

## **Easements Subcommittee Meeting**

**December 8, 2011**

The Easements Subcommittee of the State Technical Committee held its first meeting December 8, 2011 at the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) State Office in Raleigh, NC. The meeting was attended by 11 people.

Mike Hinton, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist – Easement Programs gave an overview of the NRCS easement programs. The programs are the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), and Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP). Program purposes, land and landowner eligibility, and implementation of the programs in North Carolina were discussed. Program fund allocations had not been made at the time of the meeting, but funding levels for WRP and FRPP were expected to be similar to Fiscal Year 2011. It is anticipated that WRP will be funded at approximately \$7.0 million and FRPP at \$2.7 million in North Carolina. Because GRP applications had been limited in the previous two years it was anticipated that North Carolina might not receive funding for GRP.

Potential changes to NRCS easement programs in the new Farm Bill were discussed. It is anticipated that the easement programs could be combined into as few as two programs. One would be a “working lands” program that might combine FRPP and GRP, and the second would be an “environmental lands” program that might combine WRP with the Healthy Forests Reserve Program and the Emergency Watershed Protection Program- Floodplains Easement programs. There will be an opportunity for public input as the new Farm Bill is formulated.

The implementation of WRP and FRPP was discussed. For WRP, enrollment has been fairly efficient but there is a significant backlog in restoration. Several factors contribute to the backlog. Lack of sufficient staff to complete design work and funds to contract out engineering services are the most significant factors. There is likely to be some increase in funds for these services, but it will take several years to catch up.

For FRPP, the length of time from enrollment to closing continues to be a concern. The appraisal review and approval, along with the deed review process continue to be an issue. There are some improvements to the appraisal review process and some appraisers are now successful in getting appraisals approved with minor changes. Deeds that differ significantly from the deed template continue to take considerable time to review and approve. The length of time it takes to go from enrollment to closing impacts landowner participation in the program as well as funding from other sources. Most cooperating entities are dependent on grants for much or all of their match and those grants often have deadlines associated with them. It is unlikely that there will be any significant changes to the processes prior to the new

Farm Bill. Members of the subcommittee were encouraged to comment as the new Farm Bill is formulated and make suggestions for improvements.

Prior to ending the meeting, there was some discussion as to the purpose of the subcommittee and how often it should meet. It was recognized that several individuals who planned to participate were not able to attend. It was proposed that the subcommittee meet on an as needed basis, but at least twice annually. Once more members are able to participate and the purpose and objectives of the subcommittee are better defined, an adjustment to the frequency of the meetings may be made.

Mike Hinton

January 17, 2012