

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

Wednesday, May 28, 2014

Tower Hill Botanical Garden  
11 French Dr.  
Boylston, MA 01505

---

**Present:** 18 in attendance.

Christine Clarke, USDA-NRCS, State Conservationist	Gerard Kennedy, MA Dept. Ag. Resources
Deborah Johnson, USDA-NRCS, ASRC	Ted Kenziora, US FWS
Barbara Miller, USDA-NRCS Program Manager	Jeff LaFleur, MACD
Diane Petit, USDA-NRCS, PAS	Jon Niedzielski, USDA-FSA
Carol Rickless, USDA-NRCS, Secretary	Jane Peirce, MA Dept. of Env. Protection
Peter Church, MA DCR	Marianne Piche, MA Div. of F&W
Fletcher Clark, MA DCR	Brent Powers, MA Div. of F&W
John Devine, USDA-FSA	Markelle Smith, TNC
Maryjo Feuerbach, US EPA	Brian Wick, CCCGA
Jon Kachmar, TNC	

This meeting was digitally recorded.

Meeting duration: 9:15 A.M. to 11:35 A.M.

---

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

- Christine Clarke, State Conservationist announced she has returned from her detail. She acted as Director of the Pacific Islands Area in Honolulu, Hawaii. She thanked Barb and the staff for their work while she was away. Christine described her duties and some of the places she traveled while on detail.

**Organizational Changes – Christine Clarke**

- Some organizational changes occurred at NRCS in early 2014. Through these changes NRCS hopes to address the needs of our customers effectively while also managing budget reductions in the coming years. Currently, there are 3 District Conservationists covering the seven field offices, each responsible for a specific geographic area in the state. Three new Team Leader positions have been created to help achieve consistency in program delivery. All team leaders

will focus on the technical aspects of delivery of conservation and address targeted resource concerns. There are also new Program Specialist positions. The Program Specialists are assisting the District Conservationists in handling routine duties relating to the administration of participants contracts. This type of organizational model is common in other states, but new to Massachusetts.

- Luis Laracuente, State Conservation Engineer will be returning in June from his detail as Acting Watershed Rehabilitation Program Coordinator in NHQ
- NRCS Budget looks good, staff has downsized and we have increased collaboration with partners. A new 2014 Farm Bill, Conservation Title was enacted on Feb. 7, 2014.
- The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) announcement occurred May 27, 2014. RCPP is a new NRCS program that uses partnerships to multiply conservation investments and reach conservation goals on a regional or watershed scale. NRCS and state, local and regional partners coordinate resources to help producers install and maintain conservation activities in selected project areas. Partners leverage RCPP funding in project areas and report on the benefits achieved. 40% funding will go to national, multi-state projects; 25% will go to state projects: and 35% will go to critical conservation areas designated by the Secretary of Agriculture.
- A bond bill to provide funding for the Conservation Districts may occur this year. MACD is working with districts on this.

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

##### **Financial Assistance Programs**

- Barb told STC members she would like our partners to encourage their colleagues to attend the STC meetings to get acquainted with the new Farm Bill. She added that NRCS partners' input is important since this information will impact how NRCS spends farm bill dollars.
- Under the 2014 Farm Bill, Financial Assistance programs are now just EQIP, CSP and AMA.
- Regional Equity - Under the 2008 Farm Bill, Massachusetts was a Regional Equity\_state, so we were guaranteed \$15 million in financial assistance funds if we could show the need for the funds. Regional Equity is based on allocation formulas. The formula change under 2014 Farm Bill is .6% of FA funds- now Regional Equity funds are near \$18M (may change annually), NRCS must show need in December- earlier in the year. It is important that Conservation Planning be done in advance so when funding becomes available we are ready to commit funds to projects. This year NRCS didn't submit for Regional Equity Funds because there were no projects ready to go.
- Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limitations have changed under the new Farm Bill. Now it is \$900,000 including farm income which makes some farmers ineligible for USDA programs. Under the 2008 Farm Bill, AGI was \$1 million and did not include farm income. AGI rules may keep some participants from eligibility for programs. The idea behind this is to streamline tax and income information for entities and tax preparers. AGI now includes all income sources for eligibility including spouse's income. New rules for AGI start Oct. 1, 2014 for FY15, except for AMA, which does require filing AGI certification.
- To participate in USDA programs a participant must meet the provisions of conservation compliance through the *Food Security Act of 1985*. A conservation plan is needed to plant a commodity crop on a wetland or highly erodible land if the land was not converted to a crop

field before 1985. Under the new crop insurance-provision in the 2014 Farm Bill, landowners will have to comply with the Food Security Act of 1985. The Farm Service Agency is waiting to get final policy information.

