



United States Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service
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**MASSACHUSETTS STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

November 21, 2023
9:00am-12:00pm
Meeting Held Virtually

Welcome and Opening Remarks – Dan Wright, NRCS/USDA

The meeting was called to order at 9:00 am by Dan Wright, Massachusetts State Conservationist. Dan welcomed and informed everyone that the meeting was being recorded.

Dan thanked the members who participated in the subcommittee meetings and those who participated in the special IRA meeting.

*If you are interested in viewing the recording of the IRA meeting, please contact Catherine.Magee@usda.gov, Rita.Thibodeau@usda.gov, or Daniel.Wright@usda.gov for the private link.

Dan called upon participants to introduce themselves.

Minutes from the November 29, 2022, meeting of the State Technical Committee were accepted.

Dan spoke of hiring new federal staff including:

1. Public Affairs Specialist (PAS)
2. Interdisciplinary team of 6 who will be servicing the entire state from the Amherst State Office (Positions will include entry level planners, forestry specialist, etc.)
3. Staff for each of the three NRCS Field Office areas

Farm Bill Programs – Rita Thibodeau, NRCS/USDA

Rita provided funding updates.

- Original Allocation for Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) = \$5.8 million
Allocation of additional funds for EQIP Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) = \$1.2 million
 - The EQIP IRA funding has a deadline of June 30th to obligate. We have already obligated the majority of the funds and have received applications that will use up the remaining.
- Original Allocation for Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) = \$1.5 million
Allocation of additional funds for CSP IRA = \$490,000
 - Of the \$1.5 million, we have already obligated all but about \$200,000 back in February. MA was the first state in the nation to obligate all CSP dollars.
- Landscape Conservation Initiative National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) = \$70,000

- Funds will be used for the Westford River Noquochoke Lake NWQI
- EQIP Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) = \$290,000
 - 5% of EQIP Classic allocation – Received more applications than we will be able to fund.
- Original allocation for Agriculture Management Assistance Program (AMA) = \$155,000
Allocation of additional AMA funds through Risk Management Agency (AMA RMA) = \$194,625
 - Except for the ~\$200,000 CSP funds, we have received more applications than we have money.
- The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) notice of funding opportunity was released on May 19, 2023. The deadline for applications is August 18, 2023 (grants.gov).
- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) funds allocations:
 - Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) = \$1,922,068
 - Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) = \$756,607
 - WRE Stewardship = \$14,751

There have been no changes in ACEP funds.
- DEADLINES: EQIP / AMA / RCPP 1734 / IRA CSP / IRA EQIP / IRA WRE (Round 2 Only):
 - Round #1 Application Deadline – 2/17/23
 - Round #2 Application Deadline – 6/2/23
 - Obligation Deadline for All Programs Except ACEP – 6/30/23

Nature Conservancy – Steve Kirk, Coastal Program Director

- Nature Conservancy is a global environmental nonprofit whose mission is to conserve lands and waters on which all life depends.
- Most of the work done here in MA relates to water quality and functional habitat in our coastal waters. Estuaries and coastal waters are critically important to people and nature. The work is rolling toward the climate and biodiversity crises.
- Hoping to advance the use of nature-based solutions to address the challenges in our coastal zone. Many of the challenges stem from what's happening on the land and what is rolling downhill and getting into our coastal waters causing nutrient pollution.
- This year, the Nature Conservancy was awarded a Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) by NRCS for aquaculture restoration with a focus on shellfish habitat. Shellfish play a critical role in removing nitrogen and nutrient pollution that reach the coastal waters, which has a cascading affect to improving the health of coastal waters. The problem in MA is that most of the shellfish and oysters are gone and with that, the myriad of ecosystem services they provide. The goal is to increase the population of shellfish which would lead to returning the ecosystem services they provide. The Nature Conservancy with the financial assistance of NRCS is working on identifying restoration sites and the municipalities to identify where it is feasible.

State Resource Conservationist – Catherine Magee, NRCS-USDA

Catherine announced some technical updates.

