

State Technical Committee



Natural Resources Conservation Service

New Jersey State Technical Committee
220 Davidson Avenue 4th Floor, Somerset, NJ 08873

Meeting Date: Tuesday, June 29, 2023

Meeting Location: Coyle Field, Barnegat NJ

Evan Madlinger gathered all participants at Bass River State Forest and directed the group to the Field Tour portion of the meeting. Sites for the visit included Allen Road and Washington Turnpike.

Those present included:

Katura N Wright
Michelle Pedano
Nicole Ciccaglione
David Clapp
Morgan Devine
John Hodge
Evan Madlinger
Sarah Fenwick
Gail Bartok
Antonia Gabi Arcandi
Jill Ott
Anthony Zotynia

Katelyn Colon
Kristin Adams
Don Donnelly
Kevin Killeen
Kathy Hale
Haley Jackson
Zeynan Qiu
Katie Lynch
Joanna Caponossi
Lucas Pick
Mitchell Mickley

Riley Blankenship
Bryan Stimpson
Michael Kent
Edwin Muniz
Betsy McShane
Arelys Ortiz
Mike Flood
Frank Minch
Ryan Hasko
Virginia Lamb
Jennifer McNally

The Field Tour began at Allen Road. NJ Forest Fire Service shared insight on the notoriously dangerous wildfire incidents that have occurred onsite there. They went on to discuss how the conditions there make control of wildfires especially dangerous and difficult to contain and control. Neighboring landowners have been working with the NJ Forest Fire Service to manage their overstocked forest stands in an effort to reduce surface fuels and maintain the health of the forest. It was discussed that Spring is the wildfire season in NJ due to the forest canopy still being open from winter, but with warmer temperatures allowing the sun to reach and raise the temperature of fuel on the ground.

The next stop on the tour was Washington Turnpike. Washington Turnpike is one of the major utility roads on the south side of Wharton State Forest, beginning near Basto Visitor's center. Here participants saw an ideal layout with both sides of the road flanked by open forest meadows. These plots have been intensely managed via tree thinning, brush management and prescribed burning, and serve as a guideline for work that would greatly benefit the Allen Road properties.

Participants then travelled to Coyle Field to conduct the business meeting in the training room.



2:00 Coyle Field staff welcomed participants to Coyle Field and shared the history of its use by the NJ Forest Fire Service in its wildfire and aerial firefighting efforts.

Introductions – Evan Madlinger, NRCS

Evan welcomed participants to the meeting and gave an overview of the agenda. Introductions were made around the room.

Farm Service Agency Program Update, Sarah Fenwick, FSA

Sarah gave a brief overview of the status of FSA Conservation and Emergency Programs including CRP (Conservation Reserve Program), CREP (Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program), SAFE (State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement), ECP (Emergency Conservation Program) and EFRP (Emergency Forest Restoration Program).

As of this reporting date, Sarah provided updates to signup types, acres, and acreage percentage.

- Continuous: 20.72 acres, 1%
- Continuous CREP: 656.96 acres, 37%
- Continuous SAFE: 831.4 acres, 47%
- General: 88.77 acres, 5%
- Grasslands: 172.53 acre, 10%

The total CRP acres is 1,770.38 at 100%. Total number of contracts is 278, and average rental rate is \$92/ac.

In addition to the updates on current signup types, Sarah also provided a 5-year overview of expiring acres.

- Expiring 09/30/2023: 115.72 acres, 24 contracts
- Expiring 09/30/2024: 55.19 acres, 11 contracts
- Expiring 09/30/2025: 170.77 acres, 30 contracts
- Expiring 09/30/2026: 138.35 acres, 33 contracts
- Expiring 09/30/2027: 150.05 acres, 20 contracts

CRP is a voluntary program that allows producers to take environmentally sensitive agricultural land out of production and devote it to conservation. Participants are paid annual rental payments during the contract duration between 10 and 15 years. There are three signup types within CRP: General, Continuous, and Grassland.

General signup occurs annually during an announced enrollment period. Offers are ranked based on the Environmental Benefits Index, which includes concerns such as wildlife habitat, water quality and air quality.

Continuous CRP Signup has no enrollment period so producers can sign up at any time and are not subject to competitive bidding. The total number of Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) contracts is 208 with an average rental rate of \$160 per acre. The State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) program restores vital habitat and creates food sources through the establishment of wetlands, grasses and trees to enhance important wildlife populations. SAFE is only available in certain areas of the state and has historically contained three different proposals: Development of Landscape Scale Agricultural Heritage and Habitat Conservation Plans (NJAS) with 214.18 contract acres; Grassland Habitat Restoration and Management (CWF) with 232.93 contract acres; Raritan-Piedmont Wildlife Habitat Partnership (RPWHP) Implementation of Grassland Conservation Plan with 225.02 contract acres. As of the FY 2023 signup, all 3 initiatives have been combined into one signup.

