



United States Department of Agriculture

New Jersey State Technical Committee Minutes of March 14, 2012

Those in attendance:

Janice Reid, NRCS
Christine Hall, NRCS
Tim Dunne, NRCS
Fran Grasso, NRCS
Maria Collazo, NRCS
Lauren Rega, NRCS
Dan Mull, NRCS
Donald Pettit, NRCS
Bill Angstadt, Growmark, FS
Liz Thompson, NJFB
Marie Banasiak, NJFB
Ken Klipstein, NJWSA
Eric Shrading, USFWS

Charles Roohr, SADC
Bob Frieberger, Monmouth Co. Farmer
Amy Hansen, NJCF
Kristina Heineman, US EPA Region 2
John Gibbons, NASS
Bob Erikson, NWTF
Eric Olsen, TNC
Steve Eisenhauer, NLT
Nancy Coles, FSA (via videoconference)
Paul Hlubik, FSA (via videoconference)
John Parke, NJAS
John Cecil, NJAS
Beth Ciuzio, USFWS

Donald Pettit welcomed everyone at 10:05 a.m. Don opened the meeting with remarks on the initial movement on the new Farm Bill. The senate has a goal to complete the senate version by Memorial Day. This will likely be a busy time as decisions are made for the new farm bill.

The December meeting minutes were reviewed and accepted.

Outreach Subcommittee Update

The outreach subcommittee meeting was held on January 17th. They had an extremely productive meeting. The outreach subcommittee wanted to remind everyone about the partners Google Calendar, which lists partner events throughout the state.

The outreach subcommittee will be focusing on outreach for the Conservation Stewardship Program. It was decided that they will focus on success story fact sheets with farmer input. The subcommittee set a deadline for June 30th to find willing participants.

Several outreach meetings were scheduled through the conservation districts for this week. Unfortunately, due to low sign-up participation, they are being rescheduled. It was suggested that the time frame was not a good time of day for producers to be able to meet and that producers may be overwhelmed by meetings this time of year.

AMA – Agricultural Management Assistance Program
AWEP – Agricultural Water Enhancement Program
CAP – Conservation Activity Plan
CCPI – Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative
CIG – Conservation Innovation Grant
CRP – Conservation Reserve Program
CREP - Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

EQIP – Environmental Quality Incentive Program
FRPP – Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program
GRP – Grassland Reserve Program
HFRP – Healthy Forest Reserve Program
SAFE – State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement
WHIP – Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program
WRP – Wetlands Reserve Program

Helping People Help the Land

An Equal Opportunity Provider and Employer

The USDA has to comply with the Plain Writing Act of 2010, which requires the federal government to write all new publications, forms, and publicly distributed documents in a "clear, concise, well-organized" manner. Several articles have been updated and we are interested in volunteers from the State Technical Committee to review the documents for clarity and provide feedback. Liz Thompson volunteered to review documents. If anyone else is interested, please contact Barb Phillips.

CRP, CREP, SAFE, GRP Activity

Nancy Coles provided the quarterly update report on FSA conservation programs. In the Conservation Reserve Program, the practice CP 25 (Rare and Declining Habitat) was added and 31.4 acres were enrolled. To date, 317 practices have been enrolled in 295 contracts. The annual rental payments are \$174,190.

A new contract was added to the CREP program in FY 2012. The average contract size is small due to the highly sensitive lands that are the focus of the program. The average rental rate is \$135.70/acre.

The SAFE program has 46 contracts approved for a total of 614.8 acres enrolled with 5 pending offers of 102.2 acres. In the Grassland Habitat Restoration and Management Area is at 88% enrollment. The Raritan-Piedmont area is at 70% enrollment. The Raritan-Piedmont area is in need of 90 more acres for this project area. Nancy Coles mentioned that although we are able to meet the cap for the area, there may be an opportunity for additional funding for more acreage in those project areas. So, we should be encouraging sign-up even as we reach the cap for the project area.

To date for FY 2012, \$369,387 CRP payments have been issued in CRP.

Paul Hlubik mentioned that there will be some upcoming changes to the CRP program. Last week Secretary Vilsak announced initiatives in the continuous CRP program. It will enroll additional acres in pollinator habitat, wetland restoration, and the SAFE program. It will provide some additional incentives for participation in the CRP program.

Also, there will be additional funding for the HEL lands with a higher index.

The general sign-up for CRP started on Monday.

