



NRCS Fall State Technical Advisory Committee Meeting October 22, 2020 9 am – 12 pm

NRCS State Conservationist Update, Alan McBee:

This year NRCS rolled out new software and tools to help staff with contracting, mapping, and ranking applications, and we received and started implementing the final program rules for the 2018 Farm Bill. Alaska was one of the early states to fully obligate all FY 2020 EQIP funds, which included additional funding that was received and fully obligated.

In FY 2021 we will be working on:

- Increasing the number of Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) program participants.
- Reinvigorating local work groups (LWG) to incorporate locally-led planning into NRCS programs
- Using the FY2020 Farm Bill guidance for the FY2021 resource concerns and priorities.

Bryan Scoresby, FSA:

- Farm Service Agency (FSA) has a Seafood Trade Relief Program (STRP) that extends to fishermen across the state. If you know of someone who may not know which agency to contact to receive program information, or have been unable to sign up, feel free to share the following link <https://www.farmers.gov/Seafood> to learn more about the program. FSA is looking forward to reaching out to everyone who may be interested. Sign up ends December 14, 2020.

FY20 to FY22 Program Priorities – Scott Crocket, NRCS

- **Updates to STAC contact list:** If you did not receive the STAC meeting notification/information or if you know of someone who would like to be added to our STAC mailing list, please contact, Amanda Crowe, Ryan Maroney, or Scott Crockett. . Anyone who has an interest in land management and conservation is welcome to participate in the STAC.
- **FY21 Priorities:** NRCS will use the same natural resource priorities that the STAC developed in FY20 throughout FY21. See handout with more info about the priorities.
 1. Increasing freshwater fish habitat and populations
 2. Protection and enhancement of traditionally and culturally used resources
 3. Forestland health and wildfire hazard reduction
 4. Soil health includes crop, pasture and forestland soil health
- **Updating priorities for FY22:** NRCS is looking to update the state priorities for FY22 using input from STAC and local work groups. We want to create a more effective locally-led process to use from FY22 forward so we can focus NRCS technical and financial assistance on resource concerns at the local level.

Programs Update – Amanda Crowe, NRCS

- **Priority resource concerns on ag lands:** Last January the STAC provided the input on Priority Resource Concerns on Agricultural Lands, which includes cropland, pasture, range, associated agricultural land, or farmstead. See handout for the priorities that were determined. In FY 2020 Headquarters said we need to identify 5 priority resource concerns. In FY 2021 they are asking for 8.
- **Conservation Stewardship Program:** The CSP program is ideal for landowner who are already doing conservation work on their lands and are ready to take it above and beyond the NRCS conservation practice standards through enhancements. Alaska had 2 CSP contracts in FY20. We have challenged all field offices to have least one CSP application for FY2021.
- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program:** Review of EQIP priority recommendations from STAC in FY20 was used to develop EQIP budget. Applications may compete in several fund pools and others may only compete in one fund pool. Our goal is to obligate 100% of our funds and although we had a goal of spending certain amounts of money in each fund pool; we had to shift things around to get funds obligated on time. We have more opportunities to fund Soil Health, On-Farm Energy and Organic applications.
- **Historically Underserved Producers:** NRCS offers additional incentives to various producer groups who are historically underserved, such as Beginning Farmer/Ranchers (BFR). BFRs are individuals who have been farming less than 10 years. Socially Disadvantaged is another group of underserved growers, which includes Alaska Natives. NRCS has allocated significant funding to historically underserved producers.
- **Working Lands for Wildlife:** WLFW is an approach, it's not a standalone program. Through this approach we can use multiple programs to meet the goals. Alaska has 1 Working Lands for Wildlife effort on the Kenai Peninsula with the primary resource goal of salmon habitat. Originally the scope followed the USFWS project and included 20 streams on Kenai Peninsula. This year we were able to expand that to the entire Kenai-Peninsula Borough (KPB). That means that any project that fits the goal of Working Lands for Wildlife (WLW), Salmon Habitat Project could compete in EQIP for example under WLFW fund pool.

ACEP and GARCs for Alaska – Scott Crockett, NRCS

- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) is our conservation easement program, it consists of two components: Ag Land Easement (ALE) and Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE).
- For the WRE land valuation we have what is called a Geographic Area Rate Cap, or GARC. The GARC is a limitation cap on how much can be spent to procure wetland easements, set by Congress. Currently the GARC for Alaska is \$5,000. Alaska NRCS believes this cap is too low.

- However, up until this past year we have not had an application for a WRE and no need to complete a land appraisal. We are currently working with a partner on an easement for wetlands located in the Mat-Su Valley and have ordered a land appraisal.
- Once the appraisal is complete, we are going to have an actual land appraisal/valuation data that we can present to National Headquarters and request a more appropriate GARC for Alaska.
- Our goal is to have that real land appraisal data available for the January STAC meeting, in which we can evaluate it and help recommend a GARC that is more appropriate. More information on the GARC will be presented at the next STAC meeting.

