Welcome/Opening Comments – Kurt Simon, State Conservationist
Kurt opened the meeting welcoming everyone to the newly remodel Hugh Hammond Bennett Conference Room. Kurt shared a brief background on the NRCS State Office remodel. We will be having an open house once our audio-visual equipment is installed. You are more than welcome to use this conference room if it is available, contact Shelly Grimmius to inquire.

New Farm Bill Status Update – Jon Hubbert (Attachment #1)
Jon shared the rule process is beginning but it’s a long process: It takes it from being a law to be what’s recorded in the Federal Regulations with public comment before it gets codified then we start developing our policy for delivery. At this time, we are in the second phase – rule making. The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) will be the first through the process with Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) second. Currently, Iowa has $27.5 million in EQIP funds which is significant increase than last year’s allocation. Iowa has also received $5 million for Ephemeral Gully Erosion Pilot through EQIP. We have received funds for the Midwest Ag Water Quality Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) project. There were questions from the group on the different programs.

Iowa Partners in Conservation – Kurt Simon
Kurt shared this is Iowa’s agreement program and this year we decided to put $5 million for partners to apply for with specific criteria. The deadline has come and gone, receiving 25 applications. In the announcement it states up to $5 million available. Kurt had a team review all the applications and had a discussion on how far we go down the ranked list since we don’t have a budget at this time.

Approval of Minutes from December 13, 2018
Kurt asked if there were edits/corrections for the minutes from the December 13, 2018 meeting. Jean Eells made the motion to accept the minutes as written, John Whitaker second, motion carried.
Kurt mentioned NRCS is publishing a Federal Register (FR) notice on March 11, 2019, inviting public review and comment on its National Conservation Practice Standards and associated documents. There is a 45-day comment period. This notice is one step in meeting Section 2502 of the 2018 Farm Bill (Pub. L. 115-334).

Section 2502 of the 2018 Farm Bill requires expedited review of conservation practice standards by USDA. The review is for the conservation practice standards, including engineering design specifications, that were in effect on December 19, 2018. In keeping with the review requirement, NRCS will:

- Evaluate opportunities to increase flexibility in the conservation practice standards in a manner that ensures equivalent natural resource benefits;
- Provide the optimal balance between meeting site-specific conservation needs and minimizes risks of design failure and associated costs of construction and installation; and
- Ensure, to the maximum extent practicable, the completeness and relevance of the standards to local agricultural, forestry, and natural resource needs, including specialty crops, native and managed pollinators, bioenergy crop production, forestry, and such other needs as are determined by NRCS.

The purpose of this notice is to obtain the widest possible input and to ensure the revision of the standards fully meets the intent and spirit of the expedited conservation practice review requirements. Federal Register notice NRCS-2019-0003, Review of USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service National Conservation Practice Standards, will be placed on public inspection March 8 prior to publication on March 11.


Kurt will be establishing a Source Water Protection (SWP) Sub-Committee to address the 2018 Farm Bill requirements.

**CRP Update – Curt Goettsch**
Curt shared there is ruling making on the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) with the changes in the 2018 Farm Bill. Once this is completed, FSA National Office will be sending out policy and procedures. Not sure when this will be done. There is anticipation of a grassland ranking period and a continuous CRP sign-up. The General sign-up will probably not open up until December 2019. There was some discussion from the group. Prairie strips will be a new program but not sure how it will function.

**Farm Bill Programs Update – Kurt Simon**
Kurt wanted to thank Secretary Mike Naig, Deputy Julie Kenney and Sean McMahon for going to Washington, D.C. to meet with NRCS Chief Matt Lohr and other National Headquarters staff to request additional funding for our Midwest Ag Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) project. This has been a very successful project with several entities/organizations in several states involved getting conservation on the ground. Kurt provided details on how the request came about after the initial funding was obligated after 2 years. There is a batching date of March 15 with several applications and no money to fund.

