**Idaho State Technical Advisory Committee Minutes**

**March 8, 2022 @ 9:00am – noon (MST)**

Bruce Sandoval, State Conservationist Engineer, NRCS, started the meeting at 9:02 AM – Welcomed the group, briefly went over agenda, introduced Curtis Elke, State Conservationist.

**Opening Remarks and NRCS Update** – ***State Conservationist, Curtis Elke, NRCS*** *–* Introduced himself, went over his position in serving on a detail for the last 5 months for West National Technology Support Center (WNTSC) in Portland, Oregon. Curtis will return to serve as State Conservation the week of March 14, 2022; he is looking forward getting back into his position.

Curtis gave a little overview of what goes on at the center, and the purpose of these centers, one is to strengthen the science and technology support for NRCS programs and activities. It’s been enjoyable for Curtis to get to know these folks, as well as the resources that we have available to us.

Curtis gave an update on the pandemic, it’s been a challenging last couple of years, there are some offices still mandating the mask wearing due to high hospitalizations. April 18th supervisors are expected to return to the office; May 2nd, non-supervisors are expected as well.

Curtis shared some of the NRCS Chief’s priorities as well as Curtis’ priorities. Some of the national priorities are:

* To ensure equity in the delivery of implementation of all NRCS programs and services;
* Increase assistance for climate smart agriculture and forestry and build climate resiliency;
* To expand conservation tools and support to address the needs of urban agriculture;
* To have a complete and diverse workforce;
* Enhance and leverage partnerships.

Curtis’ include:

* Getting to the field and doing conservation planning; goal of increasing the numbers of plans written to 900-1000 statewide each year;
* Continue to hire additional staff, primarily Conservational Planners and Engineers;
* Promote all programs;
* Work to increase partnerships and outreach;
* Have focus on Urban Ag and small acreage;

Cutis touched on the importance of Conservation Planning, by strengthening the planning process and partnership workforce, Greg Becker has been leading in this effort for Idaho, Curtis also wanted to give him a lot of credit for leading in this effort.

The Chief is planning on coming out and visiting Idaho this summer, looking forward having him here, there will be an opportunity to invite some folks to join and get to meet while he is here. There are some project areas that Curtis would love to show him, he asked to please reach out to Mindi Rambo to share what projects anyone has in mind.

Curtis talked about the infrastructure bill and what it provides: 500 million dollars was appropriated for watershed and flood prevention operations to remain available until expended; 118 million dollars for water rehabilitation program to remain available until expended; and an additional 300 million dollars for emergency watershed protection. NRCS has announced plans to invest more than 166.5 million of that funding to 23 states, Idaho being one of them; Curtis is very happy that Bruce and our team put together some project proposals, submitted them and got approved.

The National Conservation Planning Partnership (NCPP) has been working with the help of our subcommittee to help develop solutions for the challenges ahead for conservation and agriculture. NCPP launched a new website, [NCPP.info](https://www.nationalconservationplanningpartnership.com/training-and-certification/), the website provides a wealth of information.

Our communication and messaging team is developing new marketing products and providing staff a way to share new ideas and approaches to conservation planning. Our performance goals and accountability team are reassessing how we measure performance and developing ways to measure the value of planning practices.

Curtis commented that there’s an additional 3500 staff that they’re looking to bring on through NRCS and FPAC within the next few years.

Curtis stated ACEP in FY22 as a nation will be investing 350 million dollars, we will be investing 544 million dollars in CSP, as well as 1.27 billion dollars in EQIP this year.

Curtis wanted to thank everyone again and is looking forward to getting back as the State Conservationist, he also wanted to Amie Miller a huge thank you for serving as Acting State Conservationist, she’s done a tremendous job, and greatly appreciates his entire leadership team for stepping up in his absence.

**Introduction and Remarks** – ***Matt Gellings, State Executive Director, FSA*** *–* introduced himself, welcomed everyone in the meeting, excited that offices are opening back up to welcome our farmers and ranchers back in.

