

# NRCS Alaska State Technical Advisory Committee

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January 21, 2021 - Hosted on Microsoft Teams

## **Attendees:**

1. Scott Crockett
2. Tracy Robillard
3. Amanda Crowe
4. Scott DeBruyne
5. Amy Tippery
6. Brian Atkinson
7. Robert Carter
8. Casey Dinkel
9. Trevor Dobell
10. Kristi Harper
11. Joni Scharfenberg
12. Joanne Kuykendall
13. Ashley List
14. Ryan Maroney
15. Alan McBee
16. Jon Oestreich
17. Charley Palmer
18. Ann Rippy
19. Steven Holley
20. Tom Harris
21. Tonya Kaloa
22. Pam Voeller
23. Michael Daigneault
24. Samia Savell
25. Mitchell Michaud
26. Tikaan
27. Bruce Cain
28. Erin Sturdivant
29. Meg Mueller

## **STC Update - Alan McBee**

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Thanks to all of you for making time for this meeting and for your input! Most of our new regulations have been published for the new Farm Bill. 2020 was the first year we have been implementing those new regulations in earnest. We rolled all of our programs guidance over to 2021. We will be gathering information from our local work groups and work with the STAC to guide our priorities for the next fiscal year 2022. We want the opportunity to hear from our partners and offer a listening session.

## **Gov Delivery Email Updates - Tracy Robillard**

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NRCS is revamping our Gov Delivery email service to provide updates to conservation partners and the public. These email updates can help you stay informed of upcoming program sign up deadlines, opportunities to submit public comments on NRCS policy, and other news. We are using Gov Delivery to send communications to the STAC such as sending out meeting agendas and notes. We have taken the liberty of adding everyone who is currently on our STAC list to our Gov Delivery service so you can receive these important updates. If you are NOT receiving these emails from us, please contact Tracy Robillard ([tracy.robillard@usda.gov](mailto:tracy.robillard@usda.gov)) to be added to the list. You may also self-subscribe on our website. See the attached flyer for more information on how to sign up for email updates from NRCS Alaska and feel free to share this information with other individuals in your organization who may be interested in these updates.

## **Programs Update - Amanda Crowe**

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This fiscal year in FY21 we have set aside funding for the following programs:

- \$8.8 million available for Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
- \$500K set a side for Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)
- \$653K for easements (Agricultural Conservation Easement Program - ACEP)
- \$469K for CIG (Conservation Innovation Grants)

Last year we had more EQIP applications than we were able to fund, which is actually a good problem to have. It means there is a higher demand for EQIP assistance and we have the ability to request more funding from the national office. Our EQIP application deadline for FY21 was Nov. 20. We are hoping to get contracts obligated by the end of May.

We are hosting another state competition this year for Conservation Innovation Grants. It's currently being processed to go on grants.gov and we will likely have a proposal deadline in May. Look for more information about this on our Gov Delivery when we announce the CIG opportunity.

This year we have 8 resource concerns we are moving forward with for FY21. Last year we had 5 resource concerns. These concerns were determined with STAC input.

CSP - we are looking to have applications due in early spring.

## Public Comments on definition of NIPF - Alan McBee

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There was a national announcement for public comments on refining the definition for Non-Industrial Private Forestland (NIPF). The comment period closed on Jan. 19. Many Alaska Native entities have submitted comments expressing concern as well as NRCS Alaska leadership. The final definition is being developed at the national office which will take into consideration the public comments. There is also flexibility for each state within the STAC to determine their own priorities and needs for NIPF.

Tom Harris comment: We ask that the agency policy makers be mindful that this change will disenfranchise 93% of the ANCSA landowners who have received less than 1% of the programs and funding provided the rest of the nation, and ANCSA landowners have received less than 1/10th of 1% of the USDA NRCS programs and funding provided to other non-ANCSA landowners in Alaska.

## Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) - Scott Crockett

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GARC is used as part of the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) for Wetland Reserve Easements. to determine the payments made for the easement.

Under a permanent easement (in perpetuity aka forever) NRCS purchases the development rights to the property. We have several different methods we use to determine the fair market value of the property. The current Alaska GARC ratio is set at 80% of fair market value. The current cap is at \$5,000. We had our first Wetland Reserve Easement application last year for Alaska and we went through the appraisal process. It appraised at \$5,130/acre and that was in the Matanuska Susitna Valley. The purchase would be the lesser of \$5,000 cap per acre, 80% of fair market value, or landowner offer (rarely happens).

**QUESTION: Is the GARC a flat rate for all of Alaska?** Yes. The GARC is a flat rate for all of Alaska, since Alaska is considered one region within NRCS for determining the GARC. Follow up question - Do we have statewide flexibility by region in Alaska? NRCS will bring this forward to the national office. It was also suggested that we could consider how to break up GARC rates within the state based on Alaska Borough/Census areas.

**QUESTION: Does NRCS have staff associated with IRWA for easement appraisals?** International Right of Way (IRWA) is the leading organization for appraisals which emphasizes a before and after analysis of needs to be identified. NRCS will query the national office to get clarification on this and will work with Tom Harris offline to bring these concerns to the national easement team.

**QUESTION: How did NRCS come up with the \$5,000 rate cap?** Answer: That was a national standard set by NRCS. However states have the ability to increase or lower that amount.

