

January 23, 2024 – MO NRCS State Technical Committee Virtual Meeting

In attendance: Josh Colligan, Amy Hamilton, Paul McDonald, Robert Stout, Ashley Johnson, Elena Hoover, Nate Goodrich, Ken Henderson, Nick Cuchetti, Bob Ball, Andrew Rackers, Eric Gramlich, Landry Jones, Kaylee Schlosser, Nathan Tutt, Casey Bergthold, Scott Edwards, William Haworth, Lisa Potter, Selma Mascaro, Ken Sudduth, Erin Holmes, Joe Aull, Andrea Rice, Jesse Linscott, Jake Wilson, Susan Mammen, Hank Stelzer, Nancy Walker, Drew Walters, Brien Darby, Emily Beck, Frank Oberle, Reagan Bluel, Kurt Boeckmann, Nashad Carrington, David Baker, Doug Spaunhorst, Ethan Miller, Chris Hamilton, Hannah Hemmelgarn, John ? (not sure if this was John Murphy, John Weber, or another John entirely), Travis Sieve, Tim Gibbons, Sarah Powell, Ken Henderson, Jef Hodges, Diane Bradley-Redden, and Jennifer Eggemeyer.

9:00am – Nate welcomes us all into the meeting.

Scott Edwards with NRCS.

- Back from national headquarters temporary detail, glad to be back. Praise for Ashley Johnson as Acting in Scott's absence.
- Biggest news is the large amount of funding we are getting this Fiscal Year thru extension of the Farm Bill and the Inflation Reduction Act, almost doubled our conservation allocation.
- Working on better working relationships with SWCD to make State Cost Share work more efficiently and effectively, getting more staff into offices while trying to streamline the work at the same time, and have better communication with all of SWCD and NRCS across Missouri.
- April's Face-to-Face State Technical Committee meeting moving to May 7th, and that calendar invite will be modified. We are also adding a field tour to occur in the afternoon after the State Technical Committee meeting is over.

Joe Aull with FSA.

- Busy, dealing with drought, particularly with the Livestock Forage Program, paying out \$173 million across Missouri.
- Also have ELAP program to transport livestock to water and feed, or water and feed to livestock, and the sign up deadline for ELAP is January 30th.
- FSA still cleaning up emergency relief program payments for emergencies in 2022.
- Urban Ag pilot programs going on in KC, KS/MO and STL. Only 27 pilot cities for the Urban Ag program, and we have 2 of them here in Missouri!
- Lisa Allen is retiring, and she will be missed.
- Turned over to Drew Walters (FSA's new conservation chief) with CRP updates. 670k acres of CRP in MO, #5 in nation for annual payments last year, paying out roughly \$99 million. Coming up on national cap for acres allowed under the Farm Bill (27 million acres). First CRP application deadline is March 15th, and that is coming up soon. Contact Drew with any questions at drew.walters@usda.gov.
- Drew is looking to make a CRP subcommittee, for input on recommending and primary nesting season dates, reviewing cost share rates, and specifics of certain wetland practices. If you are interested in joining the subcommittee, contact Drew.
- Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) served over 20 counties this past year, with 17 counties experiencing drought, 2 tornado, 2 flood, and 1 strong storm.

Nathan Tutt with Rural Development.

- Over 40 programs managed by RD, programs ranging from housing to community facilities to businesses.
- Value Added Producer Grant (VAPG) program just got funded, 90 day window for producers to apply for a planning grant or a working capital grant, up to \$250K available to each applicant, via a monthly reimbursement, up to 36 months in length, not really meant for startup farmers. In total, about \$35 million for the VAPG this year.
- REAP (Rural Energy for America Program) is also growing, been around for 20 years, up to 50% reimbursed of the project which was increased by Inflation Reduction Act from 25%. Roughly \$16 million available for REAP this year.
- Please contact Nathan if you have any questions, nathan.tutt@usda.gov.

Elena Hoover with Food Security Act Compliance update.