About two years ago the Office of General Council (OGC) did an audit in Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri (Iowa was involved in a small portion) on how we handle the ephemeral gully erosion. When
NRCS does compliance checks, the other states were going to a farm with visible gully erosion in the field and they called it under compliance. If they had a terrace or a structure in the field and there could be ephemeral gully erosion, but the structure was not allowing the water to leave the field, so they said they complied. Iowa required more with other management practices, so we didn’t have as big of an issue as the other states. This resulted in detailed discussion with Farm Bureau staff in the four states meeting in Kansas City. From that there were interim rules in the Federal Register for review and comment. In the meantime, Iowa was issued $5 million to address ephemeral gully erosion issues. Kurt wanted to provide this information to the State Technical Committee and ask the EQIP Sub-Committee to take on this effort to find out how this will look like, such as looking at watersheds, statewide program, or identify certain practices. Kurt has been in touch with the other states discussing having a pilot project in the southwest corner counties that touch Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri. Kurt provided details on the process of measuring ephemeral gullies, but this pilot would be based on a systems approach. There was a detailed discussion from the group. Kurt delegated this task for the EQIP Sub-Committee. Kurt also asked the group once the EQIP Sub-Committee meets and comes up with a recommendation, would it be ok to approve them and move forward. Since we are needing to move on this right-away, waiting till the June 20 meeting would be too late. John Whitaker made the motion to authorize the NRCS State Conservationist following the EQIP Sub-Committee meeting apply the recommendations, Jean Eells seconded, motion carried.

Sub-Committee Reports
EQIP – Steve Hopkins (Attachment #3)
Steve provided a copy of the EQIP Sub-Committee Meeting held on February 20 and went over the document in detail (see Attachment #3). There was a detailed discussion from the group. Cover Crop Grazing Pilot Project: The Sub-Committee discussed the details of a proposal being developed for a cover crop grazing pilot project in Iowa. The pilot project is being proposed as a new EQIP project by Practical Farmers of Iowa, Iowa Cattlemen’s Association, and the Iowa Ag Water Alliance. The idea was discussed at two earlier work group meetings—one in December and one in February—involving the above three organizations, NRCS staff, and several EQIP Sub-Committee members. The funding request is to provide 75 percent cost-share for external fence and water installation on croplands, with priority given to cropland adjacent to permanent pasture in two pilot areas: 1) Rathbun Lake (Wayne, Lucas, Appanoose, Clarke, Monroe, and Davis Counties) and 2) Middle Raccoon River Watershed (Sac, Calhoun, Carroll, and Greene Counties). The proposal would be submitted to NRCS National Headquarters for new EQIP funding in Iowa.

After much discussion, the Sub-Committee voted unanimously to support the pilot project proposal, and to recommend bringing it to the State Technical Committee for further support. A draft proposal is being prepared by Meghan Filbert of PFI and Sean McMahon of IAWA, with editing from Steve Hopkins and Jeff Matthias, NRCS. A final draft of the proposal is targeted for mid-to-late March 2019, with submittal to NRCS National Headquarters as soon as possible, following consideration by the State Technical Committee and State Conservationist. This will be discussed further at our next State Technical Committee Meeting on June 20, 2019.

State Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) – Robert Mier
The FY19 CIG Application Proposals for Funding (APF) has been developed and reviewed by the National CIG team. The APF will be sent to our Grants and Agreements Service Branch (GASB) later today or tomorrow for final review and posting. It is anticipated that the APF will be posted on grants.gov by early next week. The information will also be available next week on the Iowa website at https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/ia/programs/financial/cig/.

A workshop and/or webinar for CIG applicants is scheduled for April 5, 2019, from 10:00 am to 3:00 pm central standard time. Information on how to participate in the webinar will be posted to the https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/ia/programs/financial/cig/ website. Applicants are encouraged
to visit the website to learn more about the CIG program. Questions about this announcement can be directed to Judy.Martinson@ia.usda.gov (515-323-2229.)

Kurt mentioned there is a $750,000 ceiling with $25,000 per project.

