



## STATE TECHNICAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE (STAC) MEETING SUMMARY

January 21, 2020

Start: 9:05 a.m.

End: 12 p.m.

### *Welcome and Introductions, Scott Crockett, State Resource Conservationist*

Thank you for joining us today. This is the first State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) meeting of fiscal year 2020. NRCS plans to host 3 STAC meetings throughout the year. Our next meeting will be in April. There will not be a summer meeting. The third meeting will likely be in October. More details forthcoming.

### **Introduction from new State Conservationist, Alan McBee**

**Alan McBee** is officially on board in Alaska as the new NRCS State Conservationist. He has been on Alaska soil for the last couple of months and is taking time to visit with Alaska partners and stakeholder groups. Alan began his career in Mexico and has worked in multiple NRCS offices across the Western United States including Colorado and Washington. Most recently he was the Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations in Washington. He has completed numerous leadership trainings within the agency.

The goal of this meeting is to gather input from partners and stakeholders to help NRCS prioritize its Farm Bill program delivery in Alaska. The NRCS Alaska team is up and running and looks forward to working with STAC members. Unfortunately, Alan is ill today and will not be able to attend the full meeting.

### **Other Opening Remarks**

**Chief's Visit:** Alaska NRCS is preparing for the Chief of NRCS, Matthew Lohr, to visit in June. The goal is to show him several remote areas of the state to demonstrate Alaska's unique challenges in travel and logistics necessary to get conservation on-the-ground. We want the Chief to see a mix of traditional agriculture, non-traditional agriculture, and forestry projects. More information will be shared about the Chief's visit as details are worked out.

**Everyone's input is welcome.** If we miss your comment at today's meeting, send an email to [Scott.Crockett@usda.gov](mailto:Scott.Crockett@usda.gov) to provide input. NRCS wants to ensure everyone has a place at the table. All comments are welcome. If you think of other comments after the meeting, send them to Scott Crockett afterward.

**Forest Action Plan:** The Alaska Department of Forestry is updating the State Forest Action Plan and is looking for input from agencies, partners and stakeholders. Update provided by Jim Rankert with the Community Forestry Program. The Dept. of Forestry works closely with NRCS to assist private forest owners. The plan provides a high-level look at forest issues, lands and

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trends regardless of ownership. It aims to identify priority areas to work within the state. A stakeholder survey is available and will be sent to participants of today's meeting. The final forest action plan is due in June 2020. If you have issues you would like to be addressed, contact Ashley Reed List, Forest Planner and Cooperative Forestry Programs Manager at [ashley.list@alaska.gov](mailto:ashley.list@alaska.gov) or (907) 269-8481. See handout for more information.

- **Fire Crew Staffing:** A comment was shared that there has been a reduction in the number of fire crews in Alaska compared to past decades. For example, in the 1980's there were about 77 fire crews; though last year in one of the worst wildfire seasons recorded, there were only 11 crews. The action plan should examine the policy involved with fire crews, particularly bringing in fire fighters from out of state when there are plenty of in-state personnel who are able to assist. Policy limits staffing thus capacity.
- **Tribal Consultation:** Additionally, tribal consultations need to be conducted as part of the plan development. The Tribal Resource Commission can be a valuable partner in this.

**Soils Sub-Committee:** NRCS State Soil Scientist Cory Cole is leading a STAC sub-committee focused on soils. If you are interested in participating in the soils sub-committee, contact Cory Cole at [Cory.Cole@usda.gov](mailto:Cory.Cole@usda.gov) or 907-761-7759. Sub-committees are designed as a more intimate group of people that can specialize on a specific subject matter.

### ***Farm Bill Priorities, Scott Crockett, State Resource Conservationist.***

**Locally-Led Process:** The State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) provides input to NRCS to shape statewide priorities, while also addressing local priorities in regions and communities across Alaska. Each District Conservationist is tasked with hosting a Local Work Group meeting to gather local input from a variety of partners, landowners, agencies, non-governmental organizations, and anyone else who has an interest in natural resource issues. The STAC is part of that locally-led process.

