



United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service
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MASSACHUSETTS STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

March 3, 2016

*Mass. Division of Fisheries & Wildlife Richard Cronin Building - Room 110
1 Rabbit Hill Road, Westborough MA
9:30 am – 12:00 noon*

Participants

- Christine Clarke, USDA-NRCS
- Tom Akin, USDA-NRCS
- Deron Davis, USDA-NRCS
- Vince Snyder, USDA-NRCS
- Deb Johnson-Hawks, USDA-NRCS
- Diane Petit, USDA-NRCS
- Dan Wright, USDA-NRCS
- Peter Church, Mass. DCR
- Trish Garrigan, EPA
- Kira Jacobs, EPA
- Gerard Kennedy, MDAR
- Andre Tougas, Tougas Family Farm/
Mass. Fruit Growers Association
- Marianne Piche, MassWildlife
- Brent Powers, MassWildlife
- Maria Moreira, World Farmers
- Heather Baylis, USDA-FSA
- Tom Cairns, USDA-FSA
- Karl Honkonen, USDA-FS
- Jane Peirce, Mass. DEP
- Markelle Smith, TNC
- Brian Wick, CCCGA

This meeting was digitally recorded. Meeting duration: 9:30 am to 12:10 pm.

Welcome & Opening Remarks – Christine Clarke, State Conservationist

- Christine Clarke, State Conservationist apologized for the extended period since the last State Technical Committee meeting. Due in part to significant staff changes, a year has passed since the last formal face-to-face meeting.
- This meeting is the first of a State Technical Committee retooling process in which we hope to focus on the technical side of our programs and gain input from participants.
- The goal and purpose of the State Technical Committee was summarized for the participants including its advisory role within NRCS. The State Technical Committee meeting is open to all interested parties.

Review of minutes from the December 2014 meeting and introductions

- No changes were requested during the meeting and none were received by email.
- Those present introduced themselves and their agency affiliation.

Update on Massachusetts Conservation Districts – Christine Clarke, NRCS

- Jeff LaFleur, Executive Director of the Mass. Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) was unable to attend the meeting. Chris provided a summary in his absence.
- Massachusetts passed an Environmental Bond Bill in 2014 that contained language authorizing a grant program for Massachusetts conservation districts. General award amounts will vary from \$7,000 to \$42,000. The Bond Bill authorized more than \$1 million for the program over five years. Districts can partner with others to leverage funds and/or accomplish projects of common interest. Conservation districts are authorized under Chapter 21 of the Mass. General Law.
- The Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs seeks proposals from conservation districts for innovative partnership projects to conserve the land, soil, forests, water and related natural resources of the Commonwealth. Letters of Inquiry are due March 24, 2016 and invited full proposals are due June 17, 2016. The state contact for the grant is Tom Anderson, thomas.anderson@state.ma.us or 617-626-1013.

Palmer River Summary and Update – Christine Clarke, NRCS

- Jeff LaFleur, Executive Director of the Mass. Association of Conservation Districts (MACD) was unable to attend the meeting. Chris provided a summary in his absence.
- The Palmer River Watershed is the site of a collaborative effort between DEP, NRCS, DAR, Rehoboth Agriculture Commission and MACD that is focusing technical and financial resources on agriculture lands to enhance water quality.
- The Palmer River Watershed was selected as an NRCS National Water Quality Initiative watershed in collaboration with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Mass. Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and other partners due to documented impaired water quality. NRCS allocated funds to the effort and MACD was successful in securing a 319 grant from DEP/EPA. The 319 funds allowed MACD to hire a field agent who has worked with local farmers, NRCS and Mass. Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) staff to address resource needs that would enhance water quality. Conservation plans were developed and a combination of MDAR and NRCS program funds were used to implement proactive conservation measures.
- Parallel to this effort, MDAR, NRCS, DEP and MACD have discussed water quality certainty and linkages to the Commonwealth Quality Program, as well as food safety, using the Palmer River Watershed as a reference point for discussion. The Bristol County Conservation District complemented the community education and outreach by sponsoring two soil health workshops.

