

# NRCS SC Technical Committee Meeting Minutes – November 5, 2013

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## NRCS SC STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

*November 5, 2013, 9:30 a.m.*

*South Carolina Farm Bureau Building*

*Cayce, SC*

Present: Ann English (STC NRCS), Margie Onstad (SAO, NRCS); Pam Thomas (SSS, NRCS); Evelyn Whitesides (SRC, NRCS), Amy Overstreet (SC NRCS) Kellee Melton (SC NRCS) ; Gordon Mikell, State Agronomist; Janie Harris; Joe Cockrell (USFW); Chanda Cooper (Richland Soil & Water Conservation District); Marc Cribb (SC DNR); Yvonne King (Aiken SWCD); Carl Coleman (Dillon county Soil & Water Commission); Bruce Price (Dillon SWCD); Alan Gaddy (Dillon County Soil & Water Commission); Phillip Elliott (FSA); Meredith B. Murphy (SC DHEC); Neely Page (Aiken SWCD); Aubrey White (Marion SWCD); Rafael Mendez (NRCS, Lexington); Cassandra Rush (NRCS Federation); Jim Huggins (Marion SWCD); William O. McMeekin, PE (NRSK, LLC.); Larry Harris; Russell Hubright (SC Forestry Commission); Scott Phillips (SCFC); Karen Brady (SC NRCS); Jill Miller (SCRA); Greg Yarrow; Jay Purnell; Bill Ardrey; Buddy Atkins; Bill Chaplin (SCDHEC); Laurie C. Lawson (FSA); Bill Melven (Lexington SWCD); Patrice Moses (SC NRCS); Gary Peters (National Wild Turkey Federation); Beverly Alexander (SC NRCS)

### **Opening remarks from Ann English, State Tech Committee Chair/SC NRCS - State Conservationist:**

- Welcomed all participants, asked all attendees to introduce themselves and where they worked.
- Secretary Vilseck announced South Carolina as StrikeForce state last March. There will be a meeting at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, 9:30 a.m. – 3:30 p.m. The audience will be farmers, community leaders, etc. We will have 7-minute presentations by USDA agency leads followed by a question and answer session. At this time we have FSA, RD, FNS, NASS and APHIS on the agenda.
- No news on Farm Bill; awaiting announcement.
- Last week there was a press release on a grant for South Carolina Wildlife Project (Conservation Coop Restoration Outreach Grant) is on-going (looking at restoration of Longleaf).
- Bill Melvin has moved to new part of county.
- District manager position being advertised on Lexington county website.

### **Comments from Kellee Melton, SC NRCS - Assistant State Conservationist for Programs:**

- FY2013 Program Year-End Obligations (provided handout) -
  - EQIP - \$17,172, 247
    - New/Beginning Farmer - \$1,025,556
    - Limited Resource Producer - \$175,202
    - Socially disadvantaged Farmer - \$964,553
    - Organic (Certified and Transitioning) - \$77,917
    - Seasonal High Tunnel - \$393,482
    - Longleaf Initiative - \$2,-52,538
    - On-Farm Energy - \$\$196,585
    - Animal Waster - \$942,066

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- Specialty Crop - \$409,797
- Watershed Accounts for Crop, Pasture and wildlife/Forestry Areas - \$4,941,811
- StrikeForce - \$4,500,000 (total for all EQIP funding pools was \$8,611,759)
- NWQI - \$663,045
- Planning – this account is for the CAPs not related to initiatives - \$351,148
- CIG - \$411,000
- WHIP - \$178,000
  - Working Lands for Wildlife – Gopher tortoise (counties included in initiative):
    - ✓ Aiken
    - ✓ Allendale
    - ✓ Bamberg
    - ✓ Barnwell
    - ✓ Beaufort
    - ✓ Colleton
    - ✓ Dorchester
    - ✓ Hampton
    - ✓ Jasper
- CStP - \$357,796
  - There were 71 contracts funded, of that:
    - ✓ 31 were Non-industrial Private Forestland
    - ✓ 13 were Historically Underserved
- Easement Programs
  - Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) - \$1,076,000 covering 4 new agreements to purchase.
  - Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) - \$565,000 covering 1 permanent easement.
  - Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) - \$2,100,000 covering 3 new agreements.
  - Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP) - \$267,750 covering 1 permanent easement.
- FY2014 Program Announcements – EQIP:
  - Batching Periods: December 20, 2013
  - Waiting on Initiative Announcements from NHQ for
    - Organic
    - Seasonal High Tunnel
    - On Farm Energy
    - National Water Quality

