



New Jersey State Technical Committee Minutes Tuesday March 2, 2010

The meeting was opened at 10:05 AM by Tom, who welcomed everyone and asked everyone to introduce themselves.

Those in attendance:

Amy Hansen	NJCF	Nancy Coles	USDA-FSA
David Clapp	NJDA	Torrey Reade	FSA State Committee
Charles Roohr	NJDA-SADC	Steve Peterson	USDA-NASS
Tim Fekete	NJDA-SSCC	Barb Phillips	USDA-NRCS
Kathleen Hitchner	NJDEP	Christine Hall	USDA-NRCS
Kim Korth	NJDEP-DFW-ENSP	Fran Grasso	USDA-NRCS
Jim Barresi	NJDEP-Forestry	Janice Reid	USDA-NRCS
Liz Thompson	NJFB	Maria Collazo	USDA-NRCS
Marie Banasiak	NJFB	Marybeth Sorrentino	USDA-NRCS
Ken Klipstein	NJWSA	Sharif Branham	USDA-NRCS
David Glenn	NOFA-NJ	Tim Dunne	USDA-NRCS
Mike Westendorf	RCE	Tom Drewes	USDA-NRCS
Anne Heasly	RPWHP	Howard Henderson	USDA-RD
Sam Conard	Somerset Co.	Audrey Moore	USEPA Region 2
		Kristina Heinemann	USEPA Region 2

The minutes were approved as e-mailed.

Tom mentioned that OMB has held back allocations for two programs. WHIP has a very small allocation at this time, and AMA also was cut slightly, but more funds may be released soon.

Committee Reports

Outreach Committee Update

Barbara Phillips reported that Google Calendar is being used by a few groups. She mentioned that there are events that could be posted to the calendar. Barb encouraged everyone to use the calendar; and asked for response from everyone on their use so that we can make it an effective tool.

Upcoming and recently completed outreach efforts include:

CSP information meetings: 5 meetings across the state in December, 2009

Vegetable Growers Meeting: information for new farmers, NRCS grazing programs, January

NOFA-NJ Conference: NRCS organic EQIP initiative, January

NJ Forestry Association: NRCS forestry EQIP initiative, March

Conservation Land Rally: WRP program, March

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

Program Committee Update

The sub-committee hasn't meet recently. But based on our approved funding pool request, there will 7 pools in EQIP: Cropland, Irrigated Cropland, Forestry, Livestock, Transition Organic, Certified Organic, and Planning (for CAPs). Some pools are statewide and some are split between North Jersey and South Jersey. We also need to set funds aside for the Innovation Grants program.

WHIP has 3 approved pools with 2 priority concerns in each pool. Janice reported that we have a substantial number of good WHIP applications and we will not be able to fund all at this time.

AMA is done for 2010 and all money as been obligated unless we receive a further allocation.

Old Business

CRP, CREP, SAFE

Nancy Coles handed out a report that highlights CREP activity through the years. She reported that there will be a multi agency CREP training session on May 5, 2010, at the Eco-Complex.

Nancy reported that the SAFE program has three project areas and gave the statistics of each area as indicated on her report.

Nancy reported that a general CRP signup is expected around June 2010; however the timeline may change. The last general signup was in spring 2006; there has not been a signup recently because of extensions that were given to expiring CRP contracts.

Nancy mentioned that the general signup requires a priority area to be established, no greater than 1/3 of the cropland acres in a state. The priority area expires every 5 years, and NJ's area is now expiring. NJ FSA must submit a new priority area proposal or resubmit the current one.

The current priority area is state watershed management areas 17, 18, & 19 which meet the 1/3 requirement. The advantage of a priority area is points in the national ranking system. Nancy recommends that we keep the current area to benefit applications from south Jersey. Projects from north Jersey are generally on more highly erodible slopes and rank higher than projects from south Jersey. Since a general signup is competitive at the national level, it may result in more applications being funded. After some discussion, it was recommended that the priority area will remain the same.

NRCS Program Status

Applicant Eligibility: Janice proposed a new policy for applicant eligibility, allowable under the NRCS EQIP manual, due to apparent confusion on the part of both NRCS and our partners if an applicant is eligible for the programs. It was explained that program rules are developed from the statute, and program manuals from the rules. Manuals provide guidance for NRCS to administer the programs. The manual section on eligibility contains the language that has caused confusion.

The statue and rule do not require a minimum of \$1000 of crops to be produced for an applicant to be considered an agricultural producer. The manual uses this criterion, however, but also provides the opportunity for State Technical Committee input on other ways to define agricultural producer eligibility. Janice is asking the State Technical Committee for their input on a NJ policy for this; suggesting that we let FSA make that determination. Tom asked Nancy Coles if FSA would have any issues on making these decisions. She did not anticipate any problems with FSA making these determinations.

After some discussion, it was agreed that the NJ policy for determining whether an applicant is an agricultural producer will be: NRCS will accept the FSA determination of whether an applicant is an agricultural producer based on the certifications and materials provided by the applicant to FSA. NRCS will use existing databases to determine this applicant status; if an applicant has land associated with their operation on an AD-1026A for the year the application is filed, NRCS will accept that the applicant is an eligible agricultural producer. This policy is for the definition of agricultural producer only; applicants still must qualify under the other eligibility requirements for HEL/WC and AGI, and have control of the land for which they are requesting assistance for the contract period.

Policy on capping payments: Janice explained the reason why we need to consider the idea of capping payments for some or all management practices. Due to the complexity of the considerations, Tom requested that the Programs sub-committee review options and bring a recommendation to the State Technical Committee at the next meeting.

