

State Technical Committee (STC) Meeting
May 27, 2021, at 10 a.m.
Virtual Meeting via Microsoft Teams

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Dr. Edwin Martinez Martinez, State Conservationist

Dr. Martinez welcomed everyone and thanked new committee members for joining the session. He emphasized the critical importance of group input and participation in meetings of this nature and shared the following comments:

Team Updates – Terry Cosby is the new NRCS Chief. Prior to assuming this post, he was the State Conservationist in Ohio and Acting NRCS Chief for the past several months. Dr. Martinez has previously worked with Chief Cosby and looks forward to continuing that collaboration.

NRCS has now added 22 new NRCS team members through the direct hiring authority to perform critical functions and fill entry-level positions in Virginia offices. We appreciate the efforts made to recruit for these positions.

Bay Conservation – The Bay Water Quality Area is a strong priority with more staffing added to offer services in this region. Dr. Martinez and other NRCS state conservationists are involved in coordination meetings with the Chesapeake Bay Commission to explore additional partnership opportunities. These collaborations will enhance Technical Assistance (TA) and Financial Assistance (FA) delivery in the Bay.

Tribal Outreach – We are committed to working with Virginia tribes and taking steps to enhance collaboration. That process includes gathering information to make sure we have the right outreach tools and asking for feedback on prior work. The team discussed practices implemented on tribal lands in Michigan and Maine.

Before and After Photos – Dr. Martinez discussed the systems approach to conservation and the importance of strong before and after photos to document the impacts of these practices. Public Affairs will reach out to local offices to secure images of tracts before, during and after installation to highlight changes on the land.

Dam Rehabilitation – We are working with local sponsors to rehabilitate 13 dams. We have helped local sponsors prepare three additional dam rehabilitation plans with one plan in progress. It takes a true partnership approach to get the work completed on these complex projects.

Agriculture Conservation Experienced Services (ACES) – This program allows us to bring back retired employees to help retain institutional knowledge and pass along their expertise to newer employees.

We are sharing a lot of good information today. The NRCS team plans to listen, gather feedback and use those insights to enhance our program delivery.

COVID-19 Updates – How NRCS is sustaining operations

David Kriz, ASTC-Watershed Operations

The Virginia team is receiving daily updates from headquarters that indicate we are moving in the right direction. Total cases are coming down considerably and rapidly. David shared a national map with high concentrations of COVID cases highlighted in red.

Fully vaccinated persons who have passed the two-week mark on their final dose do not need to wear masks. Those who are not vaccinated must continue to wear them. At the State Office, the building owner has asked that we wear masks in the common areas.

We are recommending maximum telework with 50 percent staffing levels for service centers. Travel restrictions remain in place with leadership approval required for mission essential travel. NRCS is meeting with the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Rural Development (RD) teams to discuss the issue, but we have received positive news and are moving in the right direction.

Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)
Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

Patrick Vincent, ASTC-Programs

Welcome and Introduction: Patrick became our new Assistant State Conservationist for Programs in January. He is new to this role but has been on the programs staff for 10 years. Patrick brings a wealth of experience to the team through his past service to the Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) program (four years), Rural Development, Farm Service Agency, and Virginia State University (VSU) Cooperative Extension. He looks forward to working with partners in this new role.

Budget Review –

- EQIP - \$23 million
- CSP - \$8 million
- CSP Renewal - \$3 million
- CSP Grasslands - \$57,000

Midyear Spotlight – Patrick reviewed the statutory requirements for funding as well as applications and pre-approvals for EQIP, CSP and RCPP. NRCS expects to complete CSP preapprovals by end of June. He offered a five-year look back at applications vs. contracts to highlight a trend of more applications than funding, which also shows rising and falling applications that are most likely due to Farm Bill maximum obligations per participant.

Agricultural Land Easements (ALEs) – Virginia closed three ALE easements on 252 acres in Loudoun and Stafford counties with 11 acquisitions currently underway. NRCS currently has 143 existing recorded easements totaling 16,807 acres of land protected and monitored. The agency is now celebrating a national milestone of 5 million acres enrolled in conservation easements over the past 28 years.

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) – The 2021 Virginia CIG Notice of Funding Opportunity was posted on April 20, 2021, on grants.gov. Grants will be awarded for projects between one and three years duration with a maximum single award of \$300,000.

Environmental Quality Incentive Program Conservation Incentive Contract (EQIP-CIC)

Ron Wood, Program Manager

Introduction: Ron has served on the NRCS Programs team for the past his 17 years . Prior to that, he worked six years with Chesapeake Bay Local Assistance Department and five years with Hanover-Caroline SWCD.

EQIP-CIC overview –This program is a merger of EQIP and CIC (Conservation Incentive Contracts) that acts as a steppingstone for transitioning to CSP. He reviewed program eligibility requirements and payment limits (\$200k payment limitation per farm bill for individuals and \$400k for joint operations).