**ACEP-WRE – Kelly Smith**
Kelly shared the Sub-Committee met to review the 2019 ranking criteria, with the recommendation to use the same as FY18 along with the Geographic Area Rate Caps (GARC). Funding eight pothole applications for approximately $4 million; 10 riverine for $7 million, 3 Missouri River sites for $2 million (this is a new pilot) – this depends on the allocation that we receive hoping it will be between $10-$12 million. There have been issues with the smaller applications from the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) for restoration with land values and the GARC that doesn’t compete with the appraised values. Kelly provided additional information on potentially changing the way to increase the applications in the PPR.

**CRP – Sean McMahon (Attachment #2)**
Sean provided a copy of the CRP Sub-Committee meeting minutes from December 7, 2018 and went over the document in detail. Below is a recommendation to the entire State Technical Committee. There was a detailed discussion. Sean McMahon made the motion to accept the Sub-Committee’s recommendation, John Whitaker second, motion carried. Note: Susanne Hickey, TNC, has not had enough time to digest the recommendation - opposed. The State Technical Committee would ask Farm Service Agency to forward this recommendation to their National Headquarters for consideration.

Include CP12 Food Plot as an available practice consistent with 2-CRP (Revision 5) Amendment 34, Exhibit 11 page 43 for the purpose of Iowa’s CREP Wetlands program. Allow for winter cover to be established in the form of a shrub or perennial planting, in total not to exceed 10% of the contracted acres. CP12 Food Plot and Winter Cover acreage shall not impact the wetland’s water control structures and must be planned to ensure the wetland structures are kept clear of shrubs and plantings with roots that could compromise the integrity of the wetland structures.

Kurt shared there will be a Prairie Pothole Regional meeting being held in our office March 18-19 to discuss this issue. The State Conservationists with their compliance staff will be meeting with Kevin Wickey, Regional Conservationist-Central and Jason Outlaw, National Wetland / Highly Erodible Land Specialist, to see if there’s a possibility to use the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) as a pilot.

**Agency Announcements**
Kurt Simon – NRCS has posted the Wetland / Highly Erodible Land (HEL) Compliance Interim Rule in the Federal Register last Friday. It’s open for 60-day comment/review period. Kurt provided details from the website.
Steve Hopkins – FY19 RAMP – asking for additional 319 Funds; May 15 deadline for new funding projects on existing watersheds. They have received 6 applications through this grant to develop new watershed plan that could address the new 319 funding rules.
Joe McGovern – Last week the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation finalized another Agriculture Land Easement (ALE) with Seth Watkins in southwest Iowa. There has been a lot of interest for State Legislation to keep grass on the land that could potentially add leverage to the ALE funds.
Jean Eells – Women Food Agriculture Network (WFAN) is holding 8 meetings across the state: March 19 – Racoon River Nature Center in Des Moines; March 20 – FFA in Ankeny; April 2 – Otter Creek Nature Center in Toledo; April 3 – Brenton Arboretum in Dallas Center; April 10 – Grand Viking Hall in Story City; April – Titonka Bank in Forest City; May 1 – Ned Ashton House in Iowa City; and May 2 – Barn Happy in Cedar Falls. Thank you to Marty Adkins and Robert Mier for attending WFAN’s Summit Meeting with discussions on how educators can assist with training/teaching about soil health.
Susan Kozak – The State Director vacancy at the Iowa Department of Land Stewardship (IDALS)-Division of Soil Conservation and Water Quality has closed. The State Soil Conservation and Water Quality Council (SSCWQC) are reviewing applications. Three names will go to Secretary Naig to make the selection. IDALS is working with the Iowa Department of Transportation and Department of Natural Resources to put together comments on the Waters of the US/World – deadline April 14. Will be sending out a meeting invite to attend the Stakeholders Meeting on March 27. If you did/do not receive the meeting invitation, please contact Susan Kozak and she will add you to the attendance list. Suzan Erem – It was really great to see Paul Johnson and Seth Hopkins in a meeting with hundreds of other people.

