NRCS Fall State Technical Committee Meeting
9:00am Tuesday, November 16, 2021
Virtual Meeting

Agenda attached.

Meeting called to order by Amanda Mathis, Asst. State Conservationist, at 9:00am.

Members present:
See attached list - 86 participants

Welcome & Opening Remarks – Mike Sullivan

- Provided an update on NRCS activities
  - EQIP
  - Climate Smart Ag and Forestry Pilot
  - National Civil Rights Award Received
  - Chiefs Awards – Canton Ford, Mark Robinson, Melissa LeCrone, and Amanda Mathis
- FEVS shows Arkansas NRCS higher employee satisfaction than NRCS nationally or regionally.
- Training for employees continues to be a strong need and challenging due to covid.
- Worked with conservation districts to provide training, outreach, and education to stakeholders.
- Focus continues with climate smart agriculture, especially rice and forestry
- Expand locally led conservation efforts targeting urban conservation as one of the priorities
- Dedicated to improving training avenues until in-person meetings can be held
- Covid is a concern related to safety for employees, but field offices have adapted, and landowners needs continue to be met
- Vaccine requirements are being updated related to contractor and vendors
- Infrastructure Bill includes watershed funding, etc.
- Mentoring Program for employees was rolled out in FY21

Subcommittee Reports
- Grassland – Jeremy Huff, State Grazing Specialist
  - No formal recommendations from Spring meeting but discussed new standards for which payment scenarios are being developed
  - Pasture training – 3,000+ participants in 2021
- 25% is partners, landowners, etc. involved
- Thanked AACD for their support in hosting these virtual trainings
- Thanked multiple speakers, ACA, AGLC, etc.

- **Water Quality** – Canton Ford, Water Quality Specialist
  - NWQI & MRBI & RCPP updates and planning process
  - Katie Mann, NRD – Nutrient Reduction Strategy Status
  - No official recommendations made
    - Breegan Andersen, TNC asked if two stage ditches could be increased for adoption
  - 3 NWQI Projects with continued funding- Bush Creek, Roberts Creek, Departee Creek, some projects receiving a bit less due to funding cut in AR allocation.
  - Reviewing and adding information to existing Watershed Assessment in Planning Phase
    - Greasy Creek
    - North Fork Cadron Creek
    - Saline headwaters
    - Little Strawberry
    - Cossatot River
    - Lower Bayou Bartholomew
    - Will write Upper Village Creek Watershed in Lawrence and Randolph Counties

- **Energy Subcommittee** – Britt Hill, State Energy Specialist
  - Possibility of use of solar options for poultry operations is being investigated
  - Reported on the meeting which discussed energy needs for poultry houses; solar, etc.
  - **Recommendation** – update Code 374, Scenario 1 for FY23
    - Make the fans smaller to 36” and up due to demands by integrators
    - Smaller fans are more efficient and makes houses cooler
    - Done in other regions and have shown improvements

- **Soil Health Subcommittee** – Keith Scoggins
  - Updates on soil hemp project – not planted but hope to move to the State Plant Board
  - Soil Health Manual is being developed
  - Research continues various practices
  - Practice code 336 (was 808 interim practice) using soil amendments has been accepted
  - NRCS, U of A DOA, ASHA will host another joint training being planned for May 2022
• Implementing cover crops and the creation of a guide document for NRCS to provide to landowners on planting dates, termination dates, etc.
• Spring Meeting will be held in February 2022.

• Alternative Crops – Troyce Barnett
  o Discussed 808 Soil Amendment for approval (compost application on the farm to deposit organic matter)
    ▪ Looking at two scenarios- 3 tons of organic matter applied and 1 ton
    ▪ Encouraging this practice
    ▪ Looking at no-till, strip tillage, pest management, mulching
    ▪ Biochar is one of the activities being discussed
    ▪ Urban and Rural Agriculture – opening practices to help enhance these efforts
    ▪ Climate Smart practices are being incorporated

• Water Quantity – Cory Perrin, Water Quantity Specialist
  o No recommendation currently
  o Recommends further study with input from other states (California) regarding practices 815/817
  o Existing conservation practices can impact the water quantity and aquifer
  o Land leveling practice and question of reducing minimum yardage requirement – needs more study

• Wildlife Subcommittee – James Baker
  o Feral pigs – 450 properties (400,000 acres with 9,000 pigs removed
  o Working lands for wildlife - $550,000 spent and the practices
    ▪ Forest Stand Improvements
    ▪ Firebreaks
    ▪ Prescribed burning
  o Recommendation – lack of winter water for waterfowl
    ▪ Practice 646 is being utilized in CSP at 45,000 acres per year.
      • Want to increase that number of acres by elevating Code 646 (Shallow water) to a high priority practice for EQIP.