**Alaska's Top 4 Priorities from the 2014 Farm Bill:** With input from STAC and locally-led processes, NRCS Alaska developed 4 overarching priorities that guided implementation of the 2014 Farm Bill (2014 – 2018). These priorities were built into the state business plan. Those priorities were:

1. Reduction of non-point source pollution (such as animal waste on farms, pet feces, limiting run-off from farm fields, etc)
2. Grazing lands / Pastureland health
3. Forestland health
4. Protection and enhancement of traditionally and culturally used resources

**What are the priorities for the 2018 Farm Bill?** The new Farm Bill has been signed by the President in December of 2018 and written into law. Over the last year, NRCS has been working on developing policy and guidance so that states can implement the Farm Bill. NRCS has just recently finalized the very last of the policies. These policies undergo a public comment period and are finalized after incorporating public input. Alaska NRCS is beginning to build its state business plan for the 2018 Farm Bill and seeks to incorporate STAC priorities into that plan.

**Question: What is the reporting process for NRCS to measure outcomes?**

**Answer:** NRCS has created ranking tools to weight applications for various practices that will address priority natural resource concerns. This allows specific applications to rise to the top for ranking and allocating funding. NRCS reports funding on particular practices, though the agency realizes the limitations in reporting solely dollars funded and acres applied. NRCS planners use a new tool called Conservation Desktop which provides more data to measure outcomes of a given conservation practice. Specifically, there is a new ranking tool being rolled out internally within NRCS called the Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART). The CART has created a database for each resource concern (there are 47 specific resource concerns prioritized by NRCS). The tool will allow NRCS to quantify outcomes of a practice in a county, borough, region or nation. Examples include calculating how many tons of soil are protected from erosion; or how many acre-feet of water are conserved due to a practice being implemented.

**Question: Does NRCS use fire as a practice?**

**Answer:** NRCS has practices that use fire as a tool. The former state conservationist did not favor writing burn plans. More follow up to come with new state conservationist on this topic. NRCS does have the ability to assist in providing fire-related practices as a tool for implementing burn plans. NRCS plans to hire a forester in Juneau and a forester in the state office in the coming months to address workload gaps in forestry, particularly related to fire as a management tool. NRCS is working on developing a fuel break training for employees and partners.

### **New Potential Priorities Identified for 2018 Farm Bill Implementation in Alaska**

1. **Develop conservation practices related to increasing salmon numbers and salmon habitat in stream.** This could include culverts, forest health practices and riparian restoration. Discussion was had on focusing solely on salmon or widening the resource concern to also include any anadromous and freshwater fish. Multiple partners at the meeting shared comments related to salmon/freshwater fish as a priority resource concern.
  - **Salmon Safe:** Partners in the Mat-Su Valley and Kenai area are working with Salmon Safe to help producers plan and implement agricultural practices that support healthy salmon habitats. This is a popular model being used in the Northwest U.S. and has application here in Alaska. Developing Alaska-specific guidance for Salmon Safe would have tremendous applicability in addressing this resource concern.

2. **Cropland Health:** Several Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) and Tribal Conservation Districts (TCDs) expressed an interest in focusing on cropland health. Some areas of the state have an abundance of croplands surrounding sensitive waters that supply large amounts of salmon habitat. There is potential for leeching of fertilizers into rivers and streams; and for run-off of non-point source pollution. The Alaska Association of Conservation Districts (AACD) expressed a unified voice across districts for cropland health to be a priority. AACD previously discussed this recently with Alan McBee.
3. **Building Capacity for SWCDs and TCDs:** There is a need for more staff, training and education to build capacity for both Soil and Water Conservation District and Tribal Conservation District staff. TCDs were incorporated in 2011 and are still new in their development. Staff are new and capacity is an issue.
4. **Development and implementation of Alaska specific resource treatments.** With such unique land challenges compared to the Lower 48 – ranging from everything to climate, soils, types of agriculture, subsistence gathering, and the remoteness of rural communities – there is a need for Alaska-specific resources to help conservation planners, partners, farmers and landowners. NRCS works hard to shift or align national Farm Bill program rules to suit the specific needs and challenges in Alaska.
5. **Beginning farmer/ranchers and landowners.** There is a great need in rural Alaska for developing farms and new producers. They need resources to help them set up the farm, using the best science and practices available, before they become a mature operation. Nationwide, a certain amount of NRCS funding is available to beginning farmers and ranchers. We can also make this a priority in Alaska. For example, new peony farmers popping up across the state don't have basic information on soil health and other farming resources. This was a priority expressed by AACD in addition to other partners.
6. **Invasive species.** Invasive species of multiple types continue to be a threat to Alaska agriculture.