The GRP allocation is forthcoming with a preliminary ranking report. Funding is very low. Nationally, there is talk that there is more demand for rental money than available because we have a requirement to devote a certain percentage of the money to easements. So the rental contract money is somewhat limited. We have our request in for additional money. \$29,695 was distributed for rental payments in FY 2012.

Bog Turtle Initiative WREP Proposal Submitted

Christine Hall provided an update on the Wetland Reserve Enhancement Program proposal. The traditional WRP program looks for wetlands restoration on lands that been farmed and drained. The WREP program is for partners to submit a proposal for priority areas. Last year, we discussed bog turtles and how we could provide additional restoration for these species. Conserve Wildlife Foundation submitted a proposal to enroll 84 acres in WRP at an overall project cost of \$1,104,000. Typically, WRP allows a 2:1 acre ratio for buffers around the wetland

restoration acres. However, with this proposal we are looking at a 5:1 ratio of a buffer area, which along with a higher proposed easement payment rate, explains the increased cost. We reviewed the proposal and forwarded it to NRCS national headquarters where the funding decision will be made by March 30th. The bog turtle recovery plan is the basis for the proposal. In the plan there is a map indicating bog turtle areas. Anything that was identified in the recovery plan could be eligible for inclusion in the project area.

New Business **2012 WHIP Status**

When we received our initial state allocations, WHIP had no money. Last week, it was announced that NRCS will be working with the Department of Interior for the Working Lands for Wildlife. For this initiative they identified 7 at-risk species that are either threatened or endangered or heading to a T&E listing.

The goal of this initiative is to empower landowners to continue working their lands while they conserve wildlife areas. Two thirds of the federally listed species are on private lands. Conservation on these lands typically generates a lot of outdoor recreation and economic benefit. There is 33 million dollars available nationally for this effort. In New Jersey, we have two species that are eligible: the bog turtle and golden-winged warbler. Tim Dunne provided fact sheets on the species.

There will be a list of core and supporting practices to support conservation of these species.

The golden-winged warbler has a very limited range in New Jersey. They inhabit high elevation areas. We have begun working with the GIS specialist to determine the high elevation areas in North West NJ overlain with forested farmland tax assessed properties to target our outreach to eligible participants. We anticipate there will be a limited number of properties that will meet these eligibility criteria.

There are a number of species that thrive on this early successional habitat that would benefit from these practices in addition to the golden-winged warbler. It really has a far reaching habitat benefits. We will likely use that to target landowners with multiple interests.

The ranking system still has to be developed. Whether or not the species is currently present may have an impact in the pre-screening criteria. This may be more applicable for the bog turtle. Typically the small wooded acreage for golden-winged warbler (2-5 acres) is selectively harvested to create the early successional habitat. This could also provide an economic benefit to the landowner.

The program dates should be announced soon as the funding obligation deadline in July is fast approaching. We may be asking the State Technical Committee for help with promotion. It is encouraged that we have some press events with our partners.

The question was raised about how creating these small early succession habitat patches will negatively impact other species. What is the net benefit? Tim Dunne explained that we have a process through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to determine the positive and negative effects for altering the habitats to determine the appropriate course of action. There may be positive effects for the golden-winged warbler versus a negative impact for other species that may not prefer the same habitat. This is why we are looking towards expanding on

areas around already disturbed areas such as rights of ways for power lines. This would minimize the overall disturbance, but have a positive impact for the target species.

The three main goals of this effort are to 1) Restore populations of declining species, 2) Protect the economic viability of rural production and 3) Protect landowners from regulatory actions if they are voluntarily participating in this program.

Please visit our website for additional information on this program
<http://www.nj.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/whip/WLFW.html>

EQIP Initiatives, Status of Applications and Contracts

NRCS had three new EQIP initiatives for FY 2012: Organic, Energy, Seasonal High Tunnel. There were three application cut-offs for these initiatives, February 3, March 30, June 1. We've only received 7 organic applications to date. We could use additional help to get organic applications in. The ranking score is 150 out of 1000 points for the second round. It is pretty low and pretty easy to get funded.

We had an overwhelming request for the energy and seasonal high tunnel initiatives. Nationally, they set aside \$3 million in energy and received \$27 million in requests. Locally, we received \$200,000 in requests and were able to fund 4 of those applications (three energy audits and 1 implementation project). Don Pettit made the decision in NJ to take some of our regular EQIP allocation and put it towards funding the other two implementation applications.

For seasonal high tunnels, we were able to fund 37 of 39 applications.

For the second and third rounds for Seasonal High Tunnel and Energy, there is no more federal money being held nationally. The funds were exhausted at headquarters. In NJ, we are still accepting applications and may decide to fund additional applications with our NJ money.

