

STAC meeting Agenda 11/14/2024

Attendance: Alan McBee, Amanda Crowe, Austin Shero, Ann Fischer, Josh Schrecengost, Cory Cole, Denise Miller, Jess Kirby, Laurie Stewart, TTCD, Theo Garcia KTCD, Ashley List, FS, from HSWCD; Monica Kopp, Victoria Monsaint-Queeney, Megan Stoll, Nicole Arevalo. Online attendance; Schwing, ASWCD, Aleya Brinkman, FSWCD, Kyle Graham, AK F& W, Trevor, Alaska Fish and Forestry, Blaine Spellman, NRCS- SPSD, Kyra Wagner, HSWCD

Welcome from STC Alan McBee.

NRCS Updates

We entered FY25 on October 1st. It's been a busy year implementing IRA, Farm bill programs; EQIP, CSP, RCPP, Easements and Conservation Technical Assistance. We've been working with producers and working on expansion of programs and new ways to connect with landowners in AK. We've been working specifically with forestry and CSP, expanded work with reindeer herders, a number of tours over the last year where we hosted folks from NHQ. Tyonek Tribal Conservation district has been huge in partnering with us and showing our folks from HQ one of their big projects that we assisted with financially and technically. The reason this is so valuable is when they see the projects we are working on it brings support, funding and helps with policy barriers. We've had good success over last year.

We just had the election so there will be some administration changes, but we have been doing conservation for 89 yrs and we will continue doing that. There may be changes in funding or policy but the basic framework of what creates us as an agency will remain the same and we will continue moving forward and getting the job done.

This year, from a budget standpoint, we have received most of the program dollars but are in a CR (continuing resolution) and have held some of our internal budget. Our budget is mostly better than last year at this time, and we're hoping to finalize a lot of contracts and agreements with landowners to get conservation on the ground. When we have a contract with a producer that money will stay in that contract once it is obligated.

Within the watershed department we were able to bring on new staff. A lot of their work is in the village protection and relocation, and community source water protection. They have been very busy. We have unlimited potential in the state of Alaska in this space.

Our snow survey department has been asked by congress to grow that program and are thus putting an extra 20 new snow sites over the next 3-4 years. They made a good push and got 5 new ones done this year. We went from 4 people to around 8 for the snow survey crew. The SNOTEL sites are monitored long term. The majority of all SNOWTEL sites have soil temperature data as well as a SCAN program. There is an interactive map that shows the location of all sites. As far as gleaning data for agricultural land there may be one that is on ag land.

Soil survey has had good success over the last year. Everyone has been working hard and we can't do that without our partnerships. Meetings like today help us move forward as our funding levels change.

Action – Have Daniel present at STAC with SNOTEL presentation.

Local Work Groups

As we look at the goals for NRCS, it is more important than ever to have local work groups. I appreciate those who have held their LWG meetings. The work of local work groups is to provide information on what your needs are from your communities and then provide it to us through the STAC. This then helps us figure out where and how to put out funds and where to direct our resources. It going to be crucial to help us dial in where our priorities are across the state.

According to the farm bill, LWG's should be run by local conservation districts, but in lieu of that the local NRCS DC's will, run them. We, however, would love to see them locally led. It's about getting priority resource concerns and what you want NRCS working on in your areas. Helps us focus our resource pools. In the past we came up with our percentage of dollars for each pool, based on what everyone in the room voted on.

Our discretionary dollars can be used for agreements if we have enough funding. Projects that we cannot use for agreements are our direct to producer dollars, so when we ask for input that is what we use it for. In the last administration Urban Ag was a big push. In AK we think of it as small community ag and that is something we have supported through agreements throughout the state, something that reflects the input we have received from the STAC. Right now, we don't have a lot of money for internal agreements. We have about 30 different lines of funding. We have some funds available that could be used for agreements, but they are associated with programs specifically. We currently have a general TA (Technical Assistance) that is in the CR, and we have only been funded for 20% of the year. We're hoping for more opportunities in the future.

Last year we had additional money, and we were fortunate to work with the Denali commission with an agreement. They are staffing up to support an Ag Division. They will be rolling out information on that and if you have questions contact them directly.