### **Additional Comments**

**Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG):** Multiple partners expressed an interest in restoring the state-level CIG program. CIG provides funds to eligible Tribes, entities or producers to spur the development and adopting of new and innovative approaches and technology in agriculture. State level grants offer more flexibility to states outside of the national CIG competition. The 2018 Farm Bill allows more options through CIG including on-farm trials and an emphasis on soil health. This is a priority for AACD. The Delta SWCD mentioned using CIG for soil health trials and that CIG was important to its Local Work Group. The CIG discussion will be included in the development of program-specific priorities.

## CSP Priorities, Amanda Crowe, Assistant State Conservationist Programs

- The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) builds upon existing conservation. To be eligible for CSP, producers must show that they already meet two resource concerns; and are willing to meet at least one more resource concern throughout the duration of their contract. A CSP contract lasts for 5 years. The producer must already have a conservation plan in place and have previously completed conservation practices with NRCS. The program is for those who are already implementing conservation practices who desire to elevate their conservation to a higher level.
- CSP offers producers options for “enhancements” which are similar to conservation practices.
- Alaska NRCS must determine priorities for CSP to help focus our efforts in this program.
- See handout for more information on CSP priorities.
- Input was provided by STAC members present and on the phone.
- **For those on the phone that needed additional time, submit feedback to Amanda Crowe by close of business on January 23, 2020 by emailing [Amanda.Crowe@usda.gov](mailto:Amanda.Crowe@usda.gov).**

## EQIP Priorities, Amanda Crowe, Assistant State Conservationist Programs

- The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is NRCS’s “bread and butter” program. It allows NRCS to do piece mail conservation on a small-scale. For example, if you have a farm, forest, cropland or subsistence area, and you want to address one resource concern on a small part of the operation, EQIP can help.
- EQIP applications are ranked based on a number of factors so that priority applications rise to the top and have a higher chance of being funded. Resource Concern categories represent a small portion of the total ranking score.
- NRCS is moving to a new planning system called Conservation Desktop, that will help planners easily gather all the information in producer’s files so we can report meaningful outcomes such as amounts of soil loss; water saved, etc. This is directly tied to resource concerns. The new ranking system is still being rolled out internally within NRCS
- NRCS asks it’s planners how to prioritize resource concerns within each of the three hub zones in Alaska (North, Central and South hubs). We then take that feedback and determine how we should prioritize these at an overarching state level.
- See the handout for more information on EQIP priorities.
- Input was provided by STAC members present and on the phone.

## Increased Payment Rates for 10 Practices

- With the new 2018 Farm Bill, states have an opportunity to offer a higher payment rate for up to 10 conservation practices in each state. The higher payment rate would be

available to all producers, even those who may not qualify as historically underserved or socially disadvantaged. Note that producers who qualify as historically underserved, socially disadvantaged, limited resource, beginning farmer/rancher and veteran farmer/rancher already receive a higher payment rate regardless of the practice.

- Alaska NRCS is seeking input from STAC members to determine what practices would be best suited for the higher payment rate. The intent is that practices would align with Alaska's overarching Farm Bill priorities.
- **Submit feedback to Amanda Crowe by close of business on Feb. 7, 2020** regarding the conservation practices you would like to see considered. If you have a question about an individual practice, contact Amanda for the practice sheets. Email [Amanda.Crowe@usda.gov](mailto:Amanda.Crowe@usda.gov).
  - Several practices were mentioned to be considered in the list, including trails, walkways, bridges, fencing, culverts, and stream habitat improvements.
  - Well is a general practice for installation of a well in support of a practice such as livestock watering or irrigation. Protection of wells is something field staff would do during a resource inventory. Examples of practices that would be performed to protect an existing well include filter strips and critical area plantings.

### **Alaska EQIP funding pools**

- Think of these as “buckets of money.” You may also hear them called “funding pools” or “ranking pools” or “sub-accounts.” They are all the same thing. NRCS receives a funding allocation for EQIP and may decide at the State Conservationists discretion how much to designate for various funding pools.
- There are 2 new funding pools being considered this year for FY20 – wildlife and forestry. These funding pools haven't been used in the past. Please note the wildlife pool includes both fish and terrestrial species. The general pool offers more flexibility and applicability for a wide array of projects.
- There are 9 funding pools. Each STAC entity was asked to vote on their priority funding pools.
- **For those on the phone that needed additional time, submit feedback to Amanda Crowe by close of business on January 23, 2020** by emailing [Amanda.Crowe@usda.gov](mailto:Amanda.Crowe@usda.gov).