- Reviewing ephemeral gully erosion (over sheet and rill erosion), looking for feedback from partners.
- Current guidance calculates erosion using the Revised Universal Soil Loss Equation (RUSLE 2), which manages sheet and rill erosion but does not work for ephemeral gully erosion. We need a significant reduction in all erosions, but how do we know if we are having an effect, or how much of an effect, if we have no tool to measure it?
- Established in 2017, based on audit conducted in 2015-2016, Missouri has been using guidance from HQ released in Circular 180-17-1, delineating between classic and ephemeral gullies (classic – cannot be farmed across; ephemeral – can still be farmed across and is considered cropland), and allowed variances. This guidance was very confusing and time consuming, for both our employees (NRCS and FSA) and our producers, and even with more employees working the contracts covering these tracts that have identified ephemeral erosion areas, still not enough work is getting done to remediate the ephemeral erosion. Too much pushing the problem down the road.
- Looking for input from State Technical Committee. If we follow any proposed changes, won't go into effect until 2025 due to all the lead up work necessary. Tasking Soils Subcommittee and come back to May's F2F meeting to present to group and have some more discussion.
- Erin Holmes asked "we should pursue being able to offer assistance to landowners to address the erosion. It sounds like there is a need to help them adjust conservation plans and reduce erosion." Lena replied that yes we have many avenues to help producers address all types of erosion, like cost share programs. The issue is we are still helping the producers, even the ones who are not in compliance by allowing more erosion than allowed for by law, but we need to bring them back into compliance in regards to the erosion.
- Scott ask for input from the committee on possible directions moving forward. Scott is going to send the issue to the Soil Health Subcommittee for future discussion and to develop a set of recommendations to be considered by the full committee in our May meeting.

Susan Mammen for FY23 NRCS Programs Update.

- In 2023, NRCS had 396 CSP contracts, obligation \$27.6 million and covering 238,000 acres. AgLand (cropland, pasture, hayland) comprised 288 contracts and 220,000 acres of the total; non-industrial private forest land (NIPF) made up the rest, 108 contracts at 18,000 acres.
- For CSP IRA, NRCS in 2023 had 111 contracts (97 Ag Land, 14 NIPF), 45,000 acres (44,000/1,000), and \$5.1 million obligated. This next year we expect to see \$10 million in IRA funding.
- FY23 was supposed to be the last year for the Grassland Conservation Initiative (GCI), but we are possibly offering it one more year, will know more once the government funding is in place and we see what is in the Farm Bill.

Paul McDonald for Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP).

- Started out FY23 with only \$28 million, but ended with \$46 million in allocations. Some EQIP funds are required to be allocated to specific initiatives, like the Mississippi River Basin Initiative (MRBI) and the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI).
- To keep our allocations, Missouri must keep at least 50% of our EQIP funds going to animal agriculture, and we have averaged over the last 3 years 55%, 15% to animal feeding/waste, and 40% to pasture.
- Farm Bill calls for 10% to go to wildlife and MO put an additional 10% towards forestry, and we only managed 7% in each of those, so we are close to meeting those goals.
- Top practices for FY23 were Cover Crop (\$8.5 million), Pasture and Hay Planting (\$8 million), and Roofs and Covers (\$2.5 million).
- EQIP Conservation Incentive Contract (EQIP-CIC) authorized under the 2018 Farm Bill, acts as a stepping stone for producers to move from EQIP to CSP.
- Out of the \$1.5 million EQIP-CIC funds in FY23, Missouri obligated \$1.4 million.
- High Priority Areas (HPA) for Missouri were Native Grassland Restoration, Soil Health Management System, and Source Water Protection for Water Quality and Quantity.
- David Baker asked we compile all the programs and payments we are making in Missouri so all the numbers are together in just one place, not just EQIP or CSP or Farm Bill, but all of the government and private-fund practices happening in Missouri.
- Bob Ball asked, are our forest resources under utilizing EQIP funds? NRCS is pushing big on forest land in FY24 in addition to our other programs. Selma helped answer Bob's question, we will work with technical service providers who are a key piece to our forest work, and so we are continuing to build that .
- Hannah Hemmelgarn wondered if interest in agroforestry is growing. Paul did not have numbers on that, but it seems to him that interest is growing.

Selma Mascaro for Ecological Sciences Conservation Practice Standards.

- Recent Field Office Tech Guide (FOTG) updates.
- Soil Carbon Amendment (Code 336) adopted in MO.
- Agronomy Technical Notes – electronic versions of longstanding tech notes uploaded to eFOTG.
- Updated CPA 52 Environmental Evaluation Worksheet, updated last April, found in Section 5 of the FOTG.
- CPA, DIA and CEMA List for FY24, found in Section 3 of the FOTG.
- Upcoming Standard for Review, Forest Stand Improvement (Code 666).

- Prescribed Burn national policy updated in 2019, Missouri updated a supplement in the past few weeks. Code 338.
- Technical Service Providers (TSPs), we rely heavily on these folks in writing forest management plans and comprehensive nutrient management plans. Able to provide financial assistance for these programs thru our Farm Bill programs, and our producers can select TSPs from the list to write those plans when the financial assistance is available.
- Planning a multi-state TSP meeting in Columbia January 30-31, and more in the future. Provide more communication, networking, sharing information, and improving efficiency amongst TSPs.

Subcommittee Reports.