The entire state is included in the High Priority Area with a Fiscal Year 2021 focus on grazing lands, nutrients transported to surface water, plant productivity and health - degraded plant condition, animals-livestock production limitation.

Participants can implement practices and enhancements or combination of the two but must have an enhancement and activities commence in first year. Contracts are for five years with high priority practices receiving a 90 percent payment rate. Applicants do not have to enroll all lands. The program is on hold now, but NRCS may get \$1 million to implement it in FY2021.

Dr. Martinez – This initiative offers new opportunities through a combination of two programs. This initiative has a lot of value for Virginia and we are continuing to learn how to best implement it.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Source Water Protection (SWP)

Stacey Bradshaw, Program Manager

Introduction: Stacey worked 20 years with a SWCD before leaving for three years to finish her B.S. degree at VSU. She was a Pathways intern with NRCS and has been a state program manager since 2017.

RCCP –Five projects have been submitted for RCCP over the past two years (2020-2021). The team reviewed the submitted proposals with two projects being awarded funding: Capital Region Land Conservancy and Trout Unlimited (TU). The Alternate Funding Allowance (AFA) requests for proposals closes tomorrow with one in progress.

Stacey offered a look back to 2014 and discussed projects, partners, contracts and acres treated. Virginia is ahead of the national average for service to underserved participants.

Source Water Protection (SWP) and National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) – Stacey shared a map with areas of work highlighted in orange. We are collaborating with partners to identify additional Source Water Protection (SWP) areas under the new guidance. The Programs team is also moving forward in implementing National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) projects.

Q: How do I get involved? (Tim Mitchell, subcommittee member)

A: You are officially part of the subcommittee but joined after we started last year. You will be getting an email.(Stacey)

Q: Will NRCS issue refined SWP areas for FY2022? (Sylvia Malm – referencing NWQI bulletin)

A: The national bulletin combined both programs and is looking at them as a unit. We're meeting this afternoon to identify additional areas. Virginia is currently sitting at 7 percent and can move to 20 percent, so we're looking at areas of growth. (Stacey)

Q: Should all ag land with karst topography be included in SWP areas? (Christen Saacke Blunt)

A: Last year, we reviewed partner analyses and added karst practices. We also identified other focal areas through local working groups. That data will be posted soon and can be added to the agenda for discussion. (Stacey)

Farm Service Agency Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

Emily Horsley, Program Manager

Continuous signup is open and deadlines have been extended for general signup (not defined yet).

CRP Grasslands is coming soon and FSA will focus on priority zones.

Continuous CRP in Virginia is following the nationwide downward trend seen over the last 20 years. Many factors have contributed to the lower numbers (i.e., decreasing rental rates, incentives and caps) between 2016 and 2021. FSA is trying to increase collaboration and partnerships, technical capacity through NRCS, soil rental rates (SRR) and incentives. to reverse the trend and to capture more enrollment.

Emily also shared information on the new climate smart, inflation and water quality incentives. Practices will be available for eligible producers through the Highly Erodible Land Initiative (HELI) continuous signup. Virginia was a pilot state for the CLEAR30 initiative. More details are coming. Landowners who have expiring contracts with eligible water quality practices can re-enroll for 30 years.

Conservation Practice Technical Standards & Process

Chad Wentz, State Resource Conservationist
Mat Lyons, State Conservation Engineer

Chad shared that all conservation practice standards begin at national level and offered an overview of the process for updating them. The 2018 Farm Bill required NRCS to review all standards to seek opportunities to increase flexibility and incorporate new technologies. Typically, standards are reviewed and updated on a five-year rotation. Once all comments are addressed from National Review process, they are released to states which have one year to review and adopt them. States can choose not to adopt the standard or elect to use it as-is or with state-specific updates. Engineering and Ecological Sciences have separate standard responsibilities. Supporting documents are reviewed and updated. States should include relevant state laws but not implement guidance that is less stringent than national requirements. All of Virginia's adopted standards are posted to the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) for state use.

Mat: NRCS released quite a few engineering standards in 2020 with no major changes. We have updated the well standard to allow a Class 4 well with an exclusion on domestic use.

Updates are in progress on numerous practices, which are set to be released in 2021. NHQ updates on the 605 denitrifying bioreactor will reflect our experiences here in Virginia

Q: Is the 808 Soil Carbon Amendment available in Virginia? (Mark Schonbeck)

A: No. (Chad Wentz)

Q: Doesn't a denitrifying bioreactor increase the risk of major nitrous oxide greenhouse gas emissions? How is this reliably prevented in the reactor? (Mark Schonbeck)

A: I don't have an answer, but I will get back to you. (Mat Lyons)

Clarke County Easement Partner Update

Alison Teetor, Natural Resource Planner

Introduction: Alison has been with Clarke County for 30 years with 12 years' experience working with easements.