GRP Geographic Area Rate Cap: At the last State Technical Committee meeting, the Committee concurred with a proposal for two rate caps, \$12,000 for existing grasslands and \$9,000 for land needing restoration to grass. These dual rates were questioned by HQ when they were sent down for approval. Janice conferred with Nancy on an alternative. Because an annual market survey analysis does not make sense when we have few if any easement applications under GRP, we know that we will need to do individual appraisals if and when anyone does apply. We can therefore use the actual appraisal to make an offer, and establish our GARC as a percent of the appraised value. It was agreed that if anyone applies for an easement through GRP, then an offer of 80% of the appraised value will be made. It was agreed to proceed with the "80% of appraised value" as our rate cap.

Nancy asked if April 30, 2010, is still the proposed cut-off for GRP signup. Janice confirmed. Nancy reported that there is only one application submitted at this time and it is a request for rental only. Outreach is needed for this program.

WRP Action Plan items: Janice presented NJ's WRP action plan. Janice reported that there will be staff training in June that will address some of the goals of the action plan. She reviewed the expanded land eligibility based on the 2008 Farm Bill. In general, land may be considered eligible if there is likelihood of successful restoration that will maximize wildlife benefits and wetland functions and values, and these benefits can be achieved at a reasonable cost. Some of those eligible land types are:

- Former or degraded wetlands that occur on lands that have been used or are currently being used for the production of food and fiber, including forest production lands, where the hydrology has been significantly degraded or modified and will be substantially restored
- Lands that have been scoured by floods or broken levees
- Riparian areas along streams or other waterways are eligible providing the area establishes a link between:
 - Wetlands protected by an easement; or
 - Wetlands protected by an interest that achieves the same purpose as an easement such as a State or Federal wildlife management area.
- Eligible wetlands previously restored under a local, State, or Federal restoration program, including FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, or privately developed wetland areas meeting or capable of meeting NRCS restoration standards and specifications as long as the land is not already subject to an existing easement that restricts agricultural use

- Adjacent lands that will contribute significantly to the wetland functions and values or the practical administration of the enrolled area
- Soils that in their natural condition would support hydrophytic vegetation and have the potential to have hydrophytic vegetation, hydrology, or both, restored, even if they do not appear as hydric soils on soils maps

Tom mentioned that there is a lot of opportunity for landowners to participate in this program, and for our partners to market this program in conjunction with other sources of funds to protect lands. Janice also mentioned that NRCS is co-funding a position with the Fish & Wildlife Service to do outreach for wetland programs.

New Business

National CIG, CCPI: There has been no National CIG or CCPI proposals released as of yet. NJ can not advertise our state CIG until after the national proposal is released. We also have not received any word on 2010 funding of our 2009-approved AWEF project.

Open Discussion

Sam mentioned that programs have changed so rapidly that farmers can not keep up with them. He suggested that an open house by area would help. Tom agreed that this could be done.

Kim handed out a brochure about on the NJ Wildlife Action Plan addressing the Piedmont Plains. Brochures for the other areas are also available.

Janice passed out bookmarks on the state soils developed by our soils staff, and a brochure on the 2008 Farm Bill conservation programs.

Howard mentioned new programs offered by RD, including a renewable energy program. The horticulture census is being completed and data will be available soon

Jim mentioned two new pieces of NJ legislation; Forest Stewardship and a bill authorizing Licensed Tree Experts. Rules have to be developed. He also stated that the recent snow has impacted the state's prescribed burning efforts.

Dave Clapp mentioned that it has been 12 months since the basic animal waste rules were established. All ag operations in the state must comply very soon.

Dave Glenn mentioned there was very good response with session Tim and Janice did at their annual conference on the EQIP organic program. He's writing a grant to fund a beginning farmer program.

Amy announced the Conservation Land Rally on March 20th.

Kristina reported that region 2 is establishing a work group that will address ag issues.

Liz mentioned that they are getting acquainted with the new leaders in Trenton.

Christine mentioned that work is being done on the NJ Farm Land assessment rules. There are opportunities to address purpose issues and the out-of-date soils information.

Nancy mentioned that the BCAP is on hold except for the CHST (hauling) payments. The final rules for the program on up for review and that comment period will end on April 9, 2010.

Tim Fekete mentioned that the governor addressed the attendees at the ag convention and gave some positive comments on the importance of NJ ag to the state's economy. Tim also announced that there is \$405,000 left in cost share money for the 8 year program participants. Many applications have been received for this money but there is still some money available.

Mike reported that Extension continues to play a role in education, and is working with the districts to write CNMP's. CIG grant received last year has been making good progress.

Chuck reported that the legislation for allowing renewable energy on permanently preserved farms has passed and rules are being worked on. The complication is that the legislation would require any renewable energy projects on farms to get approval, even if the energy produced is used solely on the farm.

Kathleen reported that a bill to extend the waste plan deadline, which also would extend sewer coverage to 100% of the state, has been put on hold by the Christie administration.

Tom closed the meeting with an explanation of the NRCS initiative on high tunnels. NJ decided not to participate in this program for 3 reasons: The practice is not consistent with what NJ promotes for reducing impervious surfaces; the practice is not proven technology in that there may be negative impacts on other resource concerns, and funds would have to come from our current EQIP funding, where we currently fund only 1 of 3 applicants.

The next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, June 3, 2010 @ 10:00 a.m.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:20 p.m.