Closing Comments – Kurt Simon
Kurt stated starting next week, Jon Hubbert will be on a 120-day detail in Washington, D.C. He will be chairing a very important committee that will be working on the 2020 State Resource Assessment (SRA), which is how each state will receive their allocation and staffing numbers. Lori Altheide, Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operation in Atlantic, will be on detail to the State Office as Acting Assistant State Conservationist for Programs while Jon is at National Headquarters.

Shelly Grimmius will be sending out meeting invitations and reminders for the future meetings listed below.

Kurt thanked everyone for being here. Truly appreciate your passion, dedication and guidance to him in this process. Your input is valuable and look forward to hearing and appreciate you in your efforts.

Meeting adjourned at 2:44 pm.

Attachments

Future Meeting Dates
1:00 pm – NRCS Hugh Hammond Bennett Conference Room, 210 Walnut Street, Room 693, Des Moines
March 14, 2019
June 20, 2019
September 19, 2019
December 12, 2019
What’s New: Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the 2018 Farm Bill

Conservation Overview

- Strengthens and expands support to producers who address significant natural resource concerns through adoption of conservation practices and activities.
- Ensures that voluntary conservation programs balance farm productivity with conservation benefits so the most fertile and productive lands remain in production while land retired for conservation purposes favors more environmentally sensitive acres.
- Supports conservation programs that ensure cost-effective financial assistance for improved soil health, water and air quality, and other natural resource benefits.
- Encourages entry into farming through increased access to land and capital for young, beginning, veteran, and underrepresented farmers.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program

- Adds potential resource concerns related to beneficial cost-effective operation changes.
- Raises cap for organic producers to $140,000 over six years.
- New enrollment option through incentive contracts to address priority resource concerns.
- Requires advance payment option be offered to historically underserved producers.
- Authorizes direct program assistance to irrigation districts, including acequias and other entities, for purposes of improving water use efficiencies.

Conservation Stewardship Program

- Increases payment rates for adoption of cover crop rotations and advanced grazing management activities.
- Authorizes contract extensions to facilitate renewal under new program authority.
- Transforms funding mechanism for program contracts, authorizing specified annual funding levels.
- Provides specific support for organic and transitioning to organic production activities.
- Includes special grassland conservation initiative for certain producers who have maintained cropland base acres.

Agricultural Management Assistance Program

- Maintains support for conservation practices that reduce crop risk.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program

- Authorizes assistance to partners who pursue ‘Buy-Protect-Sell’ transactions.
- Requires a conservation plan for highly erodible land that will be protected by an agricultural land easement.
- Increases flexibility for partners to meet cost-share matching requirements.
- Identifies water quality as a program purpose for enrollment of wetland reserve easements.
- Expands wetland types eligible for restoration and management under wetland reserve easements.

Healthy Forests Reserve Program
• Expands enrollment options for Indian tribes.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program

• Simplifies funding authorities for program implementation.
• Authorizes Regional Conservation Partnership Program contracts rather than requiring enrollment through other program authorities.
• Expands flexibility for alternative funding arrangements with partners.
• Expands availability of watershed program authorities to projects outside critical conservation areas.

Other Farm Bill Programs

• Strengthens conservation assistance framework through support for—
  ➢ Agriculture Conservation Experienced Services Program
  ➢ Conservation Innovation Grants
  ➢ Technical Service Providers
  ➢ Veteran Farmers
  ➢ Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program
  ➢ Conservation Compliance for Highly Erodible Lands and Wetlands
  ➢ Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program
  ➢ Emergency Watershed Protection Program
What is a Conservation Practice Standard \textbf{(CPS)}? 

Conservation practice standards establish the minimum acceptable level of quality in planning, designing, installing, operating, and maintaining conservation practices.
Practice Standards

- Insures consistency in delivering services to customers
- Meet our social, economic and environmental needs
- Science based - not based on programmatic funding

Conservation Practice Standard Overview

Grassed Waterway(4U)

A grassed waterway is a shaped or grated channel that is established with suitable vegetation to convey surface water at a minimum velocity using a broad and shallow

Waterways are constructed to convey runoff

Practice Standards Review

- Typically reviewed and revised if necessary at least once every 5 years
- Currently have 169 standards
- Farm Bill mandated NRCS review all standards in 2019
Federal Register Notice

NRCS published a notice in the Federal Register on March 11, 2019 announcing that NRCS will review all CPS and inviting the public to provide comments.

