products (318). This practice came out in November, 2014 for solid semi-solid waste. There are concerns about this practice. It wasn’t offered in 2015 because it was too new for staff to offer. Arde Ramthun, NRCS State Conservation Engineer, has been discussing it with engineering staff, but between planning for siting, runoff, scheduling use and the previously mentioned concerns, he is not comfortable offering it yet.
  - On Farm Secondary Containment (319). This practice is also new as of November 2014. This is for gas/diesel containment, and paying for the structure and not site remediation. It was also not offered in 2015, since it was so new. Committee members indicated they support offering it, but NRCS staff are not fully versed in the requirements. It was recommended to offer the practice in 2017, after some review is done on the standard and research into ones that have been installed.
  - Channel Bed Stabilization (584). This is a practice which we have not offered in the past. No one at the meeting seemed inclined to offer it. Arde Ramthun indicated that he thinks this would be covered under another practice that we offer.
  - Constructed Wetland (656) for wastewater. Joe Wettemann indicated this practice has been done at UConn, with limited success. This is often taking valuable land out of production and freezing temperatures in winter is often an issue. John Guskowski indicated that there is a heated one out on Fisher’s Island that he just heard about. The committee seemed inclined to consider offering this practice in the future after additional research.

## **Engineering Update – Arde Ramthun, State Conservation Engineer**

Hurricane Sandy hit 3 years ago. Arde provided a map of sites.

- Round 1 Emergency Watershed Program (EWP) Update:
  - NRCS has closed on 13 homes in West Haven.
  - Expect to close on a Madison Land Conservation Trust property soon, and are working on another one.
  - A Branford Electric Railroad easement will close within a month.
  - Oldfield Creek in West Haven – the offer is pending. The site is overgrown, site conditions are unknown. Special permission to clear it for better review has to be requested.
  
- Round 2 EWP Update:
  - There are 77 parcels, approximately 50 have been reviewed.
  - Appraisals have been contracted.
  - NRCS is only allowed to pay the Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) which is \$5,000 per acre. This has been an issue with some of the properties.
  - NRCS expects to see \$6 million in Financial Assistance, which will come with \$1.2 million in Technical Assistance.
  - A temporary assistant was hired to help with the administrative functions, and Arde Ramthun has received a lot of support from programs staff.
  - Paul Rothbart asked about land that is already land trust land, would that not already be protected. Some of the land might not have been permanently protected, and through this program it will be.
  - Rick Jacobson recommended reviewing the type of tide gates that are planned, as some are designed to facilitate the ingress/egress of tide water and allow full flow.
  
- South Branch of the Park River flood control maintenance has been contentious, and is currently stalled. Neighboring property owners have complained about the maintenance work and notification, which has been a hot topic in the news. Woody vegetation is not allowed on the embankments, sediment basins need to be regularly cleaned, and concrete walls are failing. Capacity is currently reduced, and people are in danger of flooding. Trees can dislodge and block culverts and catch on bridges. Maintenance is supposed to be completed annually. If not, there are repercussions and financial losses. The towns affected are West Hartford, Newington, and Hartford. Karl Honkonen asked how far back from the channel that trees need to be removed. Trees on the slope and channel need to be removed. Ones on the banks are ok to retain.
  
- NRCS Engineering staff is currently down 3 engineers. A new project engineer (previously from New England) will be starting November 3, 2015. She has a lot of experience with agriculture, manure management, and irrigation.

- NRCS has a contract with Kleinfelder Engineering and RI NRCS for another Heavy Use Area/Waste Storage Facility standard building design which should be cheaper to install than the current one. This was just started a month ago, so will take a while to complete.

### **Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) Update – Jim Hyde, State Agronomist**

- Jim Hyde updated the committee that NRCS has been pushing for CNMPs to be completed before they had been required previously. There has been some pushback as we transition from historical methods to what is required. Jim asked for input from the committee on this.
- Bryan Hurlburt reported the dairy industry is in rough financial shape with the price of milk 40% from last year and the price support payment requirements have changed from the previous Farm Bill. Two dairy farms have closed in the last month.
- Robert Hust reported that regulations and permitting in the agricultural sector as well as waste treatment have been heavily discussed, and have the potential for being a financial burden.
- There is a need for more agricultural professionals to be writing CNMPs, so if anyone in the committee knows of someone who might be able to write them, please contact Jim.
- Farms are not a lot further along with having CNMPs than they were a few years ago. In 2014 we contracted for three CNMP Conservation Activity Plans (CAPs). In 2015 we contracted for four. And in 2016, there are currently 12 CNMP CAP applications.
- Currently, there are three Technical Service Providers (TSPs) in CT, and we are about to lose one if we cannot get them more work. There is one likely coming on board soon from Vermont, and one more who left the company he worked for, but should be coming on board independently.
- Per new CNMP requirements, only one plan needs to be reviewed from a TSP, not two and the documents for the producer are supposed to be shorter and easier to use.
- John Guskowski indicated the payment rate is not high enough for consulting firms to work on them.
- Javier Cruz mentioned that producers can also get their own CNMPs, they only need to use a TSP if it is through a CAP contract. There might be potential for other sources of funding for CNMPs. There is a lot of CNMP software out there that is not through NRCS.