We had one technical service provider (TSP) certified to write transition to organic plans in NJ. They were from Connecticut and decided it was not cost effective for them to come to NJ. However, we are still accepting applications for contracts. We are working on developing TSPs for Organic Agriculture. NOFA-NJ held a session trying to recruit and train TSPs and will be following up in April with 4 or 5 individuals that expressed interest in becoming TSPs.

For the energy initiative, we would really love to see more people applying for the Agricultural Energy Management Plan CAP (energy audit). In order to move forward with funding next year for implementation, it will be required for producers to have a completed audit.

It was nice to see that our extensive outreach on these initiatives was successful.

EQIP Water Quality Initiative

Don Pettit mentioned that there is a pending EQIP National Water Quality Initiative that is still in development. There has been no official announcement and we won't have any specifics until the announcement is made. We were asked to set aside 5% of our EQIP allocation for this initiative. We are working with EPA on the national level with this. We will likely use EQIP practices currently in our program portfolio. This initiative may involve some monitoring as well.

At some point, we will be looking for your input and feedback on the watersheds and the ranking questions to make funding decisions.

We will likely be communicating through email and perhaps have a subcommittee meeting. If you have a particular interest, contact Janice Reid that you're interested in being involved.

NJ Conservation Innovation Grants 2012 Pre-Proposals

We put out the announcement for the NJ component for the Conservation Innovation Grant in January. Our format changed this year. We asked participants to send a pre-proposal first. We held a workshop in February that was well attended (15-20 people). The pre-proposal deadline was March 2 and we received 8 pre-proposals. We will not be able to fund all 8. We contacted all 8 of the applicants to have review meetings this afternoon. By March 21, we will let those 8 know whether or not they are selected to move forward with submission of a full proposal. Full proposals will be due to the NJ NRCS State Office by April 27th. We cannot notify them on who is funded until after the recipients of the national CIG component are announced.

Information was also passed around for a workshop in June. This field day on native seed production is being offered as part of a previous year CIG grant project with the Delaware & Raritan Greenway.

Wetland & Riparian Restoration on FRPP Land

Eric Shrading requested acknowledgement for wetland and riparian restoration on FRPP Land. FRPP funding helps with state purchases for farmland preservation. Under the FRPP program rules Wetland Restoration/Creation is permitted on protected farmland as long as it does not make up a large percentage of the preserved farmland. USF&WS has approached farmers that have wet, unproductive sites that they are not interested in farming due to the low productivity and would like to restore the wetlands. Some proposals were denied by the SADC and the CADB. They are requesting that wetland restoration be considered as a permitted practice on preserved farmland as long as it is not a large component of the farmland. This proposal is specific to farmland preserved with FRPP.

Chuck Roohr stated that the NJ Farmland Preservation legislation dictates that the preservation dollars do not allow the land to be utilized for anything other than agricultural production.

Discussion ensued over the difference between a grassed waterway on preserved farmland which is not in agricultural production compared to wetland restoration. It was suggested that a follow-up focused discussion occur to explore this further.

Open Discussion

Eric Olsen mentioned that The Nature Conservancy has a project where they have identified priority areas within Delaware River Basin. He suggested we consider this information as we select the watersheds for the new National Water Quality Initiative. The project is funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. More information is available at www.nature.org/drb

Bob Erikson mentioned that the National Wild Turkey Federation has been working on long leafed pine restoration. In the Northeast, they are a TSP certified in Fish and Wildlife Habitat Plans and are working on becoming certified to complete Forest Management Plans. They are working to get three forestry positions funded by NRCS in Maryland.

John Gibbons announced that they have an Agri-Ability survey out in the field with Rutgers. The survey is trying to quantify the number of disabilities on the farm in NJ. John Gibbons also announced that Troy Joshua accepted a position in Washington DC and John will be taking over as Acting Director. Also, expect the census of agricultural to be starting soon for the 5 year census.

Kristina Heinemann mentioned the Oil Spill Prevention, Control, and Countermeasure (SPCC) Program rule compliance date was extended to May 2013. Any farm that stores, transfers, consumes oil or oil products may need to comply. There are fact sheets, websites, and technical specialists available to assist producers through EPA. More information is also available at http://www.epa.gov/osweroe1/content/spcc/spcc_ag.htm. Please be in touch if there are any events coming up where EPA could provide information.