*(as a reminder, EQIP is a continuous sign up. Applications can be accepted at anytime).*
- FY2014 National Water Quality Initiative

There are 4 watersheds in SC that are part of this National Initiative. The following were selected with input from SCDHEC:

  - Big Swamp – Florence
  - Polk Swamy – Dorchester
  - Upper Little Saluda River – Saluda
  - Chinquapin Creek – Aiken and Lexington

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- Other FA Programs
  - Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) – Awaiting information from NHQ as to whether there will be a signup in FY2014
  - Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) – Awaiting information from NHQ as to whether there will be a General WHIP signup in FY2014. There will be a sign up for the Working Lands for Wildlife Gopher Tortoise Initiative.
  - The Longleaf Pine Initiative will continue to be offered under EQIP in FY2014.
- Expired Farm Bill Programs – The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), the Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP) and the Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP) expired with the 2008 Farm Bill.

NRCS cannot take applications for FY 2014, WRP, GRP or HFRP, but field offices are keeping track of those landowners that are interested in the program.

FRPP did not expire with the 2008 Farm Bill. We will continue accepting applications for this program.

### FY 2014 Geographic Area Rate Caps (GARCs)

Should WRP and GRP be re-authorized for FY 2014, the following GARCs will be used for new enrollments:

Geographic Area	Program WRP or GRP	Market Analysis \$/ac	FY 14 GARC \$/ac	FY 13 GARC \$/ac	FY 12 GARC \$/ac
			SC	SC	SC
Cropland/Ag Land	WRP	2731	2185	2330	2100
High Land/Good Timber	WRP	3012	2410	2515	2340
High Land/Good Timber	WRP	1781	1425	1750	1735
High Land/Weak Timber	WRP	1781	1425	1500	1395
Low Land/Weak Timber	WRP	819	655	900	705
Area 1	GRP	2375	1306	1911	2008
Area 2	GRP	2225	1224	1925	1980
Area 3	GRP	2675	1471	1994	2035
Rest of State	GRP	2425	1334	1943	2008

**Question:** *Is there a website of funded projects to see what's being offered, funded and to whom?*

**Answer:** *No, not public information, but I can tell you what average contracts looks like (i.e. – animal waste) NRCS Field Office Technical Guide will show all practices offered. – Kellee Melton*

Any additional questions or thoughts regarding programs can be directed to Kellee Melton, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, [kellee.melton@sc.usda.gov](mailto:kellee.melton@sc.usda.gov)

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## Comments from Evelyn Whitesides, SC NRCS – State Resource Conservationist

- Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) –
  - CIG was authorized as part of Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) [16 U.S.C. 3839aa-8] under Section 1240H of the Food Security Act of 1985, as added by section 2301 of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Public Law 107-171) and section 2509 of the Food, Conservation, And Energy Act of 2008 (Public Law 110-246).
  - Under CIG, EQIP funds are used to award [competitive grants](#) to:
    - State or local unit of government
    - Non-governmental organizations
    - Federally-recognized Indian tribes
    - Private Business
    - Individuals.
  - National Component Topics
    - Preservation and Enhancement of Wildlife Habitat
    - Energy
    - Productivity and Environmental Health of Pastureland or Forestland
    - Soil Quality
    - Nutrient Management
    - Pest Management
    - Air Quality
    - Sustainable and Organic Agriculture
    - Specialty Crops
    - Water Quality
    - Etc.
  - National Component
    - FY12 approximately \$13 Million (33 Funded)
    - Maximum award amount not to exceed \$1 million
    - Set aside 10% applications from Beginning Farmers or Ranchers, Socially Disadvantaged Farmers or Ranchers, or community-based organizations comprised of or representing these entities.
    - Two phase proposal process: Usually announced in Fall
    - Projects 1-3 years in duration
    - EQIP eligibility component

Selected applicants may receive CIG grants of up to 50 percent of the total project cost. Applicants must provide non-Federal funding (matching funds) for at least 50 percent of the project cost. Up to half of the applicant's matching funds (up to 25 percent of the total project cost) may be from in-kind contributions.

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In addition, an exception regarding matching funds is made for projects funded out of the set-aside for applications from Beginning Farmers or Ranchers, Socially Disadvantaged Farmers or Ranchers, or community-based organizations comprised of or representing these entities. Up to three-fourths of the required matching funds for such projects (up to 37.5 percent of the total project cost) may derive from in-kind contributions.