- Roughly \$1 million in conservation practices resulting from the partnership have been applied in the Palmer River Watershed. The keys to success have been the full engagement and support of the Rehoboth Agriculture Commission, willingness and desire by the farmers to implement conservation, and capable staff working one-on-one with the farmers to handle technical issues and complex paperwork.
- The collaborative approach and use of multiple funding sources is not new. However, Massachusetts is challenged by historically unfunded conservation districts and decreased UMass Extension capacity. This project focused on bridging those gaps with alternative funding and staffing methods.
- General discussion on this topic included access to data, additional funding that might be available, next steps and adding watersheds to the project. There was interest among those present in being engaged in the selection of another watershed.

Forestry and Wildlife update – Dan Wright, NRCS

- The Northern Long Eared Bat (NLEB) final rule has been issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). NRCS National Headquarters recently issued a National Bulletin providing states with guidance on how to move forward. Massachusetts will be following the guidance and providing procedures to the field office to ensure we are compliant with process. NRCS will provide the opportunity for USFWS to comment on projects that may impact habitat.
- Mass. Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (MassWildlife) staff discussed the process they will use to work with Massachusetts landowners to capture data regarding NLEB locations.
- Dan Wright identified several Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) projects in Massachusetts, which led to a general discussion of linking data and targeting efforts being conducted by agencies in order to leverage resources for the common good. General interest was expressed in looking at western Massachusetts to share data and focus on specific watersheds.

Bedded Packs – Deron Davis, NRCS

- A bedded pack is a type of manure management facility in which manure is accumulated and layered with fresh, dry bedding material on a regular basis. The practice is flexible and can be modified to address a variety of needs.
- NRCS staff in Massachusetts had observed variability in how the practice was implemented and managed. As a result, the standard has been revised to provide more specific detail.
- Bedded packs are designed as part of the overall Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) and must comply with several basic criteria to operate as designed.

Soil Health – Dan Wright, NRCS

- NRCS continues to emphasize the importance of soil health, and the use of practices that enhance soil health and help on-farm management. Cover crops enhance soil health by increasing water holding, carbon, microbial activity etc. To facilitate the use of cover crops in Massachusetts, aerial seeding was started this year. This allows the field to be seeded in less time and enables earlier germination since the field can be seeded before the corn is chopped.
- Currently, cover crops are not harvested but that may change as increased field trials show value.

Programs Update – Deb Johnson, NRCS and Dan Wright, NRCS

- NRCS Massachusetts has moved from a single sign-up process to a rolling process where accumulated applications are ranked once per month. This allows farmers to sign up and potentially be approved when they are ready and work is needed rather than a year later. This revised approach also allows NRCS to manage workflow a bit better.
- As is the case most years, NRCS receives more requests for easement funds than we are initially allocated. We received about \$5 million more in requests than allocations this year and, as a result, have requested additional funds from Washington. Standard ranking is provided by Washington is used with no additional filters added by Massachusetts.

General Comments

- The Cape Cod Cranberry Growers Association is exploring issues with Massachusetts General Law Chapter 61A and USDA-NRCS Wetlands Reserve Easements to fully understand any tax issues that exist.
- Those present expressed interest in subcommittees to address issues as needed.
- The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has EPA 319 funds that are available via a grant process. Informational meetings are scheduled.
- State agencies are in the process of reviewing their current regulations and streamlining to include only those items specified in legislation.
- There was discussion regarding the changes to NRCS practice schedules and how that information might be shared outside of NRCS.
- There was also discussion and a question regarding specific practices that might be available for small fruit growers. It was recommended that interested farmers request a site visit by NRCS to discuss resource concerns, options and programs. NRCS and other field-based USDA agencies would be happy to participate in upcoming meetings to discuss.
- Wetlands Reserve Easement activity has been focused in the eastern part of the state but has applicability in other locations as well.

Compiled by Chris Clarke, March 3, 2016