Kristina also mentioned that the new 590 standard for nutrient management was developed nationally and the state standard will need to be updated soon. There is an additional requirement for concurrence from the state water quality agencies. Kristina would be interested in being involved in the process for developing the state standard. Tim Dunne mentioned that with the new standard we are required to work with EPA and state water quality agencies, but we are waiting on some additional information nationally.

Amy Hansen asked if there are any practices that specifically target carbon sequestration. Janice answered that there are a number of practices that benefit this, but it is not a targeted resource concern at this time. A number of our practices now have conditions for carbon sequestration. Tim Dunne mentioned that NRCS is working with Rutgers on increasing the soil organic matter through increasing legumes, cover crops, municipal leaves, etc.

Ken Klipstein mentioned this week's round of outreach events for AWEP and the Ag Mini Grants funding in priority watersheds within the Raritan River basin. One of the participants at the outreach meetings has already applied.

Marie Banasiak said that March 21 there will be a meeting for questions regarding permit and management regarding irrigation water. The information is available on the website. The landscape project mapping was updated from DEP. They've applied the highlands methodology to the entire state. Lastly, the animal waste management rules implementation deadline is March 16.

Christine Hall mentioned that NRCS has been working with the Barnegat Bay Partnership as they develop their new strategic plan. USF&WS taking the lead on the Barnegat focused America's Great Outdoors project and is looking at how they can get conservation on the ground in high priority areas until the funds are available for land acquisition in these areas. A meeting is in the planning stages to discuss this. The plan is to identify what kind of conservation programs exist that we could get resource protection on these lands, what are the gaps, what are the outreach needs, who are the landowners? The America's Great Outdoors is a national initiative.

Bill Angstadt suggested that the Nitrogen risk assessment tool may require modification of nitrogen practices. This is something that should be discussed with the revised national 590 standard. Also, there is potential for outreach on the new 590 standard in NJ where a lot of work has been done on phosphorous placement. As we get to the point of outreach on 590, there may be several examples of good case studies. Perhaps this should be a topic for the next State Technical Committee.

Steve Eisenhauer mentioned some successful pollinator habitat work that the Natural Lands Trust has undertaken on their property.

John Parke commended Nancy Coles for getting some good information on SAFE and CREP posted on the FSA website. Regarding the issue of wetland and riparian restoration on preserved farms, John noted that those opposing this work are focusing solely on the “habitat” benefits of these practices. NJAS would be willing to help with any regulatory changes that would need to be made to allow this work on preserved farms. Also, John Parke announced that John Cecil will be the new Vice President of Stewardship in New Jersey.

John Cecil explained that he was the Director of the Important Bird Areas (IBA) Program for the National Audubon Society so he is familiar with the work and looks forward to participating in future meetings.

Chuck Roohr discussed the decision that was made on growing medical marijuana on preserved farmlands. The verdict of the meeting in December is that it is eligible as a crop on farmland, but it is not eligible for right-to-farm protection. The SADC just released its new digital monitoring form. Thanks to NRCS for the comments on the form. As of today, one of three positions is filled and the other three are selected and working through human resources. Hopefully by the next State Technical Committee meeting those positions will be filled.

Bob Frieberger asked how widespread the bog turtle presence is throughout the state. Tim Dunne answered that there are around 150 sites in NJ. The bog turtle has very strict habitat requirements. He also commented that with regards to the outreach meetings cancelled due to low registrant sign ups, that farmers are “meeting-ed out” by this time in the year.

Paul Hlubik mentioned that under the next CRP sign-up, carbon sequestration is a component that is being considered for the program ranking. There is a fact sheet on it and will be emailed. He also announced that the conservation loan program was funded this year. The direct loan program was not funded, but the guaranteed program was funded. In many aspects this may be a better program for farmers. These conservation practices require significant cash flow that may require a high upfront cost. If cash flow is the issue for getting the practice on the ground, then the conservation loan program may be able to help. It is for practices with a lifespan of up to 20 years and can fund up to \$1,200,000. Several factors such as a fantastic credit rating, and low debt ratio can expedite the loan process.

Paul also mentioned that they have received approval from Washington to assist with the Southern Pine Beetle infestation on private forest lands. However, there is no funding available at this time and they are on a waiting list for funding. In regards to the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP), Paul thanked NRCS for the technical work performed. There are dozens of counties around the state with applications. As we move forward, we are finding other issues and are trying to get them enrolled in other programs like EQIP and CREP.

Next Meeting Date

Don Pettit suggested that we have the summer meeting in the field like we did last year. It was suggested that we go to central or south Jersey this year. We are looking to the middle of June for this meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:09.