

## **Arizona State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC)**

### **Meeting Minutes**

November 28, 2017

#### **Opening**

The regular meeting of the Arizona State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) was called to order at 9:10 a.m. on November 28, 2017, in the Federal Building, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor Conference Room, 230 North First Avenue, Phoenix, Arizona 85003, by Emily Fife, NRCS, Acting State Conservationist.

#### **Membership Present**

Emily Fife, NRCS, Acting State Conservationist  
Al Eiden, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Program Manager  
Bill Dunn, Arizona Association of Conservation Districts, President  
Chris Udall, Agribusiness and Water Council of Arizona, Executive Director  
Eduardo Bautista, Agricultural Research Service, Research Hydraulic Engineer  
Fred Breedlove, Arizona State Land Department, Director  
Heather Reading, The Nature Conservancy, Director of Land and Water Protection  
Jessica Asbill-Case, Bureau of Reclamation, Water Resources Program Manager  
Kevin Rogers, Arizona Cotton Growers Association, Executive Vice President  
Kris Randall, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, State Coordinator  
Linda Lind, U.S. Forest Service, Arizona State Liaison  
Ryan Hunt, Farm Service Agency, Program Specialist  
Sharma Torrens, Arizona Department of Agriculture, Legislative/Research Policy Administrator  
Tice Supplee, Audubon Society of Arizona, Director of Bird Conservation  
Willie Sommers, Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management, Service Forester

#### **Guests Present**

Chris Lowman, Arizona State Land Department, Range Resource Area Manager  
Darvis Jordan, NRCS, Outreach Coordinator  
Dawn Salcito, Triangle Natural Resources Conservation District, Secretary/Treasurer  
Ken Gishi, NRCS, State Rangeland Management Specialist  
Lori Kassib, Acting Assistant State Conservationist for Programs  
Rebecca de la Torre, NRCS, Assistant State Conservationist for Partnerships,  
Shelly Blackmore, Triangle Natural Resources Conservation District, Chairman  
Steve Barker, Arizona Association of Conservation Districts, Executive Director  
Steve Rusiecki, Arizona State Land Department, Section Manager  
Steve Smarik, State Resource Conservationist  
Valentino Reyes, NRCS, Public Affairs Specialist

## **Opening Remarks and Introductions**

**Emily Fife, Acting State Conservationist**

**(602) 280-8808 or [Emily.Fife@az.usda.gov](mailto:Emily.Fife@az.usda.gov)**

- NRCS is now aligned under the mission area of Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) along with Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Risk Management Agency (RMA).
- In an effort to streamline processes, a common business center for administrative support is being developed and will be called the FPAC Business Center.
- We are still under a continuing resolution until December 8, 2017.
- We haven't received any direction of our allocation yet. We usually we have a letter by now. We don't know any funding as of yet, i.e., staff, EQIP, etc.
- The hiring freeze that we were under was lifted but the Department has restricted our hiring capabilities. In FY17 we were allowed to hire 3 out of 20 positions in Arizona. Three offers were made and only one accepted. We have two still in limbo. We don't know if they will go back on the hiring list.
- We are waiting on FY18 hiring strategy approval. The Department has put a cap at 10,300 total employees. It is uncertain which positions we can hire. We can't do reassignments right now. NRCS wants to increase the field level positions. It was proposed to have internal moves to increase field level staffing due to employee attrition. We will share as we learn the outcomes.

## **Partner Spotlight**

**Natural Resources Conservation Service**

**VIDEO - Hugh Hammond Bennett: The Story of America's Private Lands Conservation Movement**

- The Hugh Hammond Bennett video can be found at the following link:  
<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/national/about/history/?cid=NRCSEPRD1356274>
- This documentary highlights our roots and what our core and mission values are as an agency.

## **FY17 Summary**

**Lori Kassib, Acting Assistant State Conservationist for Programs**

**(602) 280-8800 or [Lori.Kassib@co.usda.gov](mailto:Lori.Kassib@co.usda.gov)**

## **FY17 Applications**

- A map was presented which showed the number of FY17 Financial Assistance Program Applications Received by Field Office. Prescott Valley and Willcox had the highest number of applications.
- A graph of FY17 Applications by Field Office were shown which included the type of program areas that were requested. The majority of the applications were for EQIP funds.

### FY17 Contracts

- A map of the total number of contracts that came from the applications in FY17 was presented to show the breakdown by Field Office.
- A graph showing the contracts by Field Office was shown which included the different types of program funding that was contracted and further distinguished between General EQIP funds and distinct EQIP funds like Strike Force, Working Lands for Wildlife, etc. The highest obligated funds were General EQIP and Strike Force funds.