CRP Grasslands is a working lands program, allowing grazing land, including rangeland and pastureland, to remain in production while farmers enhance the sustainability of their operation. The total number of CRP Grassland contracts is 5 with an average rental rate of \$20 per acre and 172.53 total contract acres.

Emergency Programs include the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) and Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP). ECP provides emergency funding and technical assistance to farmers to rehabilitate farmland and conservation structures damaged by natural disaster. This program is being used currently in Hunterdon & Somerset Counties. At this time all participants have finished implementing their Conservation Plan practices and are almost all paid. Monmouth County currently has an active signup through June 30th for the tornado event which occurred on April 1st. EFRP assists owners of non-industrial private forests in restoring forest health damaged by natural disasters. Mercer and Gloucester County participants are in the process of implementing their practices and being paid. Monmouth County has an active signup through June 30th for the April 1st tornado.

A handout with this information was offered.

FY23 Farm Bill Programs Update, Gail Bartok, NRCS

Gail shared that two signups are currently open, and their application deadlines are listed below:
Aquaculture RCPP signup through July 15, 2023
RCPP Partnership Proposals due August 18, 2023

Also highlighted was that funding through the Inflation Reduction Act is expected to increase exponentially through 2028.

Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership, Betsy McShane, NRCS

Betsy shared that NJ's proposal for the FY2023 Joint Chiefs Landscape Restoration Partnership has been accepted. This partnership enables NRCS and the NJ Forest Service to collaborate with agricultural producers and forest landowners to reduce wildfire threats, protect water quality and improve wildlife habitat for at-risk species within the Pine Barrens.

As one of the most hazardous wildland fuel types in the nation, the Pine Barrens will benefit from this 3 year program through the development of landscape level Fireshed Planning Areas in coordination with the USDA Forest Service "Development and Application of the Fireshed Registry" methods; implementation of forestry management activities on state and private lands for the purposes of reducing wildfire risk in municipal watersheds and the wildland-urban interface, implementation of carbon defense activities, improvement of habitat for threatened and endangered species, and mitigation of the effects of Southern pine beetle; and the rolling out of a public outreach campaign to promote public awareness and program participation. Partners in this project include New Jersey Audubon, New Jersey Bureau of Land Management, New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJDEP), New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, New Jersey Forest Fire Service, New Jersey Forest Service, and New Jersey State Park Service.

Local Work Group Effort update, Evan Madlinger, NRCS

Evan began sharing the results captured at NRCS's statewide Local Work Group meetings which occurred in each NRCS field office service area, with the Columbus and Freehold offices combining their meetings. Local Soil Conservation Districts partnered with NRCS in helping coordinate the meetings.

Some changes of note to NRCS NJ policy since the FY2020 Local Work Group Meetings for irrigation include the allowance of assistance with multiple High-Efficiency irrigation systems on the same land, the allocation of \$1 million to irrigation of the \$8 million budget, and the signup deadline being moved to September for earlier obligations. Also, irrigation wells can be paid for if addressing concerns of water quantity/quality. It was asked if this addresses questions brought up about irrigation at the last Committee meeting, which Gail confirmed has been programmatically addressed. Early Start Waivers are accepted for the following conditions: alleviation of imminent/significant environmental problems, prevention of loss of life or property, unusual or extreme weather constraints.

Advance Payments can be made to Historically Underserved producers (Beginning Farmers, Socially Disadvantaged, Veterans, and Limited Resource) at 50% of the contracted items. Advance payments are not offered for the RCPP or AMA programs. A question was brought as to if this is a national or state rule to which Evan clarified that it is a national rule.

NRCS staffing increases include a new District Conservationist and two Natural Resource Specialists (Frenchtown Field office), a State Cost Share Soil Conservationist (State Office), and Watershed Coordinator (State Office). Hiring is currently in progress for an Outreach Coordinator, RCPP Coordinator and Watershed Engineer (State Office), Natural Resource Specialist, and Engineer (Frenchtown), and an Irrigation Civil Engineering Technician.

Urban Updates and Local Work Group Results, Morgan Devine, NRCS

\$75,000 has been set aside for NRCS FY2023 CTA Community Garden grants for which selections are currently pending.

A new scenario for the Composting Facility (317) practice will be available which accounts for large scale composting machinery.

