

State Technical Committee Meeting
September 20, 2010
Minutes

Welcome: Denise Coleman, PA NRCS State Conservationist, welcomed all and went over agenda.

- Ms. Coleman has been tasked by NRCS Chief Dave White with what showing will be done in the Chesapeake Bay in the next year. Strategy was highlighted -- still in process to welcome comments and ideas.
The Chief asked: how will you bring science to these initiatives?
 1. This will be discussed with resource assessment and setting priorities in PA, which will lead into the NRCS budget. NRCS is asking for comments/write-ups on this by December.
 2. With Local Work Groups (LWGs); hoping to hear that they use the natural resource information packets provided to them to set local priorities.
- A number of initiatives will be looked at this fall, such as the feed management initiative, and we want to get the word out.
- NRCS will host a Wildlife meeting, Nov 16 in State College. And will meet with stakeholders on October 25. We are asking for feedback from these meetings.
- NRCS is working on dam removals this year (2011) and entering into an agreement with American Rivers and the PA Fish and Boat Commission.
- We are working with the Game Commission and Pheasants Forever to put two new Farm Bill biologists in key areas to improve and increase wildlife and aquatic habitat.
- We have introduced flexibilities in working with plain-sect producers (asking for feedback on this). PA NRCS has submitted papers to the Office of General Counsel.
- 2011 is seen as a year of training for NRCS staff. Training our new staff in planning, working with SCC and PACD to have a basic conservation planning course in addition to the certified planning course.

Conservation Loan Programs and CRP/CREP: Crystal Fetzner (FSA)

- General CRP sign-up recently held. 50M acres authored; 4.3M acres accepted.
- New component with general CRP – pollinator habitat. 10% of CRP acreage must be devoted to pollinator habitat.
- Seed or pollinator habitat is becoming increasingly expensive (\$750 – \$1000 is the per acre average for seed nationwide).
- The National Office charges each State Committee to determine whether grazing should be allowed.
- Discussing the need for mid-management practices. The State Committee concurred with nesting and brood rearing dates, Apr 1 – Aug 1.

New FSA Conservation Loan Program:

- Gives credit to implement practices on conservation plans. Has a 4.375% interest rate. \$300,000 direct loans; \$1M+ for guaranteed loans. Not dependent on size or financial status. Must for conservation practices that are included in an NRCS-approved conservation plan.

CREP update:

- 11,111 contracts in PA, just short of 206,000 acres, 500 acres expiring Sept 30th

Q: can CRP land be used to put solar collectors on?

A: will check – last procedure was no.

Q: pollinator habitat (Adams County) -- seed availability/seed quality/land preparation/land maintenance – not much info. Good possibility to have small groups/advisory group – could move long way.

A: very frustrating not having info. Info from National Office is slow coming back.

Q: could land be used for organic certification?

A: encouraged to do, usually eligible.

Resource Assessment Maps Released: comments by October 31st.

Local Ranking Criteria Update and Adjustment to State Ranking Criteria: Barry Frantz

- National questions are the same for the whole country. Nine national EQIP questions in 2010; used eight of these for Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative (CBWI). Last year directed local groups to develop local questions.
- Tried to make state questions simple, using focus practices; trying to get away from detailed questions; looking at if farmer is ready, willing and able to do work.
- WHIP – similar, ready to address activities. Will continue this year, without major changes.
- Chesapeake Bay will add a ranking question to focus on wet soil issues that increase risk of nutrient leaching and runoff.
- LWGs will compile their questions by NRCS field team boundaries -- 20 in state. Will work with them to specify details. Asking STC, on rankings, is there some kind of aspect at farm level we should direct money to? Example: Conewago as special showcase watershed. Or air quality and feed management as special initiatives. Once money goes into area how is it decided to give money to which applicant would receive money first?

Q: is there a final date for feedback?

A: within two weeks if possible, for AMA/EQIP/WHIP/CBWI. Don't have final version of national questions, but don't expect changes. If you have ideas for specific questions, try to make them as specific as possible so that they can be answered with consistency by different people.

Q: do all applicants answer questions?