### **Discussion:**

- Why were there no Energy contracts? There were no applications for Energy, so there were no contracts. It was further explained that these are special program funds that are separate from General EQIP however we can move funding to other applications if we receive no energy applications so we do not lose the money.
- We don't have a lot of Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) use in Arizona and Emily believes we are missing out on funding to assist with conservation efforts. CSP funding requires that the applicant first have a good base of good conservation management to be eligible.
- Al Eiden would like to influence the enhancements/practices that are used in CSP. He requested the enhancement list be added to the meeting handouts.
  - The Enhancements for the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) for 2017 can be found here:  
<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/cspsearch/national/programs/financial/csp/>. Search by 'Land Use Type' to view available enhancements. Please remember that these were the enhancements for last year (2017) and enhancements for 2018 have not currently been released. Once they are, you can find them at this same link.
- Emily said that we are open to feedback and we have the ability to look at enhancements.
- Bill Dunn thinks the biggest barrier is that producers don't want to take money for what they are already doing.
- Emily said that it may be a misconception that they don't have to do something. Perhaps the Field Offices and our producers need additional information on CSP.
- Willie Sommers suggested targeted marketing for CSP.
- Ryan Hunt suggested sending out success stories from other states using CSP. We could make them available on counters in the offices or send out by GovDelivery.

### FY17 Funding Obligations

- A map was presented which showed the number of FY17 Financial Assistance Program Total Funds Obligated for each Field Office. Kingman, Prescott Valley and Willcox had the highest number of dollars obligated.
- A graph showing the total dollars by Field Office was shown which included the different types of program funding that was obligated. This graph illustrates which offices have the high workload and contracts.

**Discussion:**

- A question was asked what the funding was that went to Kingman. Emily stated that in Arizona that Air Quality funding goes primarily toward improving irrigation systems.
- A question was asked to describe a Seasonal High Tunnel. A brief description of a Seasonal High Tunnel is that they are plastic covered structures that are usually used to extend the growing season. They are not green houses.

**FY17 Summary Wrap-up**

- A pie chart was presented which showed the breakdown of EQIP funding by initiative. The majority of contracts and funding were General EQIP.
- A map was presented which showed the total number of acres impacted in Arizona.
- A summary chart was presented for 2017 Applications, Contracts and Obligations.
- A pie chart was shown which divided the EQIP contracts by Land Use.

**Discussion:**

- A question was asked to define Strike Force. Strike Force is a USDA initiative that provides assistance to historically under-served communities. Arizona is the only state where every county is eligible for Strike Force funds.
- A question was asked if we had EQIP acres broken down into private/State/Federal/Tribal lands. Emily said that our current system makes it difficult to break down the information in that way.

**FY18 Program Rollout**

**Lori Kassib, Acting Assistant State Conservationist for Programs**

**(602) 280-8800 or [Lori.Kassib@co.usda.gov](mailto:Lori.Kassib@co.usda.gov)**

- We expect similar deadlines and funding as last year for programs.
- Our initial allocation was \$11 million total and by the end of the year we obligated \$22 million.
- We had an alternative funding agreement with Gila River Indian Community with \$8 million going towards water quality.
- We are hopeful that will be reflected in FY18.
- Obligation amounts vary by state and typically are allocated based on the state's historical amount of applications received and contracted.

**Easements Summary and Moving Forward**

**Lori Kassib, Acting Assistant State Conservationist for Programs**

**(602) 280-8800 or [Lori.Kassib@co.usda.gov](mailto:Lori.Kassib@co.usda.gov)**

- Slides were presented detailing the FY17 Summary for Easements and FY18 Easement deadlines and current applications received.
- Arizona has requested \$6 million for FY18.



**Discussion:**

- A question was asked about how the process works. Emily answered that we go into an agreement with a partner, i.e., The Nature Conservancy, on prime and unique farmland/grassland to protect it for agricultural purposes. The agreement is for 5 years. An easement is perpetual. The owner can't develop it. Partners can buy development rights to the lands, so those cannot be sold. The farmers still get to keep the land, farm it and use it. Emily explained that ACEP – ALE is 50%-50% split between NRCS and partner. ACEP – ALE – GSS is 75% NRCS and 25% partners. All current GSS projects are in southern Arizona.
- A question was asked if State land was eligible. Emily said that State land is not eligible. If there is a private component of State land, the private portion is eligible.