Local Work Group (LWG) concerns included Food Insecurity/Low Food Access, which are being addressed by available grants; Control of Land, which NRCS is working with partners at municipal scale; and Cumbersome paperwork, which is being addressed currently with one-on-one assistance. It was asked if there was an official definition of "Urban" which Morgan clarified has intentionally not been defined within NRCS for the purposes of inclusion. However, NRCS NJ program rankings do screen for environmental justice, density location and other applicable qualifiers to guide Urban funding. Rutgers is working on creating a definition of "urban" for state programs.

Deer Fence, Evan Madlinger, NRCS; Frank Minch, Dave Clapp, State of NJ

Deer fence is currently an available practice with NRCS only for the temporary purpose of regenerating forest. It was noted that in the past NRCS had assisted organic farms in installing deer fence, but that is no longer an available practice. Some concerns with deer fencing include wildlife blockage and damage by trees.

The State of NJ currently has programs for both preserved and non-preserved farmland to apply for funding assistance with deer fence. Frank Minch discussed that the non-preserved farmland program can assist with \$200/acre up to \$20,000

per applicant. Restrictions currently allow only for owner/operators to apply, though they are looking into changing those to allow renters of land to apply. Income restrictions currently also apply. Dave Clapp discussed that preserved farms can apply for funding assistance at 50% of their actual costs up to \$20,000. A concern with fence installation is SADC's requirement for corners to be wrapped for stability whereas many installers only staple the corners for efficiency. NJSTART account registration is required for both programs.

Prescribed Burning and Agroforestry, Don Donnelly, NRCS

There are currently 2 million acres of forestland in NJ. Cost share is available on prescribed burning across the state. With this, air quality, parcel size, and cultural viewpoints tend to be concerns that restrict burning in the northern areas of NJ when compared to South Jersey.

Agroforestry is field gaining traction which can include the following climate smart practices: Alley cropping, Forest Farming/Multi-story cropping, Riparian Buffer, Windbreak, and Silvopasture.

Local Work Group results, Evan Madlinger, Bryan Stimpson, NRCS

Available practices in amendments to soil include: Gypsum (333), Soil Carbon Amendment (808/336) which includes biochar, and Amending with Lime (805) designed to target no-till operations.

Decision on if new landowners can receive payments on land that has had cover crop assistance is being discussed. CSP does offer expansion of cover crop assistance beyond 3 years of single species + 3 years of multiple species allowed through EQIP.

Equipment-adjacent practices available: Variable rate spreading under Nutrient (590) and Pest (595) Management, No-till (329) for grain crops, Reduced-till (345) for vegetable crops; CSP enhancements Precision Pesticide Application (E595A) and Automated IWM (E449D). Equipment sharing may be difficult as transportation, weather and ideal plant times are similar. No-till drills for practices such as wildlife plantings are more practical and available through RC&D, New Jersey Audubon, and US Fish and Wildlife.

National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) available in Upper Salem/ Upper Cohansey to reduce phosphorus with a \$350,000/year allocation. Lower Musconetcong and Spruce Run areas are pending, would like one more. Source Water Protection watersheds have been designated in approx. 20% of New Jersey and provides a higher cost share rate to producers implementing designated water quality practices within the watershed.

Fish Raceway & Tank (398) in being adjusted for aquaculture producers with a focus on habitat restoration. Aquaculture practices are not currently available for CSP as water is not an eligible land use.

NRCS cannot pay for production equipment.

Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training (CRAFT)- a group originally for apprentices on farms to see other operations, now a networking group for beginning farmers, typically small-scale, organic.

Other concerns brought up at LWG meetings:

- Low CPA/DIA.CEMA and TSP rates
- S&W State Cost Share Approval turn-around time
- Plans for preserved farms
- Generally happy with Field Office support
- Fewer than 12 active foresters in NJ with 7000 private woodland landowners needing plans

Open Discussion/Questions for presenters, Evan Madlinger, NRCS

Urban Ag is of interest

Saltwater intrusion a concern

Concerns of preserved land/ state-held land not being managed (preservation vs conservation)

- FSA's ECP program now allows for State Land to apply

- Non-profits can lease state land to restore through NRCS/FSA programs

NRCS programs for greenhouse operators

- Tailwater recovery, energy efficiency practices

- CIG Grants open in March every year, \$400K spent in 2023

- Raised beds to avoid soil toxicity

Bog Turtle Camera Trapping

Urban Forestry

Green Infrastructure

- NJIT with partner universities have received a C Grant for green infrastructure

Enhanced partner collaboration suggested through monthly subcommittee meetings
State soil protection on preserved farms now available for public comment through August 26, 2023
Inland flood and stormwater legislation is incoming

4:01 Adjourn, Evan Madlinger, NRCS