➤ 2013 Funded National Projects

- National fish and Wildlife Foundation: \$821,324 grant to demonstrate and expand the use of manure injection technology in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.
- University of Tennessee: \$634,107 grant to quantify and demonstrate the long-term impacts of cover crops, crop rotations and no-till farming systems on soil health and crop productivity.
- Pheasants Forever: A grant of \$631,218 to explore and demonstrate ways to integrate
- U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities: A grant of \$700,000 to demonstrate sustainable forestry technologies and create a support system and market access for historically underserved landowners in South Carolina, North Carolina and Alabama.

## **State Component**

The intent of the State Component is to provide flexibility to NRCS State Conservationists to target CIG funds to individual producers and smaller organizations that may possess promising innovations, but may not compete well on the larger scale of the national grants competition. State Conservationists will determine the funding level for state competitions, with individual grants not to exceed \$75,000.

## **Funded State Projects**

- Greenville County Landowner-\$17K Whole farm drought resistant grazing system for sheep and goats
- Clemson University -\$75K Feral Hog Information & Trainings
- Richland Soil & Water Conservation District-\$45K Multispecies Cover Crops & Soil Health
- Center for Heirs Property-\$75K Forestry Outreach to Underserved Landowners
- Clemson University-\$75K Cover Crops & Soil Health
- United Farmers- USA-\$50K Silvopasture Demonstrations & Outreach
- The Thornwell Home for Children in Clinton, SC-\$74K-Pasture Poultry Operation Demonstrations
  
- What type of proposal topics or areas should we focus?
  1. Broad
  2. Narrow/Specific
  3. And/or should certain topics rank higher?

## Possible SC Proposal Topics

- Water Resources
- Soil Resources
- Air Quality
- Grazing Land
- Forest Health
- Wildlife Habitat
- Organics
- Water Resources
- Soil Resources
- Air Quality
- Grazing Land
- Forest Health
- Wildlife Habitat
- Organics
- On-Farm Energy Efficiency
- Nutrient Management
- Water Management
- Outreach
- Soil Health

## Questions for the State Technical Committee

- Do we want to offer a SC component of CIG?

*Response – by offering these agreements you will allow the opportunity for more innovative ways that you can then pass that down to landowners.....feel its beneficial.*

*Marc Cribb - Commented that he was in favor of South Carolina Component.*

*Question – Can you make comments about the transfer of knowledge you see in the CIG grants to the landowners eventually? Do you capture that type of valuable information?*

*Evelyn Whitesides – We are actually doing a tour this year, we have on our schedule to review; we only offer the SC component two years. 1-3 year grants, still in the midst of their grants, some of have been putting on demonstrations, projects and workshops; may have seen some at Blackville, they've been doing a lot of cover crop promoting; looking at different multi species that we can hopefully put into our EQIP program (looking to review); as they get money we go out and help them, we will assign a technical contact – a NRCS employee who they can contact directly. The National has a review team; yes we are looking for transfer.*

*Question – There is a requirement in the application that they will conduct some type of outreach program?*

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*Evelyn Whitesides – Yes, we do have a ranking criteria and some of the questions the State Technical Committee uses is, will this be easily transferrable to other people?*

*Question – Where there a lot of EQIP contracts that did not get funded?*

*Kellee Melton – Yes, there is always a lot of EQIP contracts that don't get funded, we typically get \$28M in request and there are typically a lot that don't get funded.*

***Response** – Do not feel 2 years is enough time to see positive impact; should use and innovative ways to continue to improve; leave open and don't narrow just yet continue to mature. Also feel you should go to 5% MAX.*

*Recommend sending out a survey on ranking topics*

Any additional questions or thoughts can be directed to Evelyn Whitesides, State Resource Conservationist, [evelyn.whitesides@sc.usda.gov](mailto:evelyn.whitesides@sc.usda.gov) or (803) 765-5685.

## **Comments from Dick Yetter, State Wildlife Biologist**

- Status of Certainty in SC

➤ A voluntary program that helps achieve:  
Certainty- provides cooperators who voluntarily implement conservation practices or a system of practices, with assurance that they will be exempt from regulatory changes as long as they are applying their system of practices.

Natural Resource goals

i.e., Water Quality standards, Nutrient Management standards, Wildlife Habitat - WLFW  
Enhanced public perceptions of agriculture  
Potential ecosystem services payments (GAP certified)  
Affinity labels for products – market driven opportunities (La. rice)

- Producers receive assurance that future rules will not alter their business practices, if they commit to applying water quality practices.
- Producers certify annually that they are applying the conservation system of practices.
- Can lead to a 9 year State sponsored Safe Harbor Agreement if certain practices are applied.
- **MAEAP Re-Verification for Farmers:**
  - Complete one or more risk assessments
  - Update & implement the conservation plan as needed
  - Request a farm-specific inspection, by Dept. of Ag. or its designee
  - If standards have been met, MAEAP re-verification is issued by Dept. of Ag and is valid for 3 years

A farm that is not re-verified or has not requested re-verification, lose certainty

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- Certainty Programs Development
  - Stakeholders establish certainty requirements (water quality, nutrient management, develop conservation systems)
  - Need extensive outreach and education to producers about what certainty is, including both benefits and requirements
  - Process for applications, determine eligibility, and screen applications for conservation technical assistance (CTA)
  - Process to develop conservation plans and systems to meet certainty requirements
  - Process to rank applications for funding consideration
  - Deliver technical assistance and certify conservation systems implemented
- Certainty Programs
  - Verify maintenance of conservation systems applied
  - Incorporate adaptive management for continuous improvement and to maintain certification
  - Evaluate program performance, including resource improvements:
    - Performance metrics
      1. Participation levels
      2. Treatment levels
    - Environmental outcomes
      1. Reductions in Nitrogen and Phosphorus loading @ edge of field
      2. Increase in target fish/wildlife populations
      3. Related benefits
  - Certainty programs provide an excellent way to work with producers to achieve natural resource goals and to facilitate voluntary adoption of conservation plans, systems, and practices.
  - Ideally a Certainty Program would receive State legislative approval/endorsement
  - Include farmers in the discussion from the beginning
  - A State agency should administer the program
  - A State agency often handles verification – SWCD
  - NRCS standards, specifications and conservation plan development
  - State agency in charge of the program should be the state's lead for abating, managing and preventing agricultural Non-Point Source pollution
- Examples of States currently with Certainty Programs:
  - Louisiana , Master Farmer – water quality program
  - Michigan Agricultural Environmental Assessment Program
  - New York Agricultural Environmental Management Program
  - Texas Water Quality Management Plan Program
- States developing Certainty Programs:
  - Missouri, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois – beginning stages of nutrient management certainty program
  - Arkansas: Discussions under way
  - Maryland: Developing program with help of CIG
  - Virginia: Program near completion

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- Conservation reserve Program Grants (CRP)
  - Sign Up 45
  - NRCS/SC DNR agreement to handle NRCS technical workload
    - Training – CP 36, CP 4d assessment guidance, FSA job sheets
    - Lots of phone calls – CP 22 eligibility issues
  - SC DNR staff - eligibility determinations, Conservation plan development, WHIG, specification sheets, job sheets, CPA 52s, etc.
  - 243 CRP (regular and continuous) Conservation plans written as of September 30, 2013
  - CRP - Bamberg, Saluda, Sumter, Williamsburg Counties
  - CCRP – Sumter, Horry, Williamsburg
  - SC DNR will assist with implementation, status reviews, follow up, etc.
- CRP
  - Sign Up 45 - Regular CRP - 100 +/- plans
- CRP Practices
  - CP 3 – Tree Planting, N1A 50 points = CP 4d in openings
  - CP 3A Hardwood Tree Planting
- NRCS Practices
  - Tree and Shrub Site Preparation
  - Tree and Shrub Establishment
  - Brush Management
  - Herbaceous Weed Control
  - Firebreak
  - Prescribed Burning
  - Forest Stand Improvement
  - Conservation Cover – NWGS, Pollinator Habitat
  - Upland Wildlife Habitat Management
- Sign Up 45 - Continuous CRP
- CRP Practices
  - CP 36 – Long Leaf Pine Establishment
  - CP 22 – Riparian Forest Buffers
- NRCS Practices
  - Tree and Shrub Site Preparation
  - Tree and Shrub Establishment
  - Brush Management
  - Herbaceous Weed Control
  - Firebreak
  - Prescribed Burning

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- Forest Stand Improvement
- Conservation Cover – NWGS, Pollinator Habitat
- Upland Wildlife Habitat Management
- Riparian Forest Buffer – 391 addendum

*Question – Is there somewhere online to find out information about the Master Farmer?*

*Answer – Yes, each program has their own website.*

*Question – Do we have a hog control program?*

*Answer – NRCS does not have a Hog Control program; have to wait on language from Farm Bill.*

Any additional questions or thoughts can be directed to Dick Yetter, State Biologist, [dick.yetter@sc.usda.gov](mailto:dick.yetter@sc.usda.gov)

### **Comments from Gordon Mikell, State Agronomist**

- Unlock the Secrets in the Soil (Soil Health 101 Farming in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century “A practical approach to improve Soil Health”
  - Why in 2013?
  - World population is estimated to be at 9.1 billion by 2050
  - To sustain this level of growth, food production will need to rise by 70 percent
  - Between 1982-2007, 14 million acres of prime farmland in the U.S. was lost to development
  - Energy demands
    - Increase use of biofuels (40% of corn used for ethanol)
    - Increase use of fertilizer (use of Anhydrous up 48%, Urea up 93%)
- What is Soil Health
  - The continued capacity of the soil to function as a vital living ecosystem that sustains plants, animals, and humans
    - Nutrient cycling
    - Water (infiltration & availability)
    - Filtering and Buffering
    - Physical Stability and Support
    - Habitat for Biodiversity
- Soil is a Living Factory
  - Macroscopic and microscopic organisms
    - Food
    - Water
    - Shelter
    - Habitat
    - Powered by sunlight
  - Management activities improve or degrade soil health
    - Tillage
    - Fertilizer
    - Pesticides
    - Grazing
    - Plant Diversity

- Conventional Soil Ecosystem
  - This landscape photo could be anywhere in the U.S or across the world, but it shows the current state of soil ecosystems in most of agriculture.
  - Low successional level and is always kept there due to human activities
  - Why does Ray say the soil is “Naked, hungry, thirsty and running a fever?”
  - Bare soil harms the natural system in many ways. Rainfall washes away precious organic matter. Organic matter holds many crop nutrients, and OM is the lightest fraction of the soil and the first to be carried off site.
  - Bare ground harms the macro and microorganisms...because of lack of carbon (food) in the soil ecosystem. In a bare ground environment, the soil is in starvation mode with no live root to pump carbon (sugars carbohydrates- plant exudates) into the soil system No food means little microbial activity. Important to note: Carbon is the energy (food) source in the system.
  - Low organic matter reduces the amount of available water for the planned crop, also no cover leads to higher evaporation rates
  - Bare ground also increases soil temperature, making the soil less hospitable to soil organisms. Temperatures on bare soil can reach above 115 degrees; some microbes start to go dormant at these temperatures.
- Paradigm Shifts
  - Paradigm shift - #1 Stop treating the symptoms of dysfunctional soil; solve the problem of dysfunctional soil.
  - Paradigm shift - #2 Restoring soil function can be accomplished without going broke.
  - Apply basic principles of ecology to create quality habitat.
  - There is no waste in Nature.
  - Paradigm shift - #3 Conservation practices do not restore soil health, understanding soil function restores soil health.
- Four Principles for improving Soil Health by creating the most favorable habitat
  - Minimize Disturbance of the soil
  - Maximize Diversity of plants in rotation/ cover crops
  - Keep Living Roots in the soil as much as possible
  - Keep the soil covered at all times with plants and plant residues
- Create the most favorable habitat possible for the soil food web

Any additional questions or thoughts can be directed to Gordon Mikell, State Agronomist,  
[Gordon.mikell@usda.gov](mailto:Gordon.mikell@usda.gov)

### **Closing Comments from Ann English, State Conservationist:**

- Thanks for attending; everyone provided lots of information today and we will address any further questions and concerns.
- National Soil Health initiative is our latest campaign being kicked off; all NRCS employees have had the training; in process of getting information out to our producers.
- 
- RECAP

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- Yes to CIG for 2014; should not narrow scope – leave broad as is & give a couple years to see how it works.
  - CERG info was given out and will discuss at next meeting, want to ensure everyone has a good understanding.
  - Conservation Reserve Program – Feral Hogs are an issue; have to figure out how to tackle; waiting to get guidance from NHQ on how we can use dollars. (will be kept on radar)
- Have great week!

The meeting was adjourned at 11:35 a.m.

The next SC State Technical Committee meeting date, time and location to be determined.