- Nate reports on the subcommittees, started in 2021 with 6 subcommittees (Water Quality & Source Water Protection, Programs, Easements, Forestry & Wildlife, Grasslands & Row Crop, and Soil Health) and asked for members with experience and interest in those areas to join the subcommittee. Since then, the subcommittees have been mostly successful and we will be looking at the membership and positions in each before our May 7th meeting. In addition, we have added in Urban Ag and Agribusiness as of today's meeting will be adding a CRP subcommittee. Look for messages on subcommittee potential membership changes and updates to the subcommittees themselves.
- Susan Mammen with Water Quality and Programs subcommittees.
 - Water Quality has not met since last committee meeting. Rex will be sending out a request on preference of dates for next subcommittee meeting.
 - Programs did meet on December 14, 2023, discussed IRA impacts, and the funding priorities for CSP and EQIP. Under EQIP IRA, subcommittee members proposed 10% Wildlife Habitat, 10% Forestry Related, (under Cropland) 20% Soil Health, 20% Nutrient Management, (on Livestock) 5% On Farm Energy, 35% Grazing. Nutrient Management will drop to 10% based on a vote of the folks attending today's virtual meeting, and that 10% will move to Soil Health. Called for a vote in the meeting and 14 out of 14 agreed with the Programs subcommittee's recommendations.
 - Scott commented on Nutrient Management, we have had an issue in the past with delivering this program in a meaningful way. Selma and Pat Turman (NRCS State Agronomist) last year led an effort to get employees trained to demystify the practice, to do a lot of streamlining and try to get this out. Question to the full committee – do we want to continue to push Nutrient Management, or go ahead and reduce it to 10% and move that 10% somewhere else (Reagan Bluel agreed with reducing to 10%, Lisa Potter and Tim Gibbons also agreed with the reduction). We will be reducing Nutrient Management by half and moving that remaining 10% elsewhere, which the subcommittee will discuss. Susan suggested Soil Health (increasing it to 30%). A poll was put into Teams, and 14 out of 14 voted to approve this initial allocation.
- Chris Hamilton with Easements.
 - Application cutoff for Wetland Reserve Easement Program is Friday, January 26.
 - Received approximately \$6.3 million for WRE, 28 IRA applications so far this year.
 - Waiting on word about funding, which should be announced an hour after this meeting concludes.
- Selma for Forestry & Wildlife, and Grasslands & Row Crop.

- Neither subcommittee has met, should be meeting before the May meeting.
- Elena Hoover for Soil Health.
 - No meetings since the last State Technical Committee meeting, will have a meeting before the May meeting. If anyone is interested, please let Lena know.
- Nate Goodrich for Urban Ag.
 - Met on January 16th, discussed St Louis Urban Ag efforts, ACT NOW sign up occurring, as well as EQIP applications, and workshops are ongoing.
 - Elisa Moss, NRCS Urban Soil Conservationist, talked about the common conservation practices they are implementing in St Louis. Discussed the CSP and how it can help our urban and small scale producers, and what hurdles they are running into with CSP and Urban Ag producers.
 - CSP more suited to the larger, rural producer and not very helpful to urban ag and small scale producers, subcommittee is talking on how to improve that for our urban ag folks.
 - Ally Travlos (NRCS Regional Conservation Partnership Program, RCPP) was asked to talk how RCPP can work with our urban ag producers. More RCPP money coming in FY24, looking at all avenues for potential projects.
 - Also talked about the Web Soil Survey Mapping that's going on in St Louis, have some volunteers to allow NRCS come out and assist with some soil mapping and testing on their properties.
- Andy Rackers for Agribusiness.
 - No meetings, but one coming up before May F2F meeting.

Q&A

- Nate Goodrich discussed notice of funding opportunities that are coming out soon, ~\$2.5 million for technical assistance agreements and ~\$1.5 million for outreach agreements.
- Bob Ball mentions that while the Black Walnut Suitability Index is popular, the White Oak Index seems to be languishing (Lena Hoover said she would take it to the subcommittee to have a discussion). And what is the role of Outreach Coordinators? Scott Edwards answered - It's a dual-purpose role, any time we have a new piece (technology, program, funding pool), the Outreach Coordinator first trains our internal staff on the new piece, and then goes on to reach out to producers in the State. We are trying to create a dedicated position in NRCS to take on these tasks of training our staff and reaching out to our producers. Status of filling the NRCS State Forester position and the newly announced Kansas City Urban Ag Conservationist positions? Ashley Johnson answered – Those positions are being advertised on usajobs.gov this week.
- Tim Gibbons talked about bills that have an impact on Missouri water quality. Senate Bill 981 and House Bill 1691 are in Missouri Congress right now, attempting to take different pieces of our water system out of DNR protection, including wetlands that could be impacted.

Scott Edwards Wrap Up – Frank Oberle's questions on soil erosion are being sent to FSA for their attention, and will contact Frank directly. Nate performed excellent as the moderator, and got us in under time. Notes and slides will be posted and sent out as soon as possible.