**Funded CIS**

**Lori Kassib, Acting Assistant State Conservationist for Programs**

**(602) 280-8800 or [Lori.Kassib@co.usda.gov](mailto:Lori.Kassib@co.usda.gov)**

- We received 19 CIS proposals for Arizona. 6 were in Area 1 and 13 were in Area 2.
- Arizona is one of the few states moving towards this way of strategizing, but others are starting to follow.
- The idea is that as we receive less money we want to target specific resource concerns within areas.
- Partner participation is encouraged to help address components that NRCS doesn't address.
- The effort is locally led from working group to provide feedback on barriers and target areas of concern so that we know where we can help.
- Our initial goal was to have one CIS in each Field Office. The Navajo Nation has a separate strategy.

[CIS Data Handout](#)

**Discussion:**

- A question was asked if the CIS's are available to partners, so they know what the priorities are. Emily said that we don't have the actual documents yet.
- 75% of general EQIP will go towards these, but there are other funding options available.
- Emily said that for the applicants outside a CIS area, they can work with others or neighbors to bring that into the next CIS. They can also apply for CSP.

**Science and Technology Updates**

**Steve Smarik, State Resource Conservationist**

**(602) 280-8785 or [Steve.Smarik@az.usda.gov](mailto:Steve.Smarik@az.usda.gov)**

- The previous version of Conservation Client Gateway (CCG) wasn't compatible with Arizona farm and ranch entities, but it is now. CCG removes us as the middle man when working with partners. You can share maps. Want to encourage farmers and ranchers to participate. It is all online and is a huge timesaver. The initial access process takes about

one to two hours to complete. NRCS can help you with understanding this process. We are planning some possible workshops on outreach in Arizona. In the west, CCG use has not been very successful. This is mostly due to the fact that 90% are entities, not individual farmers and ranchers. CCG is only NRCS right now, but could possibly be USDA-wide in the future.

- The Science Portal Tool is currently only available to NRCS. It is an online portal to reach GIS maps and other tools. There has been a delayed release. Currently integrating all components to make this a tool where technical service providers and partners will be able to contribute and even the general public will have some access.

**Discussion:**

- It was asked if NRCS currently has projects in a GIS database. Emily said it is a national database. We can pull various numbers fairly easily, although private information is private.
- Every five years Conservation Practice Standards are required to be updated and revised. National runs it in the Federal Register. The State has one year to instate the practice. Generally, we are given some review time to satisfy issues unique to Arizona. We can't loosen the standards without a waiver.  
[Technical Notice 166 Handout](#)  
[Technical Notice 167 Handout](#)

**Discussion:**

- It was asked if NRCS has a say before the revisions are done at the national level. Steve said we can submit throughout the year.
- A question was asked if NRCS took questions on the FOTG. Steve said we take questions all the time.
- Steve discussed the Cultural Resources Prototype Programmatic Agreement between NRCS/SHPO/ASLD that was recently executed. It was one of the bigger successes over this year. It is a collaborative effort to streamline the cultural resources compliance with section 106 of NHPA.  
[Prototype Programmatic Agreement](#)

**Discussion:**

- Ryan asked if this will change the NRCS/FSA MOU on having NRCS doing the cultural resources consultation for FSA. Steve answered that NRCS will do the field work, but each agency will be responsible for their own consultation.
- Chris Lowman, with AZ State Land, mentioned that they are not getting any follow-up response from NRCS to go ahead with projects. They need something saying to go ahead with the projects. Steve will tell Al Dart to copy State Land.
- The cultural resources flow chart was discussed. Steve emphasized that there used to be a one-time fee that NRCS would pay to the State Museum to approve projects. Now it



will fall to the individual landowner because when we are talking about individual projects, EQIP funds cannot provide for that cost. We are hoping to get this issue ironed out.

[Cultural Resources Flow Chart](#)

- Prescribed grazing/monitoring guidance was recently released to the Field Offices. NRCS does not get paid to do monitoring. Monitoring is something we have tried to assist with in the past, but we cannot continue to do that.

[Prescribed Grazing/Monitoring Guidance](#)

**Discussion:**

- It was asked if prescribed grazing/monitoring can be a part of CSP. Emily said that we have used CTA funding in the past, but CTA is planning money. It is the responsibility of the producer/private sector to monitor.
- Brush management/herbaceous weed treatment guidance was recently released to the Field Offices that discussed technical variances to conservation practices and standards. There was a concern in the southeast part of the state about the heavy creosote areas. Our guidelines don't allow for treatment in many of these areas. Variances allow consideration of the conditions.