The Federal Register Notice provides instructions on how the public can provide comments.

National Standards

- Ensure practices will serve the intended use
- Program neutral but also ensure wise use of federal investment and protect taxpayer investment
- Often based on industry standard (ex. Building Code, ASABE, ACI, ASTM, National Design Specifications for Wood Construction)
- Comply with federal laws
State Standards

- Modify national standards to fit local conditions
- Comply with state law
- Cannot reduce the standard requirements only add additional criteria
- Can request a variance to criteria under extenuating circumstances
Stakeholder Engagement

• National Technical Guide Committee
• National Technology Consortium Advisory Board
• State Technical Committees
• Local working Groups
• Public comment on the Federal Register

Stakeholder Engagement

• CIG Stakeholders
• Tribes
• Disadvantaged Farmers
• RCPP Partners
Stakeholder Engagement

- National Technology Consortium Advisory Board
- State Technical Committees
- Local Working Groups

State Technical Committees and Local Working Groups

- Advisory in Nature
- State Technical Committees make recommendations on conservation practice standards, as well as provide input on FB program priorities.
- Local Working Groups are normally chaired by the local SWCD and are open to the public.
- Local Working Group recommendations are submitted to the State Technical Committee.
- Identify innovations, technical advancements which should be incorporated into practice standards
Example Practices

- Cover Crop
- Agrichemical Handling Facility
- Fence
- Grassed Waterway
- Pumping Plant

Not a Practice Standard

- Concrete (we have practices that use concrete but not a material by itself)
- Barn (NRCS does not have practices that are production related, must address resource concern)
- Soil Testing (NRCS has a practice for nutrient management which includes soil testing)
Interim Conservation Practice Standards

To address new technology or innovations

- States develop interim standards based on input from state technical committees (send request to State Conservationist)
- Field tested new technologies
- Based on requests from the State University, Agricultural Research Service (ARS), a landowner, an industry representative, employees at the field office, or other such sources
- Reviewed and approved for development by the State Technical Guide Committee then forwarded for National level review
- 3-year evaluation period
In attendance: Jeff Matthias, Larry Jones, Jon Hubbert, and Kurt Simon, NRCS; Sean McMahon, Iowa Ag Water Alliance; Joe McGovern, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation; Suzan Erem, SILT; Susan Kozak, IDALS; Steve Hopkins, DNR; John Whitaker, CDI; by phone: Matt Deppe, Iowa Cattleman’s Assoc; Rick Robinson, Iowa Farm Bureau; Susanne Hickey and Amy Crouch, The Nature Conservancy; Greg Pattison, US Fish and Wildlife Service

New NRCS EQIP Coordinator:
Jon Hubbert announced the hiring of a new EQIP Coordinator, Mustapha Abouali, who will replace Paul Goldsmith, who retired in January. Abouali has worked with NRCS in Indiana and Texas. He begins on April 1.

Cover Crop Grazing Pilot Project:
The subcommittee discussed the details of a proposal being developed for a cover crop grazing pilot project in Iowa. The pilot project is being proposed as a new EQIP project by Practical Farmers of Iowa, Iowa Cattlemen’s Association, and the Iowa Ag Water Alliance. The idea was discussed at two earlier work group meetings—one in December and one in February—involving the above three organizations, NRCS staff, and several EQIP subcommittee members. The proposal would be submitted to NRCS headquarters for new EQIP funding in Iowa.

Sean McMahon summarized that the pilot project addresses the cover crop grazing prohibition on cropland, and that a primary objective of the pilot project is to increase cover crop acres in Iowa. The rate of growth in cover crop adoption has slowed in Iowa, largely due to the costs of cover crops. He cited ISU studies showing the economic benefits of grazing cover crops as a financial reason more farmers would consider adopting cover crops in Iowa. He also cited that cover crop grazing would create economic value for cow/calf and row crops operations.