A: we answer for them. We make the yes/no answer. Do review these with applicants.

CSP Ranking Tool: Katrina Thompson

- CSP pays specific amount of money ('x' points for 'x' acres). Points are assigned at level of conservation being done. CSP rewards best farmers.
- CSP sign up, October 29th will be round 3 cut-off date. Map of geographic areas with resource concerns handed out. We are to pick 3-5 resource concerns. Not proposing to change these, but accepting comments. Asking for comments on the next round.

Q: is forestland mostly those who have forestland or forestland on farms?

A: some applicants have both ag land and forestland, but we have had some just forestland.

Total is 31,000 acres of forestland in contracts thus far, but still signing contracts. If landowner has both, would have two contracts.

Q: "SC" and "NE", under priority cropland: do acronyms refer to parts of state?

A: NE1 is Tioga/Bradford – state broken up. So those questions refer to specific areas of state.

2011 Financial Assistance Programs Summary: Barry Frantz -- 2010 summary for Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA), Chesapeake Bay, Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP).

- Received more money over the course of the fiscal year than our initial allocations in these programs.
- AMA put a lot of money in high-tunnels (also thru EQIP organic), came at expense of irrigation systems.
- Chesapeake Bay – putting most money into grazing systems/core practices/manure management systems. Would like to fund more core practices but don't get that many applications.
- Have been able to fund every eligible application with CSP. Interested in getting more applications – under-subscribed.
- Funding a lot of different activities under EQIP. Trying to create a few new categories for 2011, but want to have total number a little less than 2010. Air Quality is an earmark received from national office, which limits what can be done with the money. It did provide an additional \$3.2M for PA in 2010.
- Energy audits -- a new activity in 2010, to be continued in 2011.
- Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) -- not a lot of subscriptions, especially in the Bay. If going with projects this is the year to identify. CCPI will come up against funding cap next year, so will probably not be able to fund new applications next year.

Q: is that funded on cost share basis with third-party?

A: regular contracts with farmer. We do contracting. Expect the partnering organization to provide some kind of additional help such as planning, practice implementation, etc.

Q: would money go to other organization to assist with planning?

A: can't get money for administrative costs, but if producer was to request could get money thru TSP agreement.

- WHIP: public lands no longer eligible under WHIP. Want to expand to more streambank habitat projects and dam removal over the next year. PA has advantage that a majority of streambeds are privately owned. Chesapeake Bay Executive Order designated to open up an additional 1000 miles of migratory stream to fish passage.
- Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) funding goes thru WHIP or EQIP. Targeted areas along coastal area in Erie County. Upper Genessee River Watershed in north central Potter County will have some EQIP funding available. Will be with us for a few years.

Funding Pools: Barry Frantz

- Funding pools show what category money is directed. Use ranking system to decide which application will then be funded. Proposing to add new funding pools (in potential additions) and proposing to keep items under 2010.
- Ramping up Chesapeake Bay money -- should get another \$4M - \$5M in 2011, which would give us money to do things such as more streambank work and feed management.
- CSP – don't have option to change where money goes. Funding all applications so we don't have a strong need to change geographic areas.
- EQIP – ag energy plans and forest management plans may have separate funding pool.
- Manure importers—looking at doing this in Bay states. If a farmer is importing manure from farms that have surplus manure, could fund an improved facility to store (would fund up to a permanent storage, but it is not required).
- WHIP – fish passage, have been funding for the last 3-4 years. Part of the Bay plan for legacy sediment. Will consider a fund code specifically for this.
- Energy initiatives – anticipating more than just the energy audit initiatives. Could look into energy efficiency equipment funding – expecting more guidance.

Q: would this fall under EQIP/AMA?

A: don't know yet, looking for policy changes on this. Probably would be AMA or EQIP though.

Q: what is purpose and intent of AMA?

A: reduce risks to producer.

Q: would pollinator habitat be part of wildlife habitat?

A: could be. Pollinator now is under Conservation Cover 327 practice; will have to look at that. We do not have just one fund pool for pollinator habitat. We fund the Conservation Cover practice under a number of different funding pools..

