

State Technical Committee Meeting

2/21/2024
9:00am – 12:00 pm

Virtually-Microsoft Teams

Meeting Called By: **Becky Ross, NH NRCS**

Type of meeting: **State Technical Committee**

Facilitator: **Jeremy Fowler, NH NRCS**

Note taker: **Helen Castles, NRCS**

Attendees:

Becky Ross, Jeffery Holmes, Ryan Hyde, Sarah Waring, Misty Sinsigalli, Brandon Smith, Cara Cargill, Charlotte Harding, Ted Kendziora, Carl Hartman, Joshua Megyesy, Lauren Zielinski, Stacy Lemieux, Melissa Macheras, Audrey Mayer, Elizabeth McKenna, Joshua Megyesy, Marilyn Milne, Peg Merrens, Gage Wheeler, Katherine Zink, Tabitha Edwards, Gabriel Roxby, Marques Munis, Kimberly McCracken, Don Keirstead, Kelly Bolland, Jeremy Fowler, Helen Castles.

Becky Ross State Conservationist, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Member Updates

Becky Ross- Welcome State Committee members. Becky has been serving on a 10-month detail at our National Office, and Joe and Rebecca both covered for me. She thanked the NRCS team here in New Hampshire as well as Joe Beaufort and Rebecca Lauster for their service.

NRCS has eight different conservation practice standards that are out for public comment for revisions to the conservation practice standard. She reviewed the practices including Field Border (386), Filter Strip (393), Grazing Management (528), Hedgerow Planting (422), Mulching (484), Seasonal Water Management for Wildlife (646), Structure for Water Control (587), Wetland Restoration (657). She requested that the committee consider commenting and provided a link for further information.

NRCS will be announcing our Conservation Innovation Grant opportunity. The program requires a 50/50 match and more of that information is coming out soon. With a great partnership with NRCS and University of New Hampshire, we were able to hire Catherine Coverdale to help our farms continue with their integrated pest management solutions.

For disaster recovery, everyone's aware we've had some significant storms this last year, as well as some late frost this previous summer in the growing season. NRCS has also been working with some different partners in Gorham and Bartlett after we saw some significant storm damage utilizing the emergency Watershed Protection program. Matt Brown is our state engineer, and he's the lead, and these projects are focused on the Sacco and the Androscoggin watersheds. In addition, Baker Eight dam rehabilitation project is about 30% complete, and we will be getting more information out on this as we go through the proposed project.

Other opportunities for some of our partners across the state, the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production has a competitive grant open, and these competitive grants initiate or expand efforts for farmers, gardeners, citizens, government officials, schools, or other stakeholders in urban areas as well as suburbs. USDA is accepting applications on this until April 9th, and they are going through grants.gov. And then the last announcement NRCS did recently just announce a partnership with the National Association of Conservation Districts and the American Climate Corps. They are calling for members across the nation, and these are members who will be employed and supervised by our partners, with the goal of helping to work on climate, Smart AG, and forestry projects.

Ryan Hyde- US House of Representatives, after a successful series of letters and communications with the Risk Management Agency, USDA has announced that they will postpone the proposed rulemaking for the apple crop provision. Mr. Hyde mentioned that he understands this is a big deal for many New Hampshire producers and is a step in the right direction. They are planning to host more listening sessions in the months and year to come, and I'll be sure to communicate those opportunities with our constituents. Another update is they are currently working on potential legislation surrounding whole-farm crop protection that could help bridge

the gap by the coverage gap for small to mid-size producers. Mr. Hyde also offered if there are programs or projects or anything that we can be of assistance to you on whether that be a letter of support or some research, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Elizabeth McKenna- joined the meeting from Senator Shaheen's office and mentioned that Senator Shaheen visited Apple Hill Farm last fall and saw the disaster to the crop that farmers have dealt with all season. Senator Shaheen's going to continue to push for disaster relief while working through appropriations, the next funding deadlines, government funding deadlines is March 1st and March 8th. The office is going to continue to push to get the government funded. She will work with colleagues across the aisle to make sure that happens and start preparing for what we can be doing in FY25.

Senator Shaheen this past fall became chair of the Small Business Committee, which has a really important role. Many small businesses in New Hampshire are core to the New Hampshire's economy, and many producers can fall under that category. She also introduced 2 bills this past fall, the Snow Survey Northeast Expansion Act, which would bring snowpack monitoring to the northeast, to establish a network of snow and water monitoring stations. Also introduced, Connecticut River Watershed Partnership Act, which would formalize a partnership between federal, state, local, and private entities to promote conservation, restoration, education, and recreation efforts in the watershed and establish a voluntary grant program to facilitate these activities.

Jeff Holmes- Farm Service Agency explained the agency has been in disaster relief mode for not just last year but since 2021, and two out of three years with extreme flooding or drought. He expressed concern that a normal year has not occurred in recent years. The agency is still working on projects from 2021, there's still some permitting issues with DES for one project and expressed issues with repeated flooding over the course of multiple years. The agency has been looking to continuous CRP as maybe a potential alternative for these folks with land that seems to be particularly susceptible to the flooding events.