**ACTION:** Think about the GARC cap and submit your comments to Scott Crockett. Does it need to be increased? What justifications would be needed for an increase?

## Local Working Groups - Scott Crockett

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Local work groups provide a local voice to help NRCS identify and address natural resource concerns in communities across the state. Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) and Tribal Conservation Districts (TCDs) play a critical role in this process.

**LWG Decision Support Tool:** NRCS created a decision support tool (online) to help Local Work Groups walk through their discussions and provide input to NRCS about resource concerns. We are looking for feedback about this tool. It was sent out as a web link to STAC members and is also available as an Excel spreadsheet.

**Deadline for when to host your Local Work Group Meeting:** February 15 is the requested deadline for Local Works Groups to host their meeting, and to submit their feedback to NRCS by March 15. Some LWGs have requested an extension of that deadline which is OK - a few of them are going to host their meetings in March. We have some flexibility on these deadlines - the main priority is that we have enough time to process everyone's LWG information and present it to the STAC Committee in May 2021.

**Publicizing Your Local Work Group Meeting:** Please send your meeting date/time and agenda to Tracy.Robillard@usda.gov so we can post it to our website. After the meeting, please send a copy of your meeting notes as well so we can get that posted to the website. We also request that local offices publicize their meeting in their local newspaper and/or radio station and on any applicable social media accounts, such as a SWCD Facebook page.

## Salmon Habitat Restoration

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NRCS has a number of programs available to assist with salmon habitat restoration. It starts with a resource assessment and working 1-on-1 with a conservation planner at the field office. We work

with other agencies and partners to prioritize and dovetail our programs with other efforts taking place in the state for salmon habitat.

Local Work Groups can use the decision support tool to recommend a Working Lands for Wildlife initiative in their area to include salmon or other wildlife.

NRCS has a working relationship with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and has representatives on the STAC. We are partnering with USFWS on wetland inventories and Working Lands for Wildlife.

**ACTION:** There was a request for a presentation from USFWS on Chinook Salmon Program success in Wisconsin for next STAC. That could be a model we want to adapt here for Alaska. NRCS will reach out to WI and pursue having them present at a future meeting.

## Moose Habitat Research - Willow Generation

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NRCS does not conduct research within our mandated programs, however we can be involved as a partner to support a research project. We can provide technical assistance on inventorying resources in a particular area, and technical assistance in how to restore the habitat or create new habitat. There is a moose habitat restoration project in the Copper River Basin.

The goal is to improve moose habitat by willow regeneration. There were mixed results from this project. We need to learn more about willow regeneration and growing willow as a crop. We haven't figured out what works best in our area. There may be opportunities for research or experimental plots. The Plant Materials Center may be a resource for this. Tyonek TCD had a spectacular program for moose habitat recovery and would be a great resource as well. The practices are very labor intensive. UAF has also done research on willow propagation for biomass. Current efforts for willow regeneration are going on in Homer. AHTNA has put together a lessons learned on their moose habitat project.

**Potential Programs to address willow regeneration:** Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) may be a useful NRCS program to use in conjunction with partners for moose habitat, or a Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG).

## Biochar Soil Amendment Practice

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NRCS is working on a soil amendment practice that would incorporate use of biochar as a way to enhance soil health. Alaska is considering implementing this practice, though it has not been

adapted yet in Alaska. A request for more information about biochar was voiced by STAC members. Other states are using biochar.

**ACTION:** NRCS will reach out to those states using biochar and make connections with Alaska partners.

## Log Landing Rehabilitation

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NRCS has a payment schedule that we use to determine the federal cost share for various conservation practices. The intent is to pay enough to be an "incentive" to encourage private landowners to implement the practice. We have specific scenarios that we use to come up with an estimated cost per acre or linear foot, etc. under a typical scenario in Alaska. However it is very difficult to come up with every real-world scenario that may occur in Alaska, though we are improving those annually. Nationwide, NRCS is trying to limit the number of scenarios, because about 40% of the scenarios available are not actually used. That means some scenarios in Alaska may be deleted if they don't get used.

It's tricky for Alaska, because we are so diverse here, and we may only need a scenario once every 5 years. We need input from the STAC on maintaining those scenarios and providing feedback to headquarters. For example not deleting or archiving those scenarios if they aren't used frequently.

The Log Landing Rehabilitation is a forestry payment scenario that STAC partners have suggested we use again, however it has been archived at national due to infrequent use.

**ACTION:** Request for NRCS to formally invite the Alaska Dept. of Ag and AK Fish and Game to participate in STAC as it relates to incentives for fish and game management by private landowners. NRCS will follow up directly with those agencies.

**DECISION:** After discussion, Alaska STAC members have decided that we oppose archiving practice scenarios without prior notice to the STAC. NRCS will make this decision known to the national office and look into a notification process so we can notify the STAC when a scenario is nearing expiration.

STAC partners formally request that USDA NRCS call for a halt in archiving practices that are critical to the survival of Alaska communities. Please advise national headquarters that USDA NRCS Alaska has enormous challenge in establishing practices that are archived before our remote communities can even become aware of and/or even apply such practices, before they are archived.

## Source Water / Drinking Water Protection

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If any Local Work Groups (LWG) would like information on Source Water/Drinking Water Protection, please feel free to reach out to [charley.palmer@alaska.gov](mailto:charley.palmer@alaska.gov) or 907-269-0292.