[Brush Management/Herbaceous Weed Treatment Variance Request  
Variance Request Form – Ecological Science Practices](#)

**Discussion:**

- The form guides our Range Conservationists and District Conservationists through the process and will go through the NRCS Area and State Office. It is not for the producer to fill out.
- Concern was expressed for the negative impact on sensitive species and what those effects would be on the species in treatment areas.
- Steve said that NRCS was also concerned and that we want to be comfortable with what we are doing. Treatment would depend on what the conditions were. There would be follow-up on cases to see any effects.
- Bill Dunn mentioned that it would be beneficial to see response to treatment in warm season vs. cool season.
- Kris Randall would like to pick up discussion on a later date regarding the Douglas brush removal treatment chemical and its effect on wildlife. Haven't gotten resolution with Fish & Wildlife Service Contaminant Specialist.
- Our GIS Specialist created a warm season precipitation map at the end of September. At a glance, you can see precipitation for the end of the warm season, which gives us an indication of perennial vegetative growth on the landscape. We are going to be posting warm and cool season maps on our website for the past 3 ½ years.
- Phil Jacquez, District Conservationist in the Chandler Field Office, has been appointed as Arizona's Organic Champion. He will be our go-to expert on all organic matters.

**Discussion:**

- Ryan Hunt is the Organic Specialist for FSA. FSA has funds available to assist with the costs of becoming certified organic.

**Call to the Public/Announcements**

- Sharma Torrens announced that the Farmers Market will be held every Thursday, 10:30-1:30, until April at the Capitol and there will be a free screening of the movie, “Food Evolution” on December 5, 2017. One of the scientists will be there.
- Chris Udall said that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Agribusiness Roundtable will be held December 4, 2017 to discuss the Farm Bill. Information can be found on [www.agribusinessarizona.org](http://www.agribusinessarizona.org).
- The Agribusiness Water Council Certificate Program is actively recruiting for next year.
- Fred Breedlove explained that the Commissioner of State Land Department is also the Natural Resources Commissioner. Jackie Holm was hired as the NRCD Manager. The focus of the position will be on partnership building, technical support, etc.
- Linda Lind said that all of the Southwest Forest Service met in Arizona and focused on CE & CA’s streamlining processes.
- Jessica Asbill-case announced that Bureau of Reclamation has three grant opportunities out for now. One for starting watershed partnerships and two on water conservation. Let Jessica know if you have questions.
- Tice Supplee said there is a January 8, 2018, inter-tribal discussion on water law and best practices at Audubon’s Rio Salado Nature Center.
- Rebecca de la Torre reminded the group that Quarter 2 for the STAC focuses on Local Working Groups. There won’t be a general meeting of the STAC. The LWG locations will be posted on our website by December 15, 2017.
- Willie Sommers said the Department of Forestry & Fire Management is working on a forest action plan. A full-time planner has been hired. Anyone who wants to collaborate on a focus group is encouraged to reach out to him. The Director has asked them to change the focus toward natural resources. Would like to have the Arizona Natural Resource Action Plan wrapped up within 4-5 months. Kris Randall mentioned it would be nice to have the AACD effort be part of the strategy plan.
- Heather Reading said the Salt and Verde Alliance is bringing together 14 cities (4 in the Verde Valley and 10 in the Phoenix Metro Area) and a range of stakeholders including corporations, farmers, and other organizations that all have an interest in the Salt and Verde to invest in projects that protect river flow and water quality, ultimately benefitting both upstream and downstream communities. Specifically, the Alliance supports river projects that create water savings or improve water quality, infrastructure projects that improve water management, and projects that reduce future impacts and limit future groundwater withdrawals. The Alliance also supports our forest work. In October, The Nature Conservancy and the U.S. Forest Service launched the Future Forests Project, which is designed to transform forest management. By using innovative technology and building strategic partnerships with wood product companies, our goal is to accelerate the pace and scale of forest thinning – going from the current 10,000 acres per year to over 50,000 acres per year in order to thin 1 million acres in the next 20 years. To learn more, visit:



<https://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/arizona/howweework/arizona-salt-verde-valley-water-fund.xml>

- Eduardo Bautista announced the annual stakeholders meeting at the ARS Center. It is not open to the public. If anyone would like to become involved, please contact Steve Naranjo.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

- Post a link to the Hugh Hammond Bennett video on Arizona's NRCS website.
- Steve will ask Al Dart to copy State Land on project status.
- Kris Randall would like to pick up discussion on a later date regarding the Douglas brush removal treatment chemical and its effect on wildlife. She hasn't gotten resolution with Fish & Wildlife Service Contaminant Specialist.
- The LWG locations for Quarter 2 will be posted on the NRCS website by December 15, 2017.

#### **Adjournment**

Meeting was adjourned at 11:40 a.m. by Emily Fife.

Minutes submitted by: Diana Cameron, NRCS, Administrative Assistant

Approved by:

  
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EMILY FIFE  
NRCS  
Acting State Conservationist

#### **NOTE:**

Presentations and handouts from this meeting of the State Technical Advisory Committee meeting may be found by following this link:

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/az/technical/stc/minutes/>