Q: new forest management plan in 2008 Farm Bill?

A: yes, are working with Bureau of Forestry to have the Forest Stewardship Plan be eligible for this.

Q: EQIP Small Project?

A: dollar cap of \$30,000; one or two small projects/practices finish up plans.

Payment Schedules: Ed Sanders

- A few changes noted on handout
- Oct 1 is target for this process.
- Practice 315, Herbaceous Weed Control, is new.
- Streambank, fish passage – critical area planning/stream habitat/water control structures – options for cross veins.

Nutrient Management Updates/Policy: Mark Goodson

- Update on policy.
- It is NRCS policy to work with producers who would like to get assistance to implement manure storage, treatment and handling practices, to require a CNMP -- we help them to implement this plan. Part of this plan includes conservation practice standard (590), describes nutrients applied to acres.
- 590 is currently under revision, should see draft in Early October. Will have opportunity to comment on draft and comments will be considered. A national standard is developed and states may modify to a certain extent. Will be options within standard to take basic application (minimum standard) with advanced component to practice. In PA, acre must be practicing basic criteria to be eligible for payment for an advanced Nutrient Management option. A lot of activity concerning phosphorous index. Should see consistency across various states in how results are interpreted and applied. Will be a point (combination of transport and loss) on all indexes where a field location in landscape where no more phosphorous can be applied. All fields under these plans are evaluated with the P Index.

Fish and Wildlife: Barry Isaacs

- WRP -- Bog Turtle Initiative: federally threatened and state endangered species in PA. Primary habitat area in Pennsylvania is in the southeast and south central part of the state. There is a focus area identified in Southern York County. Can now combine easements and vegetation manipulation to improve habitat areas. Have 9 bog turtle contracts this year in WRP. Historically WRP enrollment was between \$500,000 & \$1M in PA. Statewide obligated \$3.4M in 2010. Now going out to establish the new habitat areas.

Q: working only where populated/known location or where potential could be?

A: yes, this year working on known locations. Over time could branch out to potential locations.

Q: were those sites productive ag land?

A: only a couple of them were marginal pasture land.

GRP:

- Started in 2002; those funds were used up after 2005. With 2008 Farm Bill now have new money again for easement and non-easement projects. Not just to help prevent grassland from becoming cornfields but to have grassland for grassland birds (group of species that over last few years have had steady decline in population). Non-easement option: \$10 - \$20 an acre for 10- 20-year contract.
- Asking for comments on (wildlife habitat evaluation) last sheet of handout by the end of September.

Energy Resource Concerns: Dan Dostie

- Developing definitions of two types of resource concerns. Energy audits are helping farms identify inefficiencies. Now establishing policy to help farm initiate recommendations from the audits.
- Bio-fuels looked at closely, all types of renewable energy production. This is still policy writing, and most likely will go under EQIP, possibly AMA.

Q: what about irrigation?

A: improving efficiency. In EQIP can fund improvements to existing irrigation if they improve water conservation.

Q: would no-till equipment be an eligible use?

A: not currently able to pay directly for no till equipment; can pay for Residue Management on an acre basis.

Q: does the addition of Energy as an EQIP activity area help bring more money towards EQIP?

A: cannot say at this time whether we get money to enlarge the EQIP slice, or reconfigure the entire pie to fund more types of projects with the same total amount of funding.

CEAP Results and Future Applicability: Lisa Duriancik

- PowerPoint presentation
- Authorized with the 2002 Farm Bill to look at what our practices do for our natural resource concerns do. Discuss findings for Miss River Basin and Upper Miss. We have findings here in PA.

Bio-fuels Outreach Meeting, hosted by FSA, Oct 27, PDA Bldg, 10-12. Summary of production report and gather feedback from industries, stakeholders, interested parties, and how we can find ways to meet challenge of producing and consuming this amount of bio-fuels.

Establish Set State Technical Committee Meeting Dates:

Dec 6, 2010

March 8, 2011

June 15, 2011

September 19, 2011

Closing: appreciate input and insight and comments on what is proposed.