- NRCS is starting the process of identifying new practices, enhancements, and new scenarios for FY24 for implementation on October 1, 2023. We are looking at adding some new scenarios for forest trails and landings.

We are proposing adding some scenarios, temporary stream crossings, trail erosion control without vegetation (We currently only have with vegetation) and water bars on skid trails for trail erosion without vegetation. We are looking at paying for landings which we currently do not pay for.

- NRCS is currently in the process of gathering information from the National Office for some interim practices that are to be determined.
 - New interim practices that will be offered are planting for soil microbiology management and bale grazing. More information to come from National on these practices.
 - If you have any ideas on practices you have seen in other states that we could adopt or processes that we can improve on contact Catherine.Magee@usda.gov.
- Potential adjustments we may make for FY24 are source water priority watersheds.
 - NRCS is proposing to increase source water protection areas from the 20% that our state is nationally allowed, to 32%. This proposal is due to the National office in August. If you have any interest in participating in a source water subcommittee or would like to show your support on the subject, contact Catherine.Magee@usda.gov. We are looking to get partners involved as we would need to submit a waiver to National and having partner support would make a stronger case for the adjustment.
 - Currently we have a 75% cost share rate for general customers and a 90% cost share rate for customers that are historically underserved or new beginning farmers. If the waiver is approved, customers that are geographically located in the source water protection areas will receive a 90% cost share.
- A subcommittee determines the 10 high priority practices annually. These are the practices that have a high priority resource concern. If a customer submits an application that includes at least 1 of the 10 high priority practices, they will receive a 90% cost share for that practice.
 - This year the Forestry and Wildlife subcommittee has identified 5 high priority practices that they would like to propose for FY24.
 - A survey will be sent out the week of 6/26/23 where individuals can vote on the top 10 high priority practices to be used in FY24 out of the 15 high priority practices considered, the 5 proposed by the Forestry and Wildlife subcommittee and the 10 that have been used in the past two years. The results of the survey as well as available funding and the needs of the state will aid the NRCS State Conservationist, Dan Wright, on determining the 10 high priority practices that will be used in FY24.

Urban Agriculture Subcommittee, Jack Loomis, NRCS-USDA

Jack summarized subcommittee meeting held on 6/6/23.

- Discussed discrepancies and what NRCS pays for with cost shares and opportunities to go through the process of proposing adjustments.
- Always encourages open dialogue and opportunities to share. They can collaborate on upcoming events where they can support each other.
- Introduced the new Urban Agriculture Outreach Specialist, Charlene Xu, who will facilitate the future subcommittee meetings.
- Announced that the National Office Federal Advisory Committee applications are due 7/15/23

for those who are interested. This is a committee of 12 members. Contact Jack Loomis, John.Loomis@usda.gov, for details.

Easement Subcommittee, Presented by Rita Thibodeau, NRCS-USDA

- The Easement Subcommittee is a new committee with approximately 25 members. Rita announced that Jamie Pottner from American Farmland Trust (AFT) is the Chair. Rita will be the POC on the NRCS side.
- Upcoming TEAMS meeting scheduled for Wednesday June 28, 2023, from 1:00pm-2:30pm.
- If you are interested in participating on the subcommittee, please contact Jamie Pottner, jpottner@farmland.org