Matt is looking forward to partner with NRCS, on another note, he mentioned FSA is hiring, looking to fill the offices with more staff.

FSA has county committees which include local farmers and ranchers that sit in our counties in Idaho, FSA has 29 county offices, and around 105 employees. FSA also has a state committee, Matt is in the process right now getting 5 members around this state, this is one of his top priorities.

FSA has a lot of other programs that’ll help our farmers, ranchers and forest landowners invest in improving and expanding their agricultural operations. FSA programs assist producers from impacts of natural disasters and market fluctuation, they also play a crucial role in supporting our rural prosperity, improving the environment, and contributing to US National Security by helping to insure safe and affordable food supply. In the last few years everyone has seemed to want to know where their food comes from, Matt encourages everyone to get out there and support that.

FSA farm loans is a big program, its available for producers who want to get started in production agriculture, or make investments in existing operations, but are unable to obtain credit from private lenders.

The conservation programs give landowners the tools and resources to protect environmental sensitive land, restore grasslands and forest leading to cleaner air and water.

Matt is very excited to be in his position.

**FSA Update** **– *Jenny Peirsol, Conservation Specialist, FSA*** *–* Welcomed everyone and introduced herself, gave updates on the general sign ups, the Secretary announced a general sign-up late January through March 11, prior to sign ups, they had a call with National office to go over updates and new features that were going to be incorporated into the general sign up and continuous sign up. National updated how they were going to calculate their erodibility index (EI) score, the reason for this was because they wanted FSA to be more in line with the way NRCS calculates the erosion. A few weeks into the sign up, the National office came back and said there was a glitch, and they temporarily paused the sign-up process on February 24 to fix the issues. On March 2, National reopened the software for the general sign up and the continuous signup.

The good news for Idaho, only the general CRP signup and continuous HELI program uses the EI calculator, Jenny feels that they’re going to be okay, once the national office reopened the software, they are allowing all the original offers taken during January 31 through February 24 from the county office to be edited until April 1st, to pull in the new ei score to make it accurate for the producer.

Grasslands CRP signup period was announced and will take place on April 4 through May 15.

Jenny mentioned with the issues of the pause, she doesn’t see this changing any workload, it shouldn’t change any timelines, other than maybe getting the results back from the general signup a few weeks after the expected date.

This is the year with the most expiring CRP acres in Idaho over the last ten-years, with about 125-130 thousand acres expiring in 2022. There is a lot of activity through the general signup. A lot of those acres expiring are SAFE acres in southeastern Idaho.

**EPA updates on WOTUS, 9th Circuit & Idaho CAFO NPDES permit, etc** **– *Nick Peak, Region 10 Agricultural Advisor, Environmental Protection Agency*** *–* Nick welcomed everyone, and introduced himself, gave an update on the Idaho CAFO NPDES permit, said they got the permit back, and they’re currently working on incorporating monitoring provisions for subsurface discharges from waste containment structures in the production area, and monitoring provisions for runoff from land applications where manure is applied in fields. Right now, they’re trying to figure it out, they’re meeting with a variety of people in groups. So far they’ve met with NRCS National, NRCS Idaho, and more meetings are scheduled to figure all this out. If anyone has questions, feel free to reach out to him, any feedback on this topic is welcomed.

Nick also gave EPA on WOTUS updates, there’s a couple of federal court decisions, in August and September, two US District Courts vacated and remanded the previous Navigable Waters Protection rule, the EPA and Army Corps of Engineers halted implementation of that rule and are interpreting “Waters of the United States” consistent with pre 2015 regulatory until further notice.

In early December EPA and Army Corps of Engineers proposed a rule to codify those pre 2015 definitions, the one thing Nick wanted to point out, all agriculture exclusions, such as prior converted cropland and all exemptions that were already in the Clean Water Act will remain in place and unchanged.