### **Farm Bill Programs and Initiatives Updates – Joyce Purcell, ASTC-Programs**

- Joyce Purcell shared a powerpoint presentation of a summary of 2015 Farm Bill Programs. She showed how much money was spent in each subaccount and more specific breakdowns of practices funded through forestry contracts.
- 2016 eligible applications are due November 20<sup>th</sup> for Round 1 for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) Program. There will be a

national deadline for Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) which will likely be around the holidays. There will be around 300 new Farm Bill program applications for 2016, some of which are unfunded Round 2 and beyond from FY2015.

- There were no Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) Bog Turtle contracts this year. WLFW New England Cottontail (NEC) will still be offered in the future. All NEC applications which were ready and willing were funded in 2015. Not much money was returned from this subaccount, since money cannot be redistributed to another subaccount in CT if it's in a WLFW subaccount.
- Kira Jacobs asked for a map with dots locating what is contracted and where. She receives this from other states and offered to share what she receives with NRCS for consistency. The breakdowns of forestry practices can be shared with the committee.
- Mark Edmonds reported about half of the CAPS we have contracted for return for implementation. We have only been offering Forest Management Plans since 2010, so we have limited data. On average 13% of our money is spent on forestry. Applicants who come in on time for Round 1 deadlines are more likely to be funded. We cannot skip applications in order to fund more, and money needs to be moved into subaccounts where entire applications will be funded. It was verified that energy practices are for conservation or efficiency and are based upon AgEMPs.
- High Tunnels are rolled into Cropland for EQIP in 2016, as they were in 2015. The cap of 2178 square feet was relaxed for 2015, so we were able to contract up to a capped amount, even on land that already had a high tunnel.
- Approximately 30% of all program participants are Beginning Farmers, and are not just in the Beginning Farmer subaccount. Producers are given a choice to apply in what subaccount they would like, and some are directed where their application needs to be funded if selected (Energy Initiative, AFO/CAFO, NWQI, WLFW, for example).
- **FY 2016 allocation input was requested from the committee.** When money is redistributed, we try to mimic the State Technical Committee priorities like water quality, so for FY 15, any remaining money was moved to fully fund an AFO/CAFO application. Since we cannot partially fund an application, we try to pool money together to fund the next priority application(s). It is a national requirement for 60% of funds to go to contracts for livestock. CT does not have to meet this requirement individually, but the more we allot to the requirement the better. NRCS decides if the application is benefitting livestock or not. For some mandatory subaccounts we are given a specific % to allocate and some mandatory ones we are given a specific dollar amount, and the rest we can distribute between.
- CT NRCS cannot really track all unfunded applications in a given year, especially if they come in after the Round 1 application deadline, are not eligible or do not specify what subaccount they are applying in. We are working towards having a better handle on that in the future, but is very difficult to track.
- Rick Jacobson expressed how beneficial the partnership is between NRCS and DEEP for WLFW and other projects. In January, there will be discussions about increasing the scope and quantifiable

outcomes (other species benefiting from NEC habitat). He hopes funding for WLFW will be approximately what it was in 2015.

- Carol Grasis discussed how in partnering with United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and DEEP, we have a better ability to estimate how much money will be spent for WLFW in a given year.
- Animal Feeding Operation – Confined Animal Feeding Operation (AFO-CAFO), without knowing the current demand, Joe Wettemann suggested it start at \$1 million. Nancy Ferlow said that we typically fund two applications, and money can be moved around with this subaccount to add or subtract as needed.
- Energy – the number of AgEMP application is going down. We are mostly funding applications for implementation. Mainly for greenhouses, some for dairy and some for maple. The TSP who does the audits for greenhouses is planning to retire soon. John Guszowski encouraged funding for energy.
- The remaining subaccounts were set for now. We can always request additional funds if we have a specific need.
- **Ranking Tools** – Carol Grasis showed a powerpoint presentation on how ranking tools are set up. In FY2015, the demand for funding exceeded our ability to fund all applications. This has not happened much in the past, so for FY2016, we want to ensure our ranking tools are fair and equitable. She covered how there are certain questions that cannot be asked, certain questions we cannot change, they cannot be revised throughout the year and how they will directly refer to Quality Criteria. The draft versions will be posted for a week on our website under Programs, Farm Bill. If anyone has comments, please send them to the State Conservationist and cc: Carol Grasis.

**Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) /Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) – Bryan Hurlburt, State Executive Director, CT Farm Service Agency**

- Hurlburt would like to include the State Technical Committee for input on their programs and shared a factsheet. They are developing the specifics for the CRP Grasslands Program. They will be talking with their state committee next week. The entire state will be designated as included for CRP Grasslands.
- Devon Marsden shared a powerpoint presentation about the CRP program. She also explained Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) where there is a partnership with DoAg and funding can be shared. The signup for Grasslands is going on now, with a deadline of 11/20. They will be ranked nationally, need to be in hay or pasture, and will be a 15 year commitment. The land is not eligible if it is in EQIP now. They can apply provisionally with a requirement to establish the grassland within a year. The entire state is in a wildlife and a water quality zone. Litchfield, Windham, and New London are in grassland zones. Additional points are awarded depending on the zone you are in.
- General CRP signup starts 12/1. They will be using the NRCS Payment Schedule rates, unless anyone has a better suggestion. Under the new Farm Bill, state land is no longer eligible for FSA programs.

