

FY 2012 NRCS Programs Review – Julie Elmore

**Note: Unofficial Numbers**

Total EQIP Received: \$21,607,245

Long Leaf Pine: \$1,125,075

Forestry Funding:

Mountain Area 1: \$213,154

Piedmont Area 2: \$529,906

Coastal Plain Area 3: \$393,739

New Water Quality Initiative:

Upper Mitchell Watershed: \$256,316

Little Fisher Watershed: \$213,010

Big Creek Watershed: \$381,137

Practice Highlights:

Brush Management: 40 Contracts 3,000 acres

Field Border: 5 Contracts 313 acres

Riparian Buffer: None

Stream Habitat Improv 7 Contracts 175 acres

Aquatic Org Passage None

Hedgerow Planting 3 contracts 23 acres

Tree Shrub Site Prep 63 contracts ~5000 acres

Upland Wildlife Hab 51 contracts 4515 acres

Early Succession Hab 12 contracts 802 acres

Forest Stand Improv 85 contracts 6211 acres

Wetland Wildlife Hab none

Constructed Wetland none

Wetland Restoration none

CRP Update – Tim Jones

Our most recent general sign up was sign up 43. NC had 7,000 acres offered; 6500 acres were accepted. General sign ups are a bit different than continuous b/c it is a competitive process. CRP General Sign Ups are different from EQIP and WHIP in that people in NC are competing against all offers across the country. The Environmental Benefit Index (EBI) documentation used for CRP can be provided to anyone in the group if requested. NC offers were around 90% accepted. Nationwide the average was 85%. Presently if trees are involved Forest Service is assisting NRCS and participants with plan development. If trees are not involved, planning is the sole responsibility of NRCS. All contracts become effective October 1, 2012.

111,615 acres are in CRP in NC right now (all practices).

NOTE: FSA just announced a continuous sign up for sites with an Erodibility Index (EI) of 20 or greater. 16,200 acres can be enrolled in NC without competition. We have asked our GIS specialist to try and identify where these lands might be located. With limited workforce out there, we want to target our efforts. Practices available include:

CP1- introduced grasses

CP2 – native grassed

CP3 – tree establishment

CP3a – hardwood tree establishment

CP4D – permanent wildlife habitat

#### Continuous CRP Update for NC:

CP23- wetland restoration. We have opportunity to enroll 2500 acres in wetland restoration. To date we have 23 acres enrolled. The reason it is low, is the bulk of our wetland restoration goes into CREP.

CP23a wetland restoration in floodplain – zero enrollment.

CP33 acres – habitat buffers for upland birds, commonly referred to as “Quail Buffers”. NRCS has been allocated 12,900 acres. Presently we have 8639 acres enrolled.

NOTE: Hearing a lot in the news about emergency haying and grazing in CRP lands. They are trying to be lenient in the law on some of these due to the drought in certain parts of the country. NC does not need this in most areas. Some of the things that hinder us, using the waiver include when you graze you have to do it outside of the primary nesting season. Our nesting season doesn't end until Sept 15. The end date for grazing allowed in CRP lands is Sept 30. That leaves NC two weeks which is not typically considered worthwhile by farmers.

Last thing to discuss is to look at possibilities at improving mid contract management requirements for CRP. From sign up 26 to now (43) we have had to build in mid contract management activities to improve wildlife habitat. A sub-group of partners met and come up with several pages of recommendations. Many recommendations focused on updating mid contract management. The entire list of recommendations was forwarded up to our national CRP program manager. National response was not what this group may want. They recommend that we not develop state policy related to eligibility and EBI Scoring. These matters should be elevated to the national office for consideration.

#### Specific Recommendations:

More targeted and extensive outreach - National office agrees with that.

More contract review/evaluation - Budget constraints were given as a challenge

NHQ indicated that the majority of the recommendations had some effect on the environmental benefits index (EBI); how offers are scored and accepted. According to the national office, anything that deals with the environmental benefits index has to be elevated to the national office. US FWS has a presence on interagency reviews and could be a route to getting recommendations considered.

Example – CP3 offer with existing tree cover have an option of accepting a 10 point value as is or they can enhance their offer at a 50 point value if they are willing to create wildlife openings or thin and burn. This group recommended that even the 10 point value be required to thin existing trees. National office would not give the state the chance to tweak that internally.

Mark Jones (WRC) – question, I applaud NRCS and FSA for letting us work on these. What is our game plan now that we have heard back from headquarters? I propose we try and meet again soon to plan our next steps.

John-Ann Shearer (FWS) – our national coordinator (Dave Walker) that has those relationships is willing to hear us out, but will know what may or may not fly in other areas or when other areas may concur with our needs. We need to articulate a little more clearly our recommendations with examples and purpose so that he could pick those up and read them and explain why they are needed. We may need to present those to our national person in person; a written document may be harder to sell.

Tim – at the national level there are a lot of different stakeholders asking for things that are specifically wildlife. We struggled adding on eligibility issues. If we deny someone the opportunity to enroll because they won't burn, we would likely lose at the national appeals level because it is not in national policy.