Alison shared a Clarke County map with the group and provided a general overview of easement program. She discussed purchase building rights and appraisal purchases with NRCS, indicating that the county is now managing over 140 easements.

Between 2007-2019, the county leveraged over \$2 million in NRCS funds with state and local resources to protect 1, 417 acres (about 23 percent of the land area). The county has provided 21 percent of the costs and used landowner contributions (25 percent) and grants to supply the remainder.

County Easements Profiles:

Cool Spring Farm – 204-acre tract in a Civil War battlefield historic district protecting prime soils and a historic 1880s home (retired five of eight remaining development rights)

Partners – NRCS, Virginia Land Conservation Fund (VLCF), landowner, county and Virginia Dept. of Agricultural and Consumer Services (VDACS)

Koon Dairy Farm – 123 acres conserved on a 216-acre property containing 2800 feet of riparian buffer (retired five development rights)

Partners – NRCS, VLCF, landowner, county, VDACS

Alison thanked the NRCS easement team of Diane Dunaway and Letitia Holder and hopes to continue this extremely successful partnership.

Virginia Soil Health Coalition Partner Update

Mary Sketch, Coalition Coordinator

Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG)

Dr. Michael Flessner, Virginia Tech

Partner Update – Virginia Tech Weed Control/Cover Crop Management

New coordinator Mary Sketch shared some background on the Virginia Soil Health Coalition, which was established in 2013. This partnership involving NRCS leadership has promoted a systems-based approach and benefitted from \$3 million agency investment in 26 CIG grants. She went on to highlight how this successful partnership can continue to advance the soil health initiative.

Virginia Tech's Dr. Michael Flessner provided a progress update on his grant project to identify effective approaches for dealing with weed challenges in crop production systems. Tillage and herbicides are two traditional options for controlling weeds, but some are herbicide resistant. Through the CIG grants, we've expanded our knowledge and use of cover crops, increasing the need for viable weed suppression options.

The high levels of biomass required to achieve weed suppression also offer benefits for soil health. They are getting 75 percent weed suppression for six weeks after termination – a level on par with herbicides. We need to be aware of herbicide effects on cover crops through residual carryover. Some crops are hard to terminate, so producers need to be

aware of nuances and manage for them. Dr. Flessner concluded by stating that this has been an extremely successful partnership and Virginia Tech looks forward to more collaborations.

Mary echoed that sentiment, stating that the coalition is looking to enhance the collaboration and move forward with a holistic approach and deeper levels of coordination with NRCS. She also discussed the Collective Impact Model for advancing soil health. Partners are exploring opportunities to use this approach to get more soil health practices on the ground.

A new 4theSoil campaign based on the four soil health principles will launch on June 23, national Soil Health Day. This VSHC initiative is focused on communicating the message more broadly and bringing in more partners. Mary emphasized that we are “playing the long game” to make a collective impact, realizing there is no silver bullet to achieving greater adoption of soil health principles in Virginia.

Questions and Answer Session

ALL

Q: Is Palmer amaranth a problem in Virginia? (Mark Schonbeck)

A: Yes, it is the No. 2 weed for soybeans, cotton and corn. Cover crops can help reduce the need for herbicides and increase longevity of herbicides. (Dr. Flessner)

Q: What could make the CSP more successful in Virginia? In some areas it's popular, in others not. Are there any perceived barriers or recommendations for outreach or administration activities that will make it more available to farmers? (Mark Schonbeck)

A: Virginia is trending upward. We've worked with staff to debunk myths and prepare them to do more outreach. We are seeing some success from those efforts. While NRCS was previously able to fund all contracts, Virginia now has a backlog of applications. We've developed some CSP testimonial videos and Public Affairs is helping to promote the benefits of the program. (Patrick Vincent)

Q: We have a unique situation. We are in the final period of the National Forest Service Peddler River North Project in the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests focused on drinking water, watershed, select harvest, controlled burn and other management practices. I am asking if there are partnership opportunities here. The Denver Water project has an MOU with NRCS and the Forest Service. (Timothy Mitchell, Lynchburg Water Resources)

A: Todd Groh with the Department of Forestry (DOF) is on the call. NRCS has a partnership with DOF and we would be willing explore opportunities here. (Chad)

Closing Remarks

Dr. Edwin Martinez, State Conservationist

I appreciate this morning's conversation. We've gotten some great feedback and shared information about NRCS and partner activities. We recognize that we do good work because of these partnerships.

NRCS has many technical specialists and partner organizations available to help landowners implement programs and practices that address resource concerns.

CSP has a big impact in Virginia and we are happy to see these successes in the state.

I'd like to recognize and thank the two partners who presented today. We appreciate your time and the great work you do.

Thank you.

Next Meeting - TBD