• Forestry – Doug Akin
  o Charley Williams provided an overview on Keeping It in the Family
  o Joint Chiefs Proposal was reviewed
  o AR-LA RCPP discussed
  o Small group has been created to discuss a variety of issues related to silvopasture.
  o Discussed some other practices that have lower TPA that might be used for wildlife rather than Silvopasture (i.e. 666)

• Comments
  o John McAlpine – asked by Biochar and its limitation
Troyce Barnett – subcommittee was concerned about the availability of biochar before opening it up as a practice
- Biochar plant in Monticello but not working due to lack of market which might help move Biochar forward as a practice
- U of A DOA released a new Biochar fact sheet, it was provided for meeting attendees to view.

Formation of New Subcommittees

- **Urban Conservation** – Helen Denniston
  - Urban Agriculture was made a priority for NRCS by Secretary Vilsack
  - NRCS is at the forefront of this effort and is taking steps to ensure that our urban agriculture producers receive technical and financial assistance to remain sustainable.
  - An Urban Agriculture Subcommittee being created
  - The Specialty and Alternative Crop Sub-Committee has historically provided input on urban agriculture previously.
  - Using the input from the Specialty and Alternative Crop Subcommittee, AR NRCS, implemented EQIP scenarios that address small scale/urban agriculture farmers in 2019
  - Currently urban agriculture producers can apply under EQIP for financial assistance to install conservation practices address soil health, irrigation and water conservation and other resource concerns.
  - Various funding pools are available to assist small farms with their operation
  - Helen Denniston asked for volunteers to serve on this new subcommittee.
    - Amanda Perez, U of A DOA was a recommendation by Dr. Mike Daniels
    - Debbie Moreland, AACD, volunteered to serve on this subcommittee
    - Martha Manley, Lee County, volunteered to serve
    - Levell Foote would like to serve on this subcommittee
    - Conaly Bedell, Sebastian County CD, volunteered to serve
    - Charley Williams would like to serve
    - Brenda Williams with Communications Unlimited was recommended to serve.

**Outreach, Equity, and Inclusion** – Alvin Peer

- New Subcommittee – purpose is to advise the State Conservationist and others by identifying obstacles as we seek to improve outreach, equity and inclusion in all programs.
Many times, implicit bias occurs without any real intent but has impacts. Racial impacts need to be acknowledged and addressed. Outreach – meeting people where they are regardless of their knowledge and/or size of the farm. Equity – farmer wants the same information. Inclusion – what is available and what is needed for Arkansas going forward. Decision making – small choices can be significant, making conscience choices to address implicit bias can lead to lasting change.

Alvin asked for volunteers to serve on the committee.

- Brentney Sargent, KKAC Organization
- Dr. Calvin King
- Debbie Moreland
- Dr. Mike Daniels
- Charley Williams
- Wilbur Peer

Mike Daniels introduced a new NRCS/UADA shared staff person, Dr. Kishan Mahmud who is the new Soil Health Ecologist. He will be helping identify key ecological

**Private Lands Partners Day 2022** – Ted Zawislak, AGFC

- Arkansas Private Lands Stewardship Alliance
  - Created in 2019 but has been active since 2010
  - Targeted private lands professionals
  - 21 members – state, federal agencies, NGOs, etc. and anyone who works with private lands is welcome to join us
  - Worked with IRWP to submit a proposal to host Private Land Partners Day to showcase AR Partnerships working on Private Lands.

**Partnerscapes**

- Promotes public/private partnership
- Works to grow and leverage conservation funding
- Supports local, watershed and/or place-based conservation efforts
- Annually hosts Private Lands Partners Day
  - Landowners and conservation partners
  - 200 folks attend
  - Opening reception, field trip, conference day, closing dinner and benefit auction
  - Field trip highlights conservation partnership work “near” the conference site
  - Conference day features stories from host state and from around the country
- Locations shown from 2008 – 2021 some on-site but last two years have been virtual due to Covid
- 2022 – Northwest Arkansas
  - An opportunity to highlight agriculture and conservation community
    - Need good attendance from landowners and professionals
    - Attract national and state leaders
  - **Save the Date – October 4 – 6, 2022**

