

**MASSACHUSETTS
USDA-NRCS
STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING
MINUTES**

Wednesday, December 7, 2011
Doyle Conservation Center
Leominster, MA 01453

Present: 20 in attendance.

Christine S. Clarke, NRCS State Conservationist
Barbara Miller, NRCS State Resource Conservationist
Deborah Johnson, NRCS Asst. State Resource Conservationist
Diane Petit, NRCS Public Affairs Specialist
Carol Rickless, NRCS Secretary
Adam Linnell, NRCS BMLP Intern
Heather Baylis, USDA-FSA
Don Lewis; MA Conservation Districts (MACD)
Jane Peirce, MA Dept. of Env. Protection
Maryjo Feuerbach, US EPA
Marianne Piche, MA Div. of F&W
Joe Smith, State Comm. Soil, Water & Related Resources
Dave Welsch, USFS
Artie McCollum, US FWS
Eric Derleth, US FWS
Gerard Kennedy, MA DAR
Franz Ingelfinger, MA DER
Tim Smith Apex Orchards
Brian Wick, CCCGA
Fred Farmer, Middlesex Conservation District

This meeting was digitally recorded.
Meeting duration: 9 A.M. to 11:45 A.M.

Welcome & Opening Remarks: Christine Clarke, State Conservationist

Review of minutes from May 25, 2011 meeting

- Last meetings minutes were accepted by STC members.
- Actions reviewed. Ongoing actions from May minutes are progressing as intended. The STC members agreed other listed actions in the May minutes have been completed.

Reports from Sub-Committees:

Outreach Sub-Committee - Diane Petit

- In FY11 70% of goals and projects in the Massachusetts State Strategic Communication Plan were completed by subcommittee.

- Two new publications were developed for program participants *Understanding the 2008 Farm Bill Conservation Programs* and *A Landowners Guide to the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP)*. The publications are written to help participants clearly understand their responsibilities when accepted into an NRCS program.
- The committee discussed NRCS participating in other types of events which are not usually attended to enhance outreach.
- The *Massachusetts State Strategic Communication Plan* and the *Outreach sub-committee report* is attached for STC members to review and the publications will be shared with STC members via web link.

Forestry Sub-Committee - Barbara Miller, State Resource Conservationist reporting for Kate Parsons, District Conservationist

- Feedback from the community was compiled on Forestry program regarding ranking, practices and general comments from participants. It was found that some items on the list are limited by authorities and can not be implemented.
- Suggestions on how to expand ranking in Forestry.
- Applications outstrip funding in the Forestry program.
- NRCS needs to target areas that would benefit from the forestry program to best utilize funds. Targeted areas will need to be considered in order to strategically improve outreach.
- The Forestry Sub-Committee Report is attached for STC members to review.

Farm Bill Program Roll-Out, 2012: Barbara Miller, State Resource Conservationist

Funding:

- No budget has been approved by NHQ. This fact makes it impossible to plan how dollars will be spent.
- Recap of FY 11 budget. Under EQIP, cropland had most dollars spent; forestland is next with Beginning Farmer Initiative (cropland) in third place.
- Some WHIP dollars have gone to forestry in FY11. There will be less money going to WHIP in FY12 budget.

Initiatives

- There may be a NE Cottontail Initiative in the works but at present there is little info. NE cottontail habitat and the forestry initiative do not mesh easily. Barb Miller is point of contact for questions on the proposed NE cottontail initiative.
- The Seasonal High Tunnel and the Organic Pilot initiatives under EQIP are now controlled by headquarters. They no longer are under individual state control. Energy Initiative funding is also nationally controlled.
- Energy Initiative – funding controlled at a national level and a wider suite of practices in energy conservation will be added.
- Initiatives ranking questions are created at headquarters level; there are a small number of questions allowed for local concerns. The questions created at the national level may change next year.
- A regional component is being introduced in relation to NRCS program practices and payment schedules. Headquarters is implementing a regional approach for enhanced

consistency across the board for future data capture. The New England states are considered a region.

- NE/NY Forestry Initiative has not yet been funded.

Statewide CIG – whether to offer

- There was discussion to see if partners would be interested in a Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) project for 2012 with an explanation of the objectives and funding relating to CIG. NHQ is looking for projects using innovative technologies.
- Action: What topics do STC members wish to explore for a CIG? Email Barb Miller to offer comments or ask questions. Links to past CIG projects will be sent to STC members.

Damage from Hurricane Irene

- Heather Baylis of Farm Service Agency presented a short report on funding for the June 1, 2011 Tornado and Hurricane Irene damage.
- The June 1 tornado had \$4.4M in funding for the Emergency Forestry Restoration Program.
- The Hurricane Irene funding is \$10M but the money had not yet been appropriated as of the date of the STC meeting.
- The FSA Report on the tornado and Hurricane Irene is attached for STC members to review.