- There is a change from annual funds to no year funding. This should give opportunity to offer funding year round. We anticipate being able to fund more continuously and funds won't expire at the end of fiscal year. Funds do not need to be sent back to the treasury. Hopefully, this new funding structure will give us the flexibility to prepare and plan in a year round schedule ahead of obligating funds.
- The 1619 provision in the new Farm Bill did not change. The 1619 provision concerns limitations on sharing producer data between agencies without an agreement between agency and landowner.
- Organizational payment limitation- changed from \$300,000 to \$450,000 for the life of the farm bill for EQIP.
- Receipt for Service. All USDA must provide landowners with a receipt for service. No guidance has been provided as to how to implement this, probably in the new fiscal year.
- Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program was repealed, but WHIP practices have been rolled into EQIP. Nationally 5% of EQIP funds will go to wildlife practices. WHIP was 15% in 2008. WHIP eligibility was different than EQIP; EQIP is more stringent. Final rules for the new EQIP are slated to be out by 2015.
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) remains the same. CSP is acreage based and a good opportunity for forestry. So far NRCS had only one application in FY14. Historically, there is low participation in this program in Massachusetts.
- Agricultural Management Assistance Program (AMA). No change to AMA. 15-16 states get funding under AMA. AMA is for the type of crops which are not traditionally available to get insurance. Participants receive a small amount of money, usually used for irrigation projects in MA.

### **Easement Programs**

- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - Agricultural Land Easement (ACEP-ALE) now replaces WRP, GRP, and FRPP. There is only one fund pool under ACEP. NHQ will determine how funding will be split to cover areas under these old programs. (ACEP-ALE) has replaced FRPP and GRP- no more GRP-style rental agreements which was the only application of this program in MA.
- Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP). Program was re-authorized in the new farm bill, but not funded. It only received funding at the beginning of the 2008 farm bill and since then, allocations have only supported existing projects. MA has never received funds in this program. The focus is on managing forests for federally listed species. MA has none of these in the forest landscape.
- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) - Acreage amounts have been significantly cut. This program takes land out of production by providing rent to the landowner and is not used much in Massachusetts. CRP is primarily in western states.
- Wetland Reserve Easements Program (WRE) is similar to Wetland Reserve Program (WRP). WRE is only easements now. The 10 year restoration agreements are gone. WRE has permanent

easements, 30 year easements and tribal land -30 year contracts. WRE still does restoration on easement land.

- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) replaces landscape initiatives and will be funded \$1.2 billion over 4 years. NRCS wants partners input to double this amount through leveraging funds. Partners will pay in kind dollars or give technical assistance. There is an RCPP APF (Announcement of Program Funds) in Grants.gov – NRCS partners can review the website, check on partner eligibility to work with NRCS, and to find initial RCPP notices at: <http://www.grants.gov/web/grants/home.html>
- There are 3 categories for RCPP funding: 35% will go to Critical Conservation Areas; (there are 8 areas designated by the Secretary in the US), 40% will go to National Proposals (multi-state), and 25% will be for State Proposals. Under Critical Conservation Areas, NE did not receive funding for the Long Island Watershed or NE/NY Forestry Initiative. There will be \$100 million for RCPP funding this year through the Farm Bill. NRCS contributing programs such as EQIP hold 7% back to fund RCPP.
- RCPP can be used by partners to help fund their work in critical conservation areas. A proposal's objectives and eligibility rules are similar to EQIP's, a project must be on Agricultural lands/forest land and should address one of the State's Priority Resource Concerns. More information will come out soon for this program which is seen by partners to have lots of opportunity.
- NRCS Massachusetts State's Priority Resource Concerns are: water quality degradation, soil quality, soil erosion, invasives, degraded plant condition, inadequate habitat for fish and wildlife, inefficient energy use, and insufficient water.
- RCPP may tie into the Regulatory Certainty initiative. The original Water Quality Initiative is still supported in Congress along with EPA's Regulatory Certainty.

#### **Natural Resource Concerns – Jeff LaFleur**

- Jeff presented Barbara Miller a fleece jacket to thank her for her work with the local workgroups and MACD while she was Acting State Conservationist.
- **Local Working Group (LWG) Efforts/Results:** Local Working Groups within the conservation districts in FY11 and FY12 identified conservation resource priorities in their local areas. The result was a report with 254 pages of recommendations. Recently, the Conservation Districts (CDs) reviewed and re-evaluated the report. Essex, Norfolk & Nantucket Conservation Districts did not participate in the LWG. For the review, major land use categories were matched with natural resource concerns to create a matrix of projects for each Conservation District's local geographic region. The matrix was reviewed by each CD's board and supervisors to reconfirm their priorities. It was found that some CD's needed to add to or adjust their resource concerns. In the future, this matrix of resources concerns, driven by local CD input, will help direct where EQIP funding goes in each specific conservation district.
- NRCS is working to engage the conservation districts through attendance by the District Conservationists at conservation district meetings. There has been outreach to Essex, Norfolk and Nantucket counties to revive activity in their conservation districts.