- Marsden asked for volunteers from the State Technical Committee to be on a subcommittee to assist with their program roll-out. DEEP Wildlife would be interested in assisting with CREP.

### **Partnership Opportunities – Joyce Purcell, CT NRCS**

- Joyce Purcell reported that the CT Council on Soil and Water Conservation has been awarded a 2015 Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) agreement for reducing nutrients in Long Island Sound. Kira Jacobs provided an update on this RCPP agreement, as she is working in all six states. The first official meeting is next week. If there are any landowners interested, please let her know.
- There are two statewide 2015 RCPP agreements. UConn has one for drought and water management, using EQIP funding. The Last Green Valley (TLGV) has one for water quality, nutrients and soil health, using EQIP funding.
- There is one 2016 state proposal. Dr. Jack Clausen is working on a final proposal for November 10<sup>th</sup>. The focus will be on reducing pathogens in fresh water and salt water.
- We have no national RCPP proposals this year. We have been invited to participate in one multi-state RCPP from the Wildlife Management Institute out of New Hampshire. It is a Young Forest Habitat Initiative. Rick Jacobson is familiar with it.

### **State Wildlife Division Perspective – Paul Rothbart, CT DEEP Wildlife**

- Paul Rothbart discussed how CT DEEP and NRCS became closely aligned in 1999 when the WHIP program was rolled out.
- He shared a powerpoint on the Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP). DEEP has an agreement with NRCS for \$608,741 over the next three years to roll out a program to encourage hunting and fishing on private land. They are still working on the legal paperwork for the program. There are currently 5,000 acres of private land available, that they have already worked with. These will be their focus group of landowners to re-enroll them and be able to offer them leases. Archery only deer hunting is the focus use for the land, as parcels are small – a minimum of 50 contiguous acres is needed. In addition to the current 5,000 acres, they will be targeting areas of the state where there are a lot of people, but limited hunting access. They are working on an increased law enforcement presence and legal documents. Most of the money will be going towards securing leases. There are set rates per acre which also depend on the quality and availability of the habitat. The rates range from \$3 per acre to \$20.
- Rothbart also shared a presentation the status of New England Cottontail. There have been about 570 acres of habitat implemented on private land, and about 500 acres of habitat on public land. This is aligned with the goal for Connecticut; not all customers have been reached, so there is potential for additional habitat work. The decision by EPA to not list the New England Cottontail as threatened/endangered was announced on 9/11/15, which shows great collaboration and accomplishments.

### **National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) Subcommittee - Robert Hust, CT DEEP**

- The NWQI is targeting watersheds with impaired waters which have agricultural sources that need to be improved to meet water quality standards.

- In the past, we have targeting the Little River Watershed in Windham County. Last year Broadbrook in the Connecticut River Watershed was added. We will continue to target those in 2016.
- There is Environmental Protection Agency 319 money available in those basins
- We have made great improvements in the Little River Watershed and hope to use Edge of Field Monitoring to see how we have improved water quality there. Currently at a road block, need to discuss with EPA.
- A couple of applications came in late in FY2015 for Broadbrook, so hopefully they will be eligible for FY2016.
- Kira Jacobs asked what the typical demands are in those watersheds. We have been using EQIP money there for dairy waste storage and nutrient management.

#### **Forestry Subcommittee – Mark Edmonds, CT NRCS**

- Mark Edmonds shared a Job Sheet for (666) Forest Stand Improvement that has been in development for a long time. Many people from many agencies and groups have contributed. It will be finalized very soon, and posted onto the electronic Field Office Technical Guide (eFOTG).

#### **Easement Subcommittee – Wayne Woodward, The Nature Conservancy**

- Wayne Woodward reported they will be meeting shortly to discuss ranking questions. Joyce Purcell indicated this is not a small task, and that she appreciates the assistance from this subcommittee.

#### **Nutrient Distribution Subcommittee – Jim Hyde, CT NRCS**

- Jim Hyde reported he has a core group from EPA, DEEP Permitting, DEEP Planning, NRCS and UConn Cooperative Extension helping with the subcommittee.
- He currently has stakeholder input from a poultry producer, and a fertilizer dealer. He is looking for a traditional and a progressive animal-based farmer to join as stakeholders.
- He has two goals for the subcommittee:
  1. Moving manure efficiently within the state. He would like to connect those who need manure on-farm with those who need to move manure off-farm.
  2. Moving manure efficiently out of state. He will be reaching out for ideas from members of the subcommittee as well as from anyone who would like to contribute ideas to viably export manure from Connecticut to regions where the nutrients are needed for soil nutrition and crop growth.

***The next State Technical Committee Meeting is scheduled for January 27, 2016.***