Presentation - Local Working Group Update and Report: Don Lewis, Executive Director, MACD

- A Local Working Groups (LWG) function is to create an open forum for stakeholders to brainstorm ideas, assess data, and to air stakeholder's perspectives or concerns on issues in the conservation community and to prioritize needs. The LWG's inform NRCS and its partners about what they deem important in their community which will better inform the ranking process. The Local Working Group (LWG) model is a "crawl, walk, run process".
- The conservation districts and LWG's was established under General Law; Chapter 21, Section 21. There were no LWG's in Massachusetts till 2010. Currently there is no funding for the conservation districts in Massachusetts.
- In 2011, four LWG's: Berkshire, Worcester, Middlesex and Plymouth were created. Bristol joined forces with Plymouth (now Bristol/Plymouth) and Barnstable (Cape Cod Water Resources Restoration Project or CCWRRP) were added later in that year. To reengage with stakeholders was the objective for the first year.
- In 2012 the LWG's will continue to expand, evolve and strengthen moving to the "walk" phase of the model. The goal was to bring the number of LWG's to 8 districts in FY 2012. Nantucket and Hampshire/Hampden will be added in the future. We actually reached 11 operational Local Working Groups in FY 2012.
- Currently Norfolk and Essex are not engaged. Don appealed to NRCS and STC members to help bring Norfolk and Essex to the table.
- For specific information on each district's LWG's reports are available for STC members. Email Don Lewis at theturtleguy@comcast.net for a copy of the reports.

- The *Local Working Group Update and Report* PowerPoint is attached for STC members to review.

Presentation - Understanding Climate Change Impacts to Natural Resources through the Use of Vulnerability Assessments: Marianne Piche, Massachusetts Dept. of F&W

- The information in the models is used for adaptive management of habitat and for estimation of funding needed. The models help assess adaptability of habitat/species and to measure risk. Specific factors are looked at in relation to habitat/species vulnerabilities, exposure and sensitivity to climate change. It is a proactive approach.
- The models are used to create the State Wildlife Action Plan or SWAP.
- A variety of stakeholders each have differing views of the models findings. There will be both losses and gains for habitat or species when climate change occurs.
- The *Understanding Climate Change Impacts to Natural Resources through the Use of Vulnerability Assessments* PowerPoint is attached for STC members to review.
- Marianne Piche presented for John O'Leary. Questions on the presentation should be directed to John O'Leary at john.oleary@state.mass.us; Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife.

Easement Programs: Barbara Miller

Wetland Reserve Program & Grassland Reserve Program Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC)

- The current GARC value is being re-evaluated. Fair market value of 85% was challenged by NHQ. NRCS is currently waiting the have new GARC value approved.
- In the past, the GARC value for WRP has only been in relation to cranberry bogs wetlands. Currently NRCS is appraising the value of other types of wetlands to come up with a GARC number. One such area is the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge – a flood plain forest. NRCS would like to enhance participation in WRP in the western part of Massachusetts.
- NHQ has stated that the GARC value is too high for cranberry bogs in Massachusetts. Cranberry bog owners are looking at the \$9,600 per acre figure and are enticed to turn over nonproductive bogs to conservation land. The high GARC may get bogs with water quality concerns to go out of production.

WRP Ranking Review

- Comments from the review say that there are not a lot of questions on wetland wildlife habitat and priority areas for WRP outside of coastal areas.
- In order to be eligible for WRP wetland areas must have degradation from farming or forestry.
- The ranking questions will be improved over time while WRP spreads statewide.

Discussion: STC members

- US FWS asked if partner contributions for WRP costs are included in restoration costs. Only one point is added to ranking for partner contributions and total restoration costs include easement and partner contributions.
- Partner support of WRP is important to expand use of the program.
- Delayed mowing under EQIP - forage lost. NHQ said no to foregone income in 2011.

- Invasive species in New England are a problem and practices need to be adjusted along with payment schedules.
- Budgetary shortfall and agency audits are impacting programs payment schedules.
- For timber stand improvement NRCS is looking at thinning practices – 40% basal area removal. Additional scenarios must be added to forestry practices.
- Any suggestions from STC members to make the meetings more effective are welcome.

Next Meeting in May, 2012

Adjourn

Attachments:

STC Outreach Subcommittee meeting 2011-11-30.docx
Completed projects by Category FY2011.pdf
Strategic Communication Plan FY2011.pdf
Forestry feedback summary 10-5-2011.doc
Forestry Committee.pdf
2011 FSA report.doc
Local Working Groups STC 7 Dec. 2011.pptx
Climate Change + Vulnerabilities.ppt
STC012711.pptx

Links to Outreach Sub-Committee Brochures:

Understanding the 2008 Farm Bill Programs:

http://www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov/news/publications/MA_Program_Applicant-Participant_Handbook.pdf

A Landowners Guide to the Wetlands Reserve Program:

http://www.ma.nrcs.usda.gov/news/publications/MA_WRP_Landowners_Guide.pdf