Feb 4th is the next STAC and *March 18th* is the 3rd STAC. We would like LWG (local work group) input 6 weeks prior to our Feb 4th meeting which would be needing our input by first week of January. If you see needs for regional planning or specific resources it would be good to know about and any resource concerns you need addressed. Local work groups feed the STAC and the STAC gives Alan input to make decisions. We would like information back before the Feb 4th STAC meeting so that it can be looked at prior to that meeting for review.

Action – Input due from local work groups by first week of January for resource concerns.

Program Updates

NRCS offers 3 different groups of programs:

1. Resource inventory: Soil Survey, Snow Survey, National Resource Inventory
2. Water Resources: Emergency Watershed program, Watershed and flood prevention operations
3. Farm Bill programs: CTA, EQIP, EQIP-CIC, CIG, CSP, RCPP, ACEP

CTA-Conservation Tech Assistance is putting conservation practices on the ground. For example: trails and walkways and removing undersized culverts.

EQIP -Environmental Quality Incentives Program -which is a contract that provides financial incentive after a conservation practice is installed. We asked the STAC to provide us feedback on which fund pools within EQIP were the priority. We've utilized that feedback to prioritize our funding.

CIG -Conservation Innovation Grants – We asked STAC if we should offer a state level CIG to go with the National CIG. We get a lot of feedback on these-some say it should be broader and some more specialized. The priorities for the CIG 2025 are Energy and Arctic Ag.

CSP- Conservation Stewardship Program –We've asked the STAC what the main resource concern should be when looking at agricultural lands (which is pretty much everything that is not forest) and forest lands. From that feedback we narrowed it down to the top 8 priorities and continue to use this ranking process.

ACEP- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program– this is a way to keep working lands from being developed. We have ag land easements and wetland easements. The STAC brought to our attention in FY21 that the Geographical Area Rate Cap (GARC) which is used in wetland easements was \$5,000/acre and it should be raised. We ask each year if anyone has an appraisal that documents the GARC needs to be reevaluated.

Decision – Leave the GARC at \$5200.

AFA's-There is an EQIP funding mechanism called AFA's (Alternate Funding Arrangements). It is only available to tribes or Alaska Native corporations and allows NRCS flexibility regarding funding.

An AFA is available through RCPP and tied to program regulations and policy 7 CFR, part 1466, Title 440, Part 531. AFA's for EQIP AND CSP is under program regulation 7 CFR part 1466 title 440 part 530. For EQIP and CSP AFA's a tribe would make the request, and the state would consider the request based on criteria. Alaska proposed utilizing the following criteria:

1. How AFA achieves conservation benefits for the tribe in conjunction with program goals.
2. How the AFA will more easily achieve goals and objectives of the program over that of a traditional contract.
3. How the AFA will address natural resources concerns including the development and implementation of tribal resource management plans.

Decision – Alaska should consider using the criteria.

Soil Survey

Soil survey background info of... What, why, Who, Where, How

Soil survey comes when a request is made for baseline soils data to assist with a land management decision and identify usable interpretations. In Alaska we have 3 offices with field soil survey staff. There are 8 soil scientists across the state located in Fairbanks, Homer, and Wasilla and 4 ecologists and a group of MO (MLRA office) staff that do QA (quality assurance) on soil survey.

Orders

Order one (1) is the most intense and order five (5) is the least intense soil survey. With an order 2 survey the map units can be split up and be more intense, getting it down to series level. Order 5 is more of a resource-based survey and map units are broad, only down to family level.

SSURGO is big news in AK and across the country. The goal for 2026 is to have every acre covered. We have completed this in Alaska and in web soil survey this is now available. Currently available SSURGO map was provided. STATSGO is mapped at 1-500k and meets minimum standards for order 5 survey. It is a coarse product. Priority areas have been identified in the area order 5 locations that we want to get higher priority data on

Soil products

STATSGO2 -general soils map

SSURGO- soils survey geographic database

gSSURGO- Gridded Soil Survey Geographic database

Data is located on Web Soil Survey. You can create custom soil reports, pdfs, get interpretations and ratings. You can see a map and tabular components and why the rating is what it is. There are AK specific ratings as well.

If you think there is something you would like in the interpretations, and it is not there let Cory Cole know.

NRCS cooperated with UC Davis for a downloadable app where you can find what soils are where you are physically standing. It provides details of the soil series and chemical data. You can also download and see data in google earth. <https://Casoilresource.lawr.ucdavis.edu/soilweb-apps/>

With NRCS geospatial data gateway you can directly download information at <https://gdg.sc.egov.usda.gov/>.