Soil Health Committee, Kate Parsons, Chair, NRCS-USDA

- Carol Roselle, AFT – subcommittee co-chair.
- Contact Kate.Parsons@usda.gov if interested in joining the committee.
- Goal is to increase the adoption of soil health practices naturally and to address natural resource concerns to improve farm viability and improve climate resiliency. The committee hopes to identify soil health practice implementation challenges, needs, and opportunities.
- Discuss looking for new scenario suggestions and also Farm Bill funding priorities.
- The subcommittee is a good space to convene with the whole soil health community in the state and subject matter experts. The experts' focus will be to efficiently promote soil health with organizational collaboration, reduce redundancy, and this would be a good way to provide outreach and get more people promoting the practices that NRCS funds.
- Discuss payment rates and determine whether the payment rates are appropriate.
- Mentioned the importance of collaboration with communities. Examples:
 - Challenges of planting into a dense, hairy vetch cover crop, and the importance of a dense, hairy vetch cover crop for utilization of organic nitrogen or reduce chemical inputs and reduce costs for farmers.
 - Obtain general advice on cover crops, interseeded cover crop on a corn silage field.
- Some soil-based practices:
 - Living Mulch - A living mulch is a carpet of plants spaced close together. They have many of the same benefits as traditional organic mulches, such as wood chips. Living mulches suppress weeds, help keep your soil temperature stable, prevent erosion, and some can even improve soil fertility.
 - Soil Carbon Amendment - Improves the physical, chemical, and biological conditions of soil in the short term. Typically derived from plant residues and/or animal byproducts, soil organic amendments can include compost, biochar, and other regionally appropriate carbon-based materials
 - Soil Health Testing
 - Nutrient and Pest Management
- NRCS has the ability to pay for soil health management plans developed by TSP.

Resource Soil Scientist, David Zimmermann, NRCS-USDA

David explained the update to the MA wetland compliance procedures, particularly new state off-site methods. State methods were based off a national template. Developed by and for NRCS staff in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island.

- Background of the Food Security Act of 1985 and its subsequent amendments, also known as the 1985 Farm Bill, that established the Swamp Buster Provisions, also known as Wetland Conservation aspects of the Farm Bill with the crux of it being to maintain eligibility for USDA programs.
 - Participants must self-certify that they have not produced crops on converted wetlands after December 23, 1985, and they have not made production of a crop possible in a wetland after November 28, 1990.
 - The Farm Service Agency (FSA) has the authority to determine who is eligible and NRCS has a technical role.
 - Process:
 1. The participant requests an evaluation by filing an AD-1026 form with the FSA.
 2. FSA will send it to NRCS, who is responsible for providing the certified wetland determination, which will inform the participants on whether they do have wetlands, and if so where on their land they are located. This aids the participant with making informed land management decisions and staying in compliance with federal regulations.

Traditionally this has been an on-site process where the determination would be made in the field.

Several guidance documents are relied upon for the determination. The 1987 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Wetland Delineation Manual, may be known to some as the Corps Manual, the Regional Supplement for the Northeast and North Central states, and the National Food Security Act manual. These all contain provisions and steps for providing the off-site methods, either whole or in part.

- The updated state off-site methods document that was created formalizes the information from the manuals and makes the information easier to understand.
 - There are 3 steps in the determination process whether on-site or off-site.
 1. Identify if there are wetlands on the ground in the area.
 2. Assign a Wetland Compliance label.
 3. Develop a Wetland Determination Map.
- The off-site methods document has been sent off to National Headquarters where there will be batching of the off-site methods from various states and posted to the Federal Register for a 30-day public comment period.
- Once the state receives the comments, the determination will be made on whether any revisions need to be made. The document will then be finalized and adopted for use.
- Please contact Maggie.Payne@usda.gov with any questions.

Catherine Magee thanked everyone for participating in the state tech committee meeting and for providing input on NRCS programs.

The meeting adjourned at 12:05pm.

About the State Technical Committee

The State Technical Committee advises the NRCS State Conservationist on the technical guidelines necessary to implement the conservation provisions of the 2018 Farm Bill. Committee membership includes representatives from federal and state agriculture and environmental agencies, agricultural producers, UMass Extension, nonprofit organizations, and agribusiness.

State Technical Committee meetings are open to the public and are held as often as necessary to advise and implement NRCS conservation programs. For information about upcoming meetings, please contact Catherine Magee at the NRCS State Office at 413-253-4365 or catherine.magee@usda.gov. More information and meeting minutes are available on the MA NRCS web site: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/conservation-by-state/massachusetts/massachusetts-state-technical-committee-0>