As far as disaster declarations, FSA has been quite busy over the last three years. In 2023 there was flooding and excess moisture that hit in seven of our 10 counties. The main effect of these declarations is opening availability of emergency loans for producers. But this past year with market rates much higher than they had been in the previous 5 to 10 years. So, the emergency loans became much more attractive to especially orchards this almost a total loss of crop from the freeze, freeze, and frost conditions in both February and in May of 2023. IRA dollars are available to assist borrowers that were delinquent or just distressed or challenged on the cash flow fronts that deadline for that program was the end of December. The agencies were also pleased to welcome the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary to New Hampshire in the last month. This gave them the opportunity to hear of the accomplishments of their administration and hear from our growers on the disaster that was the 2023 growing season.

Misty Sinsigalli- Area Director from Rural Development provided an update on Rural Development programs. The most recent round of rural energy for America program REAP applications and New Hampshire was about 9 million in requests. However, the funds available for the program was only 1.5 million in New Hampshire. Rural Development also has a REAP Technical Assistance Grant that the agency awarded to Clean Energy, New Hampshire. In addition, the Value-Added Producer Grant is open right now through April 11th. This is for planning and or working capital related to producing and marketing a value-added agricultural product. She offered if anybody needs any information on that program, RD is happy to assist.

Kyra Jacobs from EPA asked a question. "We get more and more questions about private well contamination, private well replacement and obviously EPA does not have funds for that and 40% of our residents in Hampshire, Vermont, Maine are on private wells, and I heard there is possible funding for private wells?"

Misty let the meeting members know that the 504 Repair program for private homeowners does offer funds that can be used for either septic or private wells, to replace them but the repair program is an income-based program based on where you are located. She also mentioned that RD also has programs for municipalities and nonprofits that can help with water and wastewater systems as well as manufactured housing communities. Misty also let folks know that a Rural Development webinar will be available specifically for farm producers, check out our jumpstart session four, which will be on March 7th from 12:00 to 1:00 PM, and that is a webinar with the deep dive into the programs the agency offers. A listing of all the webinars available in the coming months is available on the website.

Don Keirstead- discussed the NWQI program letting the member know that the program is voluntary, designed to provide funding for agricultural watersheds based on the HUC12 watershed. In FY 24 the agency plans to offer \$162,000. He discussed how the program works by working with EPA and partners to develop a watershed plan. Don stressed that this is a voluntary program and is not regulatory. The agency is looking to fund and focus on impaired agricultural watersheds with the potential to improve water quality through voluntary conservation practices. Don offered practice examples such as filter strips, riparian buffers, bioengineered riparian

buffers, these kinds of practices are of benefit. He also suggested setbacks, soil testing, and manure injection as additional practices that are beneficial to water quality. Lastly, he also stated that there's interest in using biochar to tie up nitrogen and to build soil organic matter for improved soil health conditions.

Katie Zinc- from DES gave an update on water quality sampling that is being conducted in the Clark and Oliverian watersheds. The funding comes from EPA under the 319 program with funding for staff, equipment, and testing services. Three priority watersheds that were selected and identified as high and medium recovery potential watersheds. She showed a slide depicting 16 monitoring sites that have been monitored since 2021. Katie also described the process of collection and getting the samples to the laboratory in Chelmsford, MA. The data is used to develop a watershed-based plan, to fully assess the quality, water quality conditions of the three watersheds. The test results will assist in improving the water quality in the watershed and assist with identifying areas or farming practices that can be improved. Areas that have potential for improvement include summertime spreading of manure on steep hay fields and barnyard areas. For forested areas harvesting operations, harvesting best management practices in those forested lands because the phosphorus is tied to sediment which could be mobilized during a timber harvest.

Gabe Roxby- New Hampshire State Forester discussed the White Oak Initiative. He explained that this is a large initiative with many partners, and it spans the eastern United States, NRCS is one of those partners. Many of our oak forests are well-stocked with mature oak trees, but there's a challenge in getting the oak regeneration and this will eventually become a significant issue for as the younger size classes, with a lack of mature trees. To sustain our oak forests in the coming decades, we really need to think about how to regenerate oak successfully today. The White Oak Initiative has released an assessment and conservation plan for upland oak communities. Gabe mentioned that the EQIP and CSP programs are important programs that can help accomplish this work.

Carl Hartman, US Forest Service, mentioned that deer browse is a huge component of the issue and asked if NRCS has ever funded a slash wall to help exclude deer? NRCS response: NRCS has had a couple of conservation innovation grants, one of which that has featured the slash wall. The agency is considering other potential practices that we don't have active, but we could include like woody residue treatment to leave tops large to assist with this concern. In addition, NRCS offers as one of its monitoring activities, after a harvest foresters could go back and assess the regeneration success or failure as an inventory/evaluation process.