- **Regulatory Certainty:** This is a voluntary program created to provide assistance with water quality issues, enhance public awareness and provide incentives for participation in a regulatory program through EQIP. Landowners participate in practices to protect water quality. Farmers who are implementing certain conservation practices are concerned about regulating entities and fines in relation to watershed protection. 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. Rehoboth is an active, diverse agricultural community. The local Agricultural Commission in Rehoboth has been educating the landowners and also provided outreach to local community groups. Bristol CD is also doing a Soil Health education program for farmers in the fall. 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.
- Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection recently funded MACD \$200K in 319 funding. The funding is being used to identify hot spot areas, target technical assistance, create agricultural liaisons, offer conservation planning and outreach to farmers and affected municipal areas. There will be a workshop for municipal officials in fall of 2014.

#### **Technical Matters – Fletcher Clark & Barbara Miller**

- **Forestry Subcommittee:** Fletcher Clark, Chair of the Forestry Subcommittee emphasized the fact that regional forestry resource issues must also fit into state programs, such as Chapter 61 under MA Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). He said that the funds from DCR will help with outreach and education. He added that Kate Parsons, Team Leader and himself will be holding a Forestry 101 workshop in the near future at NRCS field offices for landowners.
- **State Resource Assessment:** NRCS must annually update resource assessments. NRCS needs specific detail and data from stakeholders to choose priority areas for funding.

#### **Farm Bill Program Development 2014 – Barbara Miller**

- **Payment Schedules:** NRCS payment schedules are payments to landowners for typical practice scenarios in a region. Massachusetts requires updated and detailed data from landowners to improve the practice scenarios. New England is considered one region under NRCS view of practice scenarios.
- **Program Delivery 2014:** Under the previous Farm Bill, the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) assisted in funding for Dam Removal. The last funded WHIP contract occurred this year prior to the new 2014 Farm Bill. Under the new Farm Bill, WHIP has been rolled into EQIP.

- Under the 2014 version of Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the focus will be on shorter time frames in contracts. There will be fewer practices in one contract to expedite getting conservation on the ground. This method translates to less allocated dollars now. The goal is to create good plans and manageable contracts. This will cut down on administrative workloads and enhance the servicing of a participant's resource needs. Currently we are unsure about the actual dollar amount Massachusetts will receive.
- In mid to late June 2014 final funding decisions for NRCS Farm Bill 2014 programs will be made. There is no regional equity in MA in 2014.

#### **State Technical Committee Member Updates & Discussion**

- Jon Niedzielski, FSA State Executive Director, commented on the new Farm Bill's insurance based payments. He said that there will be no more direct payments to farmers. There are two, new safety net programs, Price Loss Coverage and Agricultural Risk Coverage. The Noninsured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) will continue to provide financial assistance to producers of noninsurable crops when low yields, loss of inventory or prevented planting occurs due to natural disasters – a buy up provision has been added. In other changes, a new Dairy Margin Protection Program will replace the Milk Income Loss Contract (MILC) Program. The new MILC takes the place of the old "Milc" program. FSA plans to do outreach as more information comes in concerning these programs. In FY15, FSA anticipates seeing double the amount of dollars for loans for farm ownership. This will make it possible to assist more new and beginning farmers as they look to finance and purchase farms as well as get help with estate planning. In addition to serving traditional, commercial agriculture customers, FSA is excited to see more demand from new entry (small farmers).
- Marianne Piche, MA Division of Fish and Wildlife, was concerned about the loss of WHIP funding for NE Cottontail. Barb Miller replied the NE Cottontail has a fund pool of its own under 2014 EQIP. Wildlife projects may get 5% additional funding. For a project to be bumped up in priority a well written Conservation Activity Plan matched to the NRCS practice standard should be completed. NRCS is open to conversations about conservation planning and ranking from partners.
- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) pre-applications are due July 14, 2014. Though there are no federal funds for forestry now, states can continue to fund practices to keep the work going.
- State ranking information will be sent out to State Technical Committee members.
- The next meeting will be in the autumn of 2014.

**The meeting was adjourned at 11:15 am.**

Attachments:

STC5282014 pdf - 2014 Farm Bill Basics  
MACD LWG Reg. Cert Presentation pdf