The pilot project would request new EQIP funding to provide 75% cost-share for external fence and water installation on croplands, with priority given to cropland adjacent to permanent pasture, in two pilot areas: 1) Rathbun Lake watershed (including the 6 counties of Wayne, Lucas, Appanoose, Clarke, Monroe, and Davis), and 2) the middle Raccoon River watershed (including the 4 counties of Sac, Calhoun, Carroll, and Greene). The Rathbun watershed has a large number of cattle on pasture, but also has a need to replace fences that have been removed as pasture was converted to cropland. The Middle Raccoon watershed has fewer cattle than Rathbun, but would enable re-integration of cattle and row cropping. More cover crops in these two watersheds would also be consistent with the goals of reducing phosphorus runoff to Rathbun Lake and nitrate export to the Raccoon River.

If the pilot project is successful, it may lead to granting an exemption to grazing cover crops on cropland.

Matt Deppe of ICA added that a recent survey of ICA members showed producer interest in grazing cover crops, and that producers would plant more cover crops if allowed to graze them.

After much discussion, the subcommittee voted unanimously to support the pilot project proposal, and to recommend bringing it to the State Technical Committee for further support.
A draft proposal is being prepared by Meghan Filbert of PFI and Sean McMahon of IAWA, with editing from Steve Hopkins. A final draft of the proposal is targeted for mid-to-late March of 2019, with submittal to NRCS headquarters as soon as possible, following consideration by the STC and State Conservationist.

Kurt Simon indicated that Jimmy Bramlett of NRCS headquarters has been briefed on the proposal and has expressed interest in it.

**Food Crops on Buffers in Working Lands**
Out of interest to promote perennial food crops, Suzan Erem asked NRCS to clarify its program restrictions on the planting of berries and other food crops on buffers. She cited a University of Missouri publication that promoted agroforestry and said that in Missouri 1% of EQIP funds are set aside for agroforestry. She also said she had been told by a local NRCS staffer that food crops could not be planted on buffers.

Jon Hubbert clarified that food crops are eligible to be planted on working lands through NRCS programs. He clarified that this differs from rules for CRP, which is an FSA program, not an NRCS program, and that there can be confusion between the different rules for the two agency’s programs.

**EQIP Batching Dates**
Larry Jones and Jon Hubbert said that the 2nd round of EQIP batching dates is March 15th, and that RCPP batching dates are June 21st.

**Results of Removal of Cover Crop Cap**
NRCS reported that, since the removal of the cap on cover crop cost-share requests, there have been higher requests for cover crop cost-share across Iowa, almost to the point of reaching new allocation amounts. The average acres requested for cover crop cost-share is slightly higher. Some producers interested in the cost-share have been turned away for now but will be eligible to apply later.

**NWQI**
NRCS mentioned that Iowa has again awarded FFY19 NWQI funding to the 6 watersheds approved last year in Iowa: Black Hawk Lake (Wall Lake inlet), Badger Creek Lake, and four sub-watersheds within the Rathbun Lake watershed.

Two watersheds were approved for FY19 NWQI Source Water funding: Cedar Lake in Madison County (City of Winterset’s drinking water source) and Spirit Lake (City of Spirit Lake’s source water). Both watersheds had completed watershed plans to protect source water.

**Prairie STRIPS Standard**
Out of interest to expand prairie strips in Iowa, there was discussion about whether having a separate stand-alone practice standard for prairie strips would expand its adoption. NRCS pointed out that prairie strips are eligible for cost-share under current standards. However, Sean McMahon felt that having a separate practice standard and accompanying data would help market the adoption of prairie strips in Iowa. It was agreed to discuss it further.

Respectfully submitted,

Steve Hopkins, EQIP Subcommittee Chair
Nonpoint Source Coordinator
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Phone: 515-725-8390