Kelly Bolland- State Biologist for NRCS New Hampshire, discussed the Working Lands for Wildlife Northeast Turtle Initiative. The initiative started in 2016, a partnership with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and a lot of other partners, but primarily US Fish and Wildlife Service and the state agencies to recover, restore work towards conservation for three at-risk turtle species, the Blanding's turtle, Wood turtle, and the Spotted turtle. The project is trying to recruit willing landowners to do turtle conservation activities, working with the Connecticut River Conservancy, state partners, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and NRCS. There are many practices that can be used for turtles.

Joshua Megyesy- State Herpetologist of New Hampshire Fish and Wildlife described some of the habitat requirements and needs of the turtle species. Since 2011, we identified priority areas for all three of these species through Fish and Wildlife Service and competitive state wildlife grants. The various species rely on relatively intact landscapes in the state that have a diversity of wetlands, vernal pools, forested wetlands, emergent wetlands, and shrub swamps and stream habitats for Wood turtles. Joshua also described the types of practices or treatments that benefit turtle habitats. These include practices of CSP, EQIP, and WRE easements. Practices such as turtle nesting habitat, improved stream crossings, early successional habitat, large wood, and wood additions to stream channels can all benefit the species. Land conservationist is the top on everybody's list for turtle species, Joshua gave a shout out to our easements team because they're doing a great job as well as other partners that are working with us and easements. He also added that in the NH Wildlife Action Plan, one of the top threats for all the turtle species in New Hampshire is a loss of habitat, so the number one Conservation Act action for each species is land protection. WRP's and WRE's are critical.

Marques Munis- Assistant State Conservationist for Programs gave an NRCS programs overview for New Hampshire. IRA funding is being rolled out quickly with many opportunities for the farm and forest communities to increase conservation efforts across the state. He also mentioned the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and indicated there is a lot of money out there available nationally for partners to apply to and bring that money into their respective states. Partners interested in the program should contact Jess Rock, the RCPP Coordinator with further questions. In 2023 the IRA dollars increased but we did get the funding the agency anticipated. With approximately an additional \$650,000 in EQIP and \$450,000 in CSP. The state did obligate all of those all those dollars last year field staff and State office and folks did a great job getting that money on the ground. However, in fiscal year 2024 the state received \$8.6 million between EQIP and CSP. NRCS New Hampshire has taken several measures including, earlier sign-up periods, new flexibilities, or practices and offering increased outreach to producers and our conservation partners. With the

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program funding has increased the state has selected applications for easements for ALE, WRE, and the RCPP programs.

Another batching period has been announced for conservation applications with a deadline of April 12th. Funding is also still set aside for EQIP for socially disadvantaged farmer rancher applicants. Members of the committee were asked to spread the word about funding opportunities for various pools of funding. The agency right now is looking for applications from people with good conservation projects, wherever they're at, that are interested in the IRA specific practices. The Field Office is acting rapidly to move viable applications forward for a conservation contract with a target deadline of May 27th, 2024.

Source Water Protection areas were also discussed, and some practices do receive high payment rates as an incentive for implementation. It was stressed to make sure producers that are located source water protection areas know that they are eligible for the increased incentive rate for conservation practices. It was also mentioned the RCPP program does have flexibilities to offer the higher incentive rates to address resource concerns and can target various watersheds as an additional opportunity.

Local Work Group meetings will be held across the state and NRCS will use the feedback back to provide to this committee to make recommendations on what NRCS programs will be in subsequent years. This year we requested that if a local working group has a specific local funding initiative that they want to want to support, they can make that recommendation. The agency is also looking for specific recommendations on ranking criteria, eligibility issues, payments, payment rates, with working group committee feedback due by April 16th. At the May 15th State Technical Committee meeting the results of the work group recommendations will be presented and any other subcommittee feedback.

Partner Updates:

Carl Hartman- US Forest Service is working on a project with the National Association of Conservation Districts called the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic Forest and Water Partnership. This is designed to bring together water utilities and force managers together to help improve source water quality across the region. US Forest Service also released a funding opportunity for our tribal partners it's a \$40 million funding opportunity for tribal organizations to improve their climate. And the Inflation Reduction Act, is offering funding through grants here in New Hampshire to help improve the urban forestry projects that we have across the state.

Lauren Zelinsky- Connecticut River Conservancy is moving forward with our RCPP projects under the New Hampshire source water collaboration.

Kyra Jacobs- EPA mentioned source water protection and at the Rochester DPW after some field tours in the morning, she was proud to work with all the partners and NRCS on these issues. Also working with Conservation Districts showing how we can all work together not just for drinking water protection but water quality overall, that's such an important partnership and trying to feature different projects throughout New England.

Becky thanked the meeting participants for their contributions and sharing. It was also mentioned that all state technical committee meetings which are scheduled from now through January 2025 on our state website.

Meeting adjourned at noon.