On February 24, EPA and Army Corp of Engineers announced a selection of 10 regional round tables. The purpose and goal of this is to receive feedback from participants – and provide feedback to the agencies on how well this works in different regions of the county and to provide experiences on dealing with or navigating WOTUS.

There are 2 out of the 10 regional round tables that are applicable to Idaho, the first one is being hosted by the California Farm Bureau, and the second will be hosted by the Wyoming county commissioner’s association – announcement of these will come late spring, mid-summer, and will be virtual.

**NRCS** **Programs Update** **– *Lori Kassib, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, NRCS –*** Welcomed everyone, introduced herself, and gave an update on Programs. Right now is crunch time, ranking deadlines were last Friday, March 4th – she had a powerpoint presentation with important dates for each program, and will have the contact information for each program as well. Lori went over the new program that will be rolling out in second signups, The Environmental Quality Incentives Program-Conservation Incentives Contracts (EQIP-CIC).

RCPP will have a new project being funded, called Boa Ogoi in southeastern Idaho – looking forward to this project, first one to stand alone.

**Urban Agriculture and NRCS** – ***Greg Becker, State Resource Conservationist, NRCS*** *–* introduced himself*,* and welcomed everyone, gave an update on what Idaho is doing for Urban Ag, it is a big priority for us, Greg included an Idaho Urban Ag Land Guidance that will be included with the meeting minutes.

There will be a State Urban Conservationist, the position opened and closed in the month of February, that person will be available to all our teams across the state, the big job there is to help each of the teams to start or developed their Urban Ag program.

There will be a couple of other teammates, David Anderson, he will be able to work alongside our Urban State Conservationist, we have another person, her name is Cheryl Simmons, who has a wealth of knowledge and experience in her career and has a very strong interest in for Urban Ag.

One other update, as soon as this State Conservationist comes in with NRCS, we will develop a subcommittee to the STAC, it will be made up of multiple partners.

Ronda Hirnyck made a comment, Ariel Agenbroad would very much like to serve on the subcommittee, Greg said will most definably reach out and further discuss.

**When a Weed is not a Weed** – ***Derek Tilley, Plant Materials Specialist, Aberdeen Plant Materials Center, NRCS*** *–* Derek introduced himself, shared a presentation slide show on When a weed is not a weed.

**Legislator Updates – *Casey Attebery*** *– Introduced himself on behalf of Senator Crapo***,** he gave us three updates, first one on the OMNIBUS spending deal to get us through the remained of the fiscal year, a few issues their working through one of them being the aid and military support for the Ukraine, and the second, ongoing COVID details. Hopefully within the next few days an OMNIBUS deal will come through.

Casey went over the Build Back Better Act, $90 billion of Agriculture related funding, a big portion of that is to be funneled through some of the NRCS programs.

The Farm Bill preauthorization process has gotten underway; it’s a two-year process and won’t expire until September 2023 – right now, their hoping to wrap up the current Congress, have an election and start a new Congress before that deadline comes up.

**Mike Mathews** - gave an update on behalf of Senator Risch’s office –he’s currently working on a bill to increase oil production, and get the Keystone Pipeline back moving again. He’s also introduced a bill called Never Yielding Europe’s Territory (NYET) – aid to assistance to the Ukraine, particularly on military front.

Mike wanted to congratulate Matt Gelllings for his appointed to State Executive Director, FSA.

**Round Table –** Bruce called an open discussion, and asked Nathan Poulson, Civil Engineer at the State Office to introduce himself. Nathan is currently working on updating some of their practice standards, one being (313) waste storage facility, it’s a top priority, if anyone has any feedback or is interested in helping them with this update, please reach out to Nathan or Bruce.

Matt Gellings closing remark asked everyone to get out there and thank a farmer 3 times a day.

**Close and Next Meeting –** Bruce closed the meeting by reminding everyone the next meeting is tentatively scheduled for Tuesday, June 7, 2022 – his hope is that the next meeting will be in person at the USDA conference room.