### **RCPP Application Reviews, Ryan Maroney, Technical Tribal Liaison**

- The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is a program designed to leverage funding not just from NRCS, but from other partner groups and entities, to achieve conservation results on a landscape scale.
- RCPP has been permanently authorized in the new 2018 Farm Bill legislation. It has been successful in Alaska and NRCS is glad to see it continue.

- There's a renewal option in the new Farm Bill for existing RCPP partners to renew their projects. There's an option for alternative funding agreements, though NRCS is awaiting guidance on that option.
- The FY19 RCPP announcement for program funding was announced in September of 2019 and closed Dec. 3, 2019. That is the first round of RCPP projects in the new Farm Bill with \$300 million available nationally. The final rule for RCPP is expected to be released by the fall of 2020.
- Alaska had 1 application submitted for the FY19 RCPP. Over the next couple of weeks, Alaska NRCS will evaluate the proposal to review eligibility and perform a state technical review with experts from various. The team will then make a recommendation to the state conservationist. Each STC must support the proposed work under that project. The deadline for the review process is Jan. 31, 2020.
- Nationally, NRCS will make decisions on what applications will be funded across the nation.
- For a copy of the review process guidance, contact Ryan Maroney, [Ryan.Maroney@usda.gov](mailto:Ryan.Maroney@usda.gov).
- NRCS is unable to give details about the application. That information is kept confidential until the time the project is potentially awarded funding.
- The next round of funding for FY20 RCPP will be announced this summer, anticipated in July.
- The new RCPP allows more flexibility with easements which is of importance to many Alaska partners.

## Closing Discussions, Scott Crockett, State Resource Conservationist

Thanks again for participating.

The next meeting will be in Anchorage. Details forthcoming.

**Note: A list of the various voting tabulations taken during today's meeting and the participating entities will be provided after the meeting.** Please note the tabulations are not final and that additional input is encouraged and requested following the meeting. Information gleaned from these exercises will be used for briefing the State Conservationist for use in shaping NRCS program implementation.

### Conference Room Attendees

- Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Palmer: Alan McBee, Scott Crockett, Ryan Maroney, Amanda Crowe
- NRCS Wasilla: Jim Hazlett and Michelle Jeseski
- Farm Service Agency: Bryan Scoresby and Jeff Curry
- Alaska Village Initiatives: Charles Parker
- Alaska Tribal Conservation Alliance: Tyler Mockta and Kyla Gongora

- Eklutna Inc.: Mark Lamoreaux
- Eklutna Tribal Conservation District (TCD)/NVE: Carrie Ann Brophil
- Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission: Bruce Cain
- Palmer Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD): Jeff Smeenk, Jesse Godbold, Louisa Branchflower, Katie Sunderland
- Knik TCD: Theo Garcia
- Tyonek TCD: Tonya Kaloa
- Knik Ahtnu Inc: Tom Harris
- Cape Fox Corporation: Tom Harris
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: Michael Daigneault
- Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Forestry: Jim Rankert

### **Teleconference Attendees**

- Alaska Carbon Exchange: Steven Holly Fairbanks
- Fairbanks SWCD: Joni Scharfenberg
- Kenai SWCD: Heidi Chay
- Salcha-Delta SWCD: Meghan Lene
- University of Alaska – Fairbanks Co-op Extension: Phil Kaspari
- Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation: Charley Palmer
- NRCS Juneau: Samia Savell
- NRCS Kenai: Bradley Yothers and David Ianson
- NRCS Fairbanks: Joanne Kuykendall and Grace Edwards
- NRCS Delta Junction: Ryan Johnson
- NRCS Homer: Pam Voeller
- Homer SWCD/Alaska Association of Conservation Districts: Chris Rainwater
- NRCS Palmer: Tracy Robillard

***Meeting notes and handouts from the meeting will be available on the Alaska NRCS website at:***

***<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/ak/technical/stc/>***

***For assistance in obtaining a handout via other means such as email or U.S. mail, contact Phillma (Dee) Covalt at [Phillma.Covalt@usda.gov](mailto:Phillma.Covalt@usda.gov) or (907) 761-7747.***