**Source Water Protection** – Edgar Mersiovsky

- Source Water Protection Priority Areas (see map)
  - Some are for water quality and others in groundwater quality
  - Practices
    - Most of the practices are in east Arkansas
    - NWQI practices provided the funding to protect source water
  - **FY21 SWP Local Priority Areas**
    - CAW, Little Rock
    - Beaver Water District, NW Arkansas
      - Practices included (graph shown)
  - **FY22 SWP Local Priority Areas**
    - Same as FY 21 with additions:
      - Conway Corp, Faulkner County
      - Clarksville Water Supply, Johnson/Franklin Counties
  - Funding opportunities
    - National Water Quality Initiative
    - RCPP
    - Arkansas Forests and Drinking Water Collaborative

**Program Updates**

- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)** – Corey Cornelious (power point)
  - Climate Smart – Pilot Program
- Oct 8, 2021, announced the sign up for FY 2022 EQIP program general sign up news release was announced
- FY 2022 EQIP Implementation Schedule will be released soon
- New Ranking Tools for FY 2022 includes: Seasonal High tunnels and Climate Smart Agriculture Forestry (CSAF)
  - FY21 as a pilot program but FY22 will have new funding pools as well as our current pools
- CSAF – Arkansas was one of 10 states that participated in FY 2021 EQIP pilot signup for this program
Core conservation practices were selected based on their ability to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and sequester carbon in the soil.

The signup was offered along several of the lower MS Delta counties which carried the large population of HU producers, etc.

- Pilot counties: Arkansas, Jefferson, Phillips, St. Francis, Desha, Crittenden, Lee, Lincoln
- Core practices defined
- Supporting practices defined in power point
- 24 applications submitted with 19 selected for $1,036,728.51 – 2,377.1 acres impacted

- EQIP obligated over $51 million statewide for conservation
- Decision has not been finalized on what counties will be involved in FY22 CSAF and may have a special sign-up.

**High Priority Practices** – Clyde Williams (power point)

- NRCS, with input from the STC, may designate up to 10 practices to be eligible for increased payment for conservation practices
- FY 2022 is proposing to designate 3 practices that were recommended in subcommittee meetings as High Priority Practices:
  - CPS 329 Residue & Tillage Management
  - CPS 340 Cover Crops
  - CPS 646 Shallow water development & management
- Practices that high potential for conservation benefits but are underutilized (329 & 646)
- Practices with underutilized practice purpose (340)
- High priority practices may have a high payment rate (up to 90%)
  - Decision has not been finalized
  - No additional funds, so any funding changes will come from other programs
  - NRCS will encourage participants but careful not to undermine the other funding pools negatively.

**Local Led Workgroup** – Lori Barker (power point)

- 2021 LLWG = $18,482,542.68 million with 632 contracts impacting 115,807 acres
- FY 2022 LLWG
  - Provided training to field offices on 2022 process to collect LLWG information
  - LLWG Meetings were held by Sept 12, 2021
- Information
17 questions in attempt to broaden the discussion beyond just EQIP FA allocations. Included:

- Impaired watersheds
- Need for new projects
- Practices
- Urban Agriculture
  - 21 counties responded with Urban interest
  - Interest in increasing for backyard vegetable production
  - High tunnels
  - Micro-irrigation
  - Demand for locally grown produce

FY21 CIG approved, Ecosystems Protective Services, LLC
- The Field Set-Aside Pilot Project – three practices

2022 CIG Areas of Concern
- Nutrient and Sediment Reduction in Impaired Watersheds
  - Demonstrates effectiveness of high potential conservation practices
- Irrigation
  - Elevate cropping systems
  - Demonstrate irrigation techniques
  - Drones
  - IWM for alternative crops to provide instructional documents to producers
- Soil Health
  - Comments need to be by mid-December 2021 to Lori Barker for potential ideas for CIG projects

**Partnership Programs** – Dianne Schlenker (power point)

- Dianne Schlenker and Roger Cousins co-chair this effort
  - Nine projects which requested funding with watershed assessments with assistance from private entity and conservation districts
    - Received approval and conducted watershed assessments in:
      - County Line Strawberry
      - Flat Hills
      - North Big Creek
      - Glad-Raft White Oak Creek
      - Lower While Bayou Des Arc
      - Lee County
      - Arkansas County Lower White
• Flat Rock
• Phillips County Water Quality Project
  ▪ Submitted 5 of the projects to be moved to implementation phase in FY22- all 5 were approved.
  ▪ The remaining watershed assessments remain valid should NRCS seek to move them into implementation phase later on.