John Ann Shearer (FWS) - just to clarify, we identified many things. Am I to understand all of those were denied?

Tim – yes, all the ones that were EBI related were. The training, the outreach, etc is ok and can be handled in the state.

John Ann Shearer (FWS) – I think it was beneficial to sit down with a small group because it was so tedious. I think it would be a good idea to go back and have a larger group look at this and make the language easier to understand.

Lark Hayes – is there a deadline?

Tim – No. I certainly wouldn't wait. May be good to go ahead and meet again soon.

Mark Jones (WRC) – there are a lot of things confusing about this. We have mid-contract management teams allowed yet when we try to have these meetings and we make recommendations, NHQ says it's a national issue. We're going in a circle. Just my two cents worth. We will need to address this with the association and come back to you.

Tim – I can give you a listing of the persons in CEPD.

Lark Hayes – I am not up to speed on the recommendations. 90% of them affect pine trees from what I've heard. To the extent that any of them that affect Long Leaf Pine, remember there is a national federal coordinating committee that has all the agencies working together. This might be an avenue to bring more attention to these issues. I'm happy to help.

Tim- its going to end up with OGC. There are going to be some lawyers looking at it.

Don Riley - anything else on this? We understand we are going to need an August meeting to figure out steps.

CREP Update, Donnarie Hales, CREP Manager NC SWC. CREP is the enhanced version of CRP. Where our practices come into play is we have funding to enhance CRP offers to include an easement that goes along with the program. We are knocking on 400 acres (200 under contract, 200 in progress) this year. Since the program started we are at 30,000 acres enrolled. 76 counties are covered under the program; basically from the PeeDee east. We usually don't get large tracks of land. A 30 year easement gets a \$250 onetime payment. Permanent easements receive a \$1000 onetime payment. Cost share rates on practices also go up based on level of easement. My current position has been vacant for a while. As a result there has been some reduction in activity. We have expanded into the western part of NC and we intend to expand outreach with help from cattlemen's associations and voluntary ag districts. CREP contracts do go through so many hands. We want to decrease drop out rates because the contracts do take so long, so we will be looking at ways to streamline the process.

Expiring non-permanent CREP agreements can be upgrade to permanent. We are seeing more people lean towards a permanent vs 30 year easement right now.

Robert Horton – Do you have a shapefile?

Donnarie – yes. It will be on our new website that is launching in 2 weeks. You can search by county or specific name and search for specific acreage.

### 2013 NRCS Programs Forecast

REGIONAL COST LISTS: This year starting with 2013, our entire EQIP program is going to be housed under a regional cost list. NC is housed in the Appalachian region. Our cost list is going to be different than what we have seen in the past. The process: national teams were developed and wrote in the costs based on typical scenarios. Those costs were based on components developed at the national level. An example is a mixed grass planting. Over 400 species were used and an average cost came out for seed.

We need to now tweak our message of 75% cost share. 75% is now 75% of that regional cost developed for typical scenarios. NRCS is still going to go to the farm, figure out your needs (resource concerns), develop a conservation plan and assist with contracting. The participant still pays for installation of planned practices and gets reimbursement when complete. The positive is that the person knows exactly how much they are going to get paid prior to signing the contract.

The reason the process had to change has to do with consistency and compliance with international trade agreements. We cannot subsidize farmers, we can pay them to do conservation, but not subsidize under current international trade agreements.

As we begin to move forward, and begin to see things in the field that is way off, we need feedback. Economists are driving the costs, not technical specialists. Technical specialists are only drafting the scenarios. In order to address potential issues, documentation will be needed.

This seems boring, but it is very significant for anyone that has ever worked with a cost-share program.

The data in there is far more extensive. The scale with which that data was collected may cause local problems if NRCS, participant and partners do not understand the process.

John Isenhour (WRC) – are the scenarios adequate for North Carolina?

Don Riley – We hope so. But we have not seen any of the regional scenarios yet.

WHIP/EQIP Long Leaf Pine (LLP): NC used to do LLP under WHIP. This year, our national office changed WHIP to focus on Working Lands for Wildlife. This in a nut shell is an attempt to address species that are imperiled or currently listed in hopes that federal funds that are concentrated can delist or have species avoid becoming listed. That means NC lost its WHIP LLP money. North Carolina only had one species identified. The Golden Wing Warbler is a high elevation early successional (young forest) specialist. Long leaf was tied to the gopher tortoise which isn't present in NC. WHIP was cut out of LLP in NC.

Our NRCS program manager went ahead and put \$300,000 of EQIP funds into LLP. National office followed suit with additional EQIP funds.

It is almost impossible to track our funds based on practices. So we have to set aside fund pools so we can track what we are doing. NC would like to have stability in funding and would like to propose the continuation of the EQIP LLP initiative. NC needs to set high/med/low priority screening requirements and ranking criteria.

Proposed 2013 EQIP Longleaf Pine Initiative Ranking Criteria was distributed to the group. This is a first pass at a screening tool. Don Riley is requesting comments and feedback on tool.

Ryan Elting (TNC) – Are you going to look more favorably at restoration rather than preservation?

Don/Robert – No. We are attempting to “favor” ecological restