

State Technical Committee Meeting

NRCS/FSA State Office, Tolland, CT

May 1, 2014

NOTES

Participants: Henry Talmage, CT Farmland Bureau; Artie McCollum, NFWR; Lisa Coverdale, NRCS; Joyce Purcell, NRCS; Arde Ramthun, NRCS; Nancy Ferlow, NRCS; Debbie Surabian, NRCS; Carol Donzella, NRCS; Carol Grasis, NRCS; Mark Edmonds, NRCS; Paul Rothbart, DEEP; Joe Wettemann, DEEP; Helen Hochholzer, DEEP; Doug Emmerthal, DEEP; Abbie Maynard, AES; Scott Gravatt, ECCD; Denise Savageau, CACD; Pat Bisacky, CT DPH; Karl Honkonen, USFS; Eric Thomas, DEEP; Dan Mullins, ECCD; Rich Meinert, UConn Ext.; Kip Kolesinskas, AFT; Devon Marsden, FSA; Wayne Woodard, TNC; Kira Jacobs – EPA DPH

WELCOME/ INTRODUCTIONS/Farm Bill Update: Lisa Coverdale

Lisa opened the meeting and welcomed all, and introductions followed. She reported on the passing of the new Farm Bill; her thankfulness for the partnership, and the purpose of the State Technical Committee. The subcommittee was established in the Farm Bill and their role is to make recommendations on NRCS programs and activities; act as an advisory committee, and assist NRCS in boosting outreach to address environmental issues. CT NRCS' regional equity is at 170%, with EQIP receiving \$5-6M. This goes towards technical assistance and top practices such as: roofs and covers, fences, waste storage facilities, energy, wildlife, forestry, heavy use, composting and brush management. CT NRCS currently has 48 full time employees, its newest member is Jamie Watts, Executive Assistant to Lisa; two new Soil Conservationists are being hired for the Windsor and Torrington field offices; two Pathway students will be joining us this summer and will be placed in the Danielson and Hamden field offices; we also have a joint Farmland Liaison with CT DoAg, and a joint position with UConn Forestry; a TAP agreement with DEEP, four Altima's, two ACES and a DEEP-Climate Change person.

Farm Bill Programs Update – Funding Opportunities: Joyce Purcell

Joyce reported that the new Farm Bill passed on February 7, 2014; the programs have been streamlined from 23 to 13; there's a change in AGI from \$1M to \$900k; it removes the authority to waive AGI except for RCPP; only AMA will need to comply in 2014; WHIP was not authorized; 5% of EQIP funds are targeted for general wildlife habitat; payment limitation has increased from \$300k to \$450k in years 2014-2018; advance payments for underserved producers is now at 50% for practices completed within 30 days; ACEP is the new easement program with two components: ALE and WRE; applications are due by June 6, 2014; ALE is the old FRPP program where easements are held by the Entities and NRCS provides funds to the Entities; WRE easements are held by the USA and funds are provided to the landowner; required length of land ownership has decreased from 7 years to 2 years; CSP must address two resource concerns; CT NRCS' total allocation received is \$3.5m, we have received 220 applications that total \$5.5M and have requested an additional \$2M in regional equity. These are no-year funds which are good for planning windows.

Lisa mentioned that *Soil Health* is being celebrated this year; the rainfall simulator has been very popular and is being loaned out to partners; the Conservation Districts are hosting workshops on May 21st and June 7th with a third being planned for early November in Hartford. She also mentioned the *Cover Crop Crusade* monitoring sites, and the closing of two FRPP easements with two more on the horizon.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP): Denise Savageau

Denise reported on the new RCPP program that promotes coordination between NRCS and its partners to deliver conservation assistance to producers and landowners through partnership agreements, program contracts or easement agreements; the program has \$100M in funds; encourages working across state boundaries and leveraging funds. The program has three categories: 40% nationwide for bi or multi-state projects; 35% to 8 critical conservation areas to be chosen by the Secretary of Agriculture (LIS watershed is a contender); and 25% for state programs. She also reported on the refunding of the PL-566 program with the focus on critical conservation areas. Letters of support for LIS are being generated by the partnership. A handout on the program was provided.

Watershed Rehab Program/Emergency Watershed Protection and Floodplain Easements: Arde Ramthun

Arde reported that the 2014 Farm Bill authorized rehab funds for PL-534, PL-566 and RC&D dams only through FY 2008; \$250M has been allocated to the watershed rehab program; the dam rehab program has begun in CT; there are 61 dams in CT, of which 28 are considered high hazard; the program involves a three step process: assessments, planning and design. The reasons for the assessments/rehab are due to hazard class change, changes in land use within the watershed, and dams at or near the end of their service life. Arde reported that CT dams are in pretty good shape; DEEP owns the dams and NRCS monitors them yearly with the State (the State has over 300 dams). This program can only be applied to NRCS dams. A Dam Watch fact sheet was provided.

Arde also reported on the EWP Floodplain Easement Program Round 2 noting that 93 applications were received, approximately 98 acres are being considered (Round 1 had 350 acres), with an estimated value of \$10M. The purpose of the program is to mitigate the effects of future storms: parcels without structures prevent development - parcels with structures gets people out before the next storm hits. Outreach for the program included town visits, press releases, assistance from the Partnership, targeted meetings along the coast, and a radio show interview.

Conservation Innovation Grants/NWQI/Payment Schedule – Nancy Ferlow

Nancy reported that four applications totaling \$75k were received for FY 2014 CIG statewide grants (part of the EQIP program), and 3 for the national grants. Those chosen at the national level can receive up to \$1M. The NWQI is focusing on the monitoring of the Little River; applications for other projects are due by June 20, 2014. The development of the Payment Schedule for FY15 is on-going; any questions/comments are to be sent to Nancy by May 6, 2014; the schedule can be reviewed all year long; payments for cutting trees varies – working to stabilize.

Subcommittee Reports

Easement Subcommittee – Henry Talmage

Henry reported that the subcommittee was charged with looking at the Entity certification process; having representatives from the national office sit down with Partners to discuss program was very helpful; the farming community is appreciative of the tremendous work done on the program changes and recognizes NRCS for all the work done on the Farm Bill. He mentioned the recent political storm and the continued efforts to find solutions to make two programs work together; NRCS and DOA met to discuss how to make it better, and it has.

He also reported on the designation of the Clean Water Act and how it's affecting farmers. The changes in regulative authority gets farmers nervous; what does it mean to production, what is the threat? Not open for public comment yet; want protective resources, want access to clean water; don't want to hurt farmers; national and state listening sessions being offered with NRCS hosting. Do we want to do in-state? Sec. 404 new rule

agricultural exemption; what constitutes waters of USA, what does it mean naturally? Interim rules to be provided by Lisa.

National Water Quality Initiative Report (NWQI) Committee – Joe Wetteman

Joe reported that DEEP and NRCS are working on Little River BMPs on farms and monitoring parties to see how they're working; currently have one farm interests and are waiting for them to decide if they want to move forward or not. Opportunity for a second NWQI is unknown at this time; it's an on-going process.

Wildlife Subcommittee – Paul Rothbart

Paul reported that the subcommittee is not active; he spoke about the New England cottontail, the only native rabbit in CT, a 2006 candidate species; NRCS is a major player in developing cottontail habitat, along with the FWS and Wildlife Management Institute; CT meets 3-4 times per year, has a land management team, a comprehensive management plan and putting habitat on the ground is a major objective; funded two-ways with FWS grants (state properties) and NRCS (outreach/conservation plans/contractor hired. Grants are able to fund three positions. To date, 400 acres of cottontail habitat have been developed; group has a goal of 1000 acres. Action plan needs to be updated for the next 10 years; the current one has a 2015 deadline.

Forestry Practice Discussion – Mark Edmonds

Mark reviewed the three forest practices that have been developed: forest trails and landings temporary crossings (EQIP); forest management planning levels (EQIP) and forest trails and landings access roads (EQIP). A hand-out was provided; send comments to Mark.

New Committee

None

PARTNER UPDATES

CT Agricultural Experiment Station – Abbie Maynard

Abbie reported the renovations are on-going, they are ahead of schedule and on budget; the annual Plant Science Day will be held on August 6, 2014, the Governor will be speaking; approval to hire several scientists was granted, an urban forester will be added; research is on-going for West Nile, Lyme, invasive species, Emerald Ash Borer and ethnic crops.

DEEP Forestry Division – Helene Hochholzer

Helene reported the Forest Legacy Program is on the President's funded list for FY-14; Salisbury project not funded; for FY-15 the Whippoorwill Woods project in Stafford with 7 landowners made the list; FY-16 accepting applications until June 30, 2014.

DEEP Forestry Division – Doug Emmerthal

Doug reported on the decline in staffing levels due to retirement; the Division continues to work with FSA; watching rabbit habitat; the Indiana bat (Northern long ear bat) being considered for T&E list; the Great Park Pursuit is being held June 20-21, 2014 starting at the UConn Horse Barn Hill; 800 families have signed up so far; two highlights are the making of maple syrup and a portable saw mill.

EPA Water Protection Program Region 1/Drinking Water Division – Kira Jacobs

Kira reported that her Division is having staffing issues, too, due to retirement; they have lost 29 employees along with funding; she mentioned the importance of Partnerships and leveraging funds; she spoke of how drinking water officials work with Districts and NRCS and a new tool kit that helps set up collaboratives (the National Drinking Water Collaborative); CT has its own collaborative and will meet sometime in June and will include a field trip to a drinking water treatment plant; an International conference was held in CT and addressed healthy water/healthy forests.

Farm Service Agency – Devon Marsden

Devon reported that they, too, are having staffing issues due to retirement; Windham and Torrington are currently understaffed; she mentioned the status of FRP, acreage reports, AGI 2009-11 eligibility and compliance issues, disaster programs, a new dairy programs, and CRP.

American Farmland Trust – Kip Kolesinskas

Kip reported that the WLA and Steering Committee are active and addressing state legislative issues and testifying; a model agricultural easement language deed is now available and can be found at the CLCC website and AFT CT webpage. He also mentioned the New England Food Policy has a new report out; outreach for land access and affordability to organizations is on-going and AFT is looking at the difficulty in securing land for new/beginning farmers; at the national level AFT is holding a meeting on farmland protection in October in Lexington, KY.

UConn Extension Systems – Rich Meinert

Rich reported on the local meat in schools initiative; three chefs will notify farms on the pounds of meat needed for their schools; fertilizer and nitrogen research is out that was conducted on 166 acres/15 crop fields/3 farms; working on small plots of corn to see if there's a difference if you don't apply manure, to date no differences were noted; purchasing an unmanned 6-rotor helicopter to do stress assessments; upcoming old tractor exhibit in Roxbury on the 18th from 11-4 PM.

The Nature Conservancy – Wayne Woodward

Wayne reported on the *Places & People* Initiative- locating landscapes and preserves that are important to people and have ecological significance; 430 mile CT River has upstream connectivity with degrading soil and water; LIS program; 65 preserves in State; ecologically important areas located in communities that people really want.

NACD/CT Association of Conservation Districts – Denise Savageau

Denise reported on landowner certainty, how we work with farmers; developing conservation plans, doing everything good so EPA can't come after them if they follow their plans; establishing a model; looking at our state laws; with the passing of the new Farm Bill the focus is now on appropriations; making sure NRCS has enough funds for technical assistance, soils, and staff; 319 appropriations for forestry, looking to consider TA and conservation plans as implementation ; analysis for stream and stream events, have assessment of streams and stream channels so when blown out, repairs can be made easily; an emergency preparedness for streams like NY has; two upcoming meetings: summer board meeting on soil health and the NACD New England Chapter meeting in August in Rhode Island.

Eastern Connecticut Conservation District – Scott Gravatt

It was noted that this is Scott's last STC meeting before retiring; Dan Mullins has taken over the role of the Executive Director for ECCD; the Envirothon is upcoming

DEEP – Eric Thomas

Eric reported on the draft non-point source pollution program that drives the 319 program and other efforts; the FY13 319 grants are being awarded; several implementation projects; pre-proposals for FY14 have closed; 16 applications were received; NEIPC conference will be hosted by CT next year; looking for topics and location to hold event; working on stream flow classification; regulations have passed now need to classify like water quality classification; starting with Thames River watershed; upcoming soil workshop, date to be determined.

US Forest Service – Karl Honkonen

Karl reported that he has been in his position for 6-weeks now and is settling in; he is happy to be a resource for the partnership.

Conte Refuge, NFWR – Artie McCollum

Artie reported on the WOW initiative and their participation in the Earth Day event held in Mystic; the push on reaching out to urban folks; and the Conte Refuge and acquiring a 50-60 acre parcel in Old Saybrook.

CLOSING REMARKS:

Henry mentioned that the legislative session in Hartford is closing in one week; two bills made it to chambers: OPM staffing needs/hiring freezes and budgetary issues. Lisa thanked everyone for coming and ended the meeting with a poignant quote. A short video called, "Don't Treat Soil like Dirt" was shown.

NEXT MEETING DATE: July/August 2014

ADJOURN

The meeting adjourned at 1:05 PM