**MRBI Implementation Phase Funding**
- 14 projects - $13,831,939 funded with EQIP FY 2022
- Application Cutoff for consideration of Ranking 12/17/2021
- Ranking and Cost Estimates
- 2 Phase Process
  ▪ Readiness Phase
    • 1 new Readiness Phase MRBI for FY22 – Cache Watershed
  ▪ Implementation Phase
    • Second year starts managing the program with funding cycles
    • 4-year budget
    • EQIP & CSP
    • Financial assistance for EQIP 75/25
    • Concentrates on system approach using core and supporting practices
- Priority Watersheds (map)
  ▪ Contact NRCS if you want additional areas to consider for MRBI project
  ▪ Need to start identifying FY 2023 planning phase projects now

**RCPP (Regional Conservation Partnership)**
- FY22 – 6 projects
  • Mid-South Graduated Water Stewardship - USA Rice
  • AR-MS Conservation & Soil Consortium – KKAC Easement Project
  • East Arkansas Delta Regional Conservation Project - EAEC
  • AR-LA CDN Open Pine Landscape Restoration – American Bird Conservancy
  • Restore the Earth Foundation – Easement Project
  • Buffalo River Watershed Partnership – TNC
  • Total - $5,860,000 FA available for FY22
  • 165 partners have been involved in RCPP overall
  • Overall funding is much larger when partners contribution is included
• Mike Sullivan commented on how much NRCS appreciates staff and partners for making this program a success

**Conservation Stewardship Program** – Clyde Williams (power point)

- **Top FY 2021 CSP Activities**
  - Forestland
    - Concentrated erosion
    - Pest pressure
    - Fire management
    - Degraded plant condition
    - Prescribed burning
    - Others are shown in Power point
  - Agriculture land
    - Practices shown in power point

- **Looking ahead in FY 2022**
  - Organic and Transitioning producers continue to have a unique opportunity to apply for CSP
  - CSP – Organic Activities
    - Alternative Subcommittee are asked to help get the word out as well as others
  - CSP State Priority Resource Concerns
    - Ag Land (Cropland and Pastures)
    - Forest Land

**Easements and Watershed Programs** – Randy Childress

- Watershed program – filled vacancies to implement projects such as Departee Creek project
- West Fork and White River – existing watershed plan which is being amended to add streambank stabilization and construction funds will be requested in 2022
- Lake Bennett – finalize watershed plans with local engineer firm
- Muddy Fork Site #1 – decommissioning the dam and working with local conservation district
- Grand Prairie Irrigation and Drainage Project – construction is ongoing with $62 million committed to that project – Contracts in 2022 to get water down to Hazen
- Bayou Meto Irrigation and Drainage Project – funding requests are being pushed in 2022
- $500 million available for watershed funding
- Randy thanked the partners for their support in these projects
- Preliminary Planning Investigation Program – evaluation of projects
Lee, Phillips, and St. Francis Counties
Osage Creek has also requested consideration for planning

- Easements- Arkansas led the nation with $14 million for easements
- $5 million with Mississippi River Trust with 12% delegated to HU landowners
- Tri-State - 50% funds dedicated to HU landowners
- Arkansas – 286,000 acres with 750 easements
  - 266,000 acres restored
  - Still leading the nation on these easements
- Recommendation – take 10% of our easement allocation ($14 million = $1.4 million) and set up a separate ranking tool for HU landowners. Funds not spent roll back into the general funding pool. No objections were voiced.

Open Discussion

- EPA – Randall Rush
  - Rod Snyder has been appointed to be Senior Policy Advisor for Administrator Regan.
  - EPA Farm, Ranch, Rural Communities Committee – EPA is hosting the Farm, Ranch and Rural Communities Advisory Committee (FRRCC) public meeting virtually on November 15-16, 2021, The purpose of this meeting is to discuss recommendations on (1) creating a holistic pesticide program for the future and (2) supporting interagency environmental benchmarks with interagency partners on the issues of water quality and quantity and food loss and waste.
  - WOTUS Update – seeking roundtables to provide input on the regional implications of “waters of the United States” (WOTUS).
  - EPA Farmer to Farmer Grant RFP due out in early December, 2021.

Closing Remarks & Adjourn – Mike Sullivan, AR NRCS State Conservationist

- Thanked everyone for their participation and work to help landowners “help the land” regardless of the program and/or project.
- Pace of change continues to evolve rapidly
- Thankful for the partnership and the successes
- Encourages the group to think about what we can achieve in the future

Meeting adjourned at 11:50am.