SSURGO portal is brand new and allows you to get away from the GIS software component and allows you to bring in spatial and tabular components for that.

SSURGO is an on-demand product and allows you to run maps for interpretations and properties that are statewide, and you can view as a map.

For state and transition models with ecological site information you will want to look at EDIT. It is a website that allows anyone to view concepts, descriptions, and roots. Edit is the place we store ecological site descriptions. They are directly linked to soil and EDIT is linked to web soil survey.

Soil data helps us spend the money we have in more informed ways. A foundational tool we use when planning a conservation project starts with soil data. The more detailed it is the more informed recommendations we can make.

Kodiak is close to complete and may be posted as an out of cycle refresh. TBD

A lot of this is the first time some of these have been done and it is coarse data. If you are working in your area and have things you need done, please get that to Cory. Any information that comes in is taken to state leaders and then priorities are submitted to the staff.

Soils of local importance is an interpretation in web soil survey. When the scientists do a survey, they populate part of the database with prime farmland or soils of importance. We don't have prime farmland in AK so if a soil is locally important it has to be identified by a government entity. That designation is used for easements and farmland protection policy.

Partnerships

We selected a State Tribal Liaison who will join us next month.

We want to thank all of you who helped support our national folks coming in and meeting with you on projects and those who have national agreements.

Braden Pitcher has joined the partnership staff as outreach coordinator. He is working to develop an outreach plan and will be reaching out to many of you for input, He will be available to assist with Local Work Group efforts.

TCD Subcommittee Report

TTCD (Tyonek Tribal Conservation District)-We want to thank NRCS and be reflective on what we have accomplished over the last few years. A lot of things we talked about have become concrete action items.

From KTCD (Knik Tribal Conservation District) we had a national agreement with USDA for equity and it opened the door to unique opportunities. One component was creating awareness around forest management activities and documenting management and building blocks and tools and resources to develop a program. There are elements of working with contractors and working with local experts and we are looking at scoping to bring tools to the shed. There are different partners with USDA and we are in talks on creating vegetation mapping awareness. It was a national funding source so it nice to have local USDA support. Key contacts are starting to get curious about AK and what's going on with TCD's, tribes and state leadership.

Tyonek, in partnership with Knik, had funding from NACD to stay connected with other TCD's, so we're just trying to stay connected as we figure out how to build structure. We have a vision that is organic with a blueprint but need support. It does require a physical sponsor, but there can be more resilience in the model if leadership or funding changes when there is shared leadership. We've written a proposal that has not been funded and it does not have official buy in yet.

CD (Conservation Districts)

We need to continue to build our relationships and strengthen ties.

If you don't have a 501c3 someone in the co-op would have to be a physical sponsor to receive grants.

Forest Service

Forest service sent funding to the Denali commission for private forest landowner support. They are working on standing up a program that would work both with forest service original funding and NRCS funding.

The Division of Forestry had other funds over the summer from IRA funding for streambank restoration and invasive species removal and are reviewing applications from the NOFO. This is urban and community forestry funding and NOFO's. There are ongoing projects funded by NRCS and a lot of the forest service funding has gone in to supplemented some of those projects.

There have been several nationwide opportunities for cooperative forestry working their way through the pipeline. They are in the review process and have closed. It a different concept; they are intended to be complementary to NRCS EQIP and other program opportunities.

NRCS follow up

ARS (ag research service) doesn't really impact Alaska funding. As you have ideas bring them to Josh and Cory. ARS is actively involved in research, but NRCS is reminded that our job is to deliver the technical and financial assistance to clients vs being involved in developing the research for the knowledge.

NRCS has had almost all of our applications funded in the last few years. Many other states have only been able to fund 25 %.

Web Soil Survey (SSURGO, STATSGO2): <https://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/app/>

- SoilWeb: -<https://casoilresource.lawr.ucdavis.edu/soilweb-apps/>•Mobile Device Soil Web App – Visit App Store or Google Play to download

- EDIT (Ecological Site Descriptions): <https://edit.jornada.nmsu.edu/>

- SSURGO Portal: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/resources/data-and-reports/ssurgo-portal>

- Geospatial Data Gateway (gSSURGO, STATSGO2) <https://gdg.sc.egov.usda.gov/>

- SSURGO on Demand toolbox - ArcPro -<https://github.com/ncss-tech/SSURGOOnDemandArcPro.git>