Review of Local Work Groups and State Technical Advisory Committee – Scott Crockett, NRCS

- NRCS has a policy in place for the State Technical Advisory Committee and Local Work Groups. According to our policy the LWG is convened by the local Conservation Districts (both SWCD's and TCD's.) The information that they provide is filtered up to the STAC and then the STAC provides their input and feed back to NRCS. The agency in turn implements that guidance and recommendations into the way the States implement the Agency Farm Bill activities. The LWG and the STAC do not have decision making authority but the agency does give high priority to their input, comments and feedback.
- Previously Alaska has had LWG's. We would like to see the following improvements:
 - a more robust local working process;
 - enable the locally led process to be more effective;
 - better able to direct our TA and FA directly at the local level and;
 - direct funding to a specific community
- Alaska is very large and diverse. We understand that a broad list of priorities may address the resource concerns within one area but miss some of the priorities in another area. We want to do our best to facilitate the locally led process.
- The full policy can be found in the NRCS [General Manual \(GM\) 440 501 Subpart B](#), or contact Scott Crockett to request a paper copy of the policy.

Local working groups are subcommittees of the STAC and are intended to:

- Ensure that conservation needs are assessed at the community level with all the stakeholder providing input.
- Have local conservation needs assessments with our local field offices staff
- Identify priority resource concerns and determining which ones are the highest priorities.
- Recommend to USDA on how conservation programs are applied at the local level.

- Coordinate within multi-counties where program funding and priority areas are applied even when its across county boundaries if necessary.
- Assist NRCS and the local conservation district with public outreach. Being a part of the effort to spread the news about NRCS programs and priorities.
- Recommend to the State and up to the national level policy based upon the local resource information in that local area.
- Utilize the conservation needs assessment, which our agency can assist with to prioritize resource concerns for the local area.
- Forward local recommendations to NRCS state office via the designated conservationist.
- Include a diverse representation of producers and entities representing all local resource concerns and land uses.

Examples of LWG members:

- NRCS local field office staff
 - Members of the conservation district boards or equivalent;
 - TCD's could include tribal leadership.
 - Members of the technical community.
 - Members of the county Farm Service Agency (FSA) committee.
 - Alaska Native governments and corporations
 - Farm Service agency
 - Cooperative Extension if they are active in your area.
 - Local State elected or appointed officials
 - Other Federal and State Government Representatives. Includes technical representatives from both federal, state, and borough agencies.
 - Representatives from the tribal entities and organizations.
 - Anyone at the local level who has an interest in land management
- **Publicizing a Local Work Group meeting:** The intent of the local working group is that they meet at least once a year, they can meet more often. They are open to the public. A notification must be published at least 14 calendar days prior to the meeting through a news release or social media utilizing some form of broad public announcement.
 - **Convening a Local Work Group Meeting:** The meetings are conducted as an open discussion among the members and typically the Chairman of the local Conservation District leads the LWG. It can be the SWCD or the TCD. According to NRCS policy if the SWCD or the TCD is not willing or able to convene an LWG then the NRCS, District Conservationist can step in and help facilitate the meeting.

LWG Survey and Planning – Scott Crockett, NRCS

- **NRCS is requesting the following input from the STAC:**
 - Create a potential timeline for when LWG's should meet.
 - When and how they should get the information back to the STAC.
 - When and how the STCA will evaluate the local process and filter

- it up to NRCS with a list of priorities for each fiscal year.
- **LWG survey:** A survey will be available online soon, for use by all LWGs and we will have the ability to compile all the information into one document.

Action Items: for FY 2022 - Local Working Group (LWG) To Do List

Oct 1	State Office prepares the new program year information that will be shared at the October STAC and provide to DC's to pass to the LWG before the Kickoff Telecon.
Sometime after Oct 15	District Conservationist (DC) will attend a kickoff telecon. Share State Office New Program Year Documentation. LWGs can request help from NRCS. Reach out to your local DC, Scott Crockett, or Ryan Maroney. The call-in info will be determined at the LWG level.
After Kickoff telecon	LWGs will convene sometime after October 15 and record their discussions and decisions (minutes)
Third Week of October	Preliminary discussion is shared and discussed at the Fall STAC meeting and new information may be provided to the districts; they will pass to the LWGs.
Mid-December	The LWGs are encouraged to hold their meetings prior to mid-December.
Mid-January	January STAC meeting to get feedback from the LWGs. We will look at Scott's report. We will determine what is working and what they need help with. We will then provide additional guidance to other LWGs if additional time is needed, we will extend through February
February	If the additional time was required to provide the LWG we will get information from them before the end of March and we will discuss as a group.
Last two weeks of March	Mid-March DC's will complete the compiling of the LWG decisions / recommendations for FY22 priority resource concerns utilizing the LWG Data Collection Spreadsheet and email to SRC with a cc: to ASTC-Programs.
April	My agency will look over the LWGs priorities and resource concerns for discussion at the May STAC
May STAC Meeting	STAC committee we can present all the information for consideration for the FY22 Farm Bill FA and TA.

- NRCS will compile some information packages to give to the Conservation Districts.
- The Conservation Districts will use the information packets to convene their LWGs.
- Please invite your District Conservationist to participate in the meeting.
- If you require help to convene your LWG meeting please let us know.
- We will provide information for the LWGs to review and consider.
 - It will be in the form of the FY22 LWG Survey, which will be established an online survey.
 - Resource Priorities – Agricultural Land
 - Priority Resource – Forest Land
 - Come up with 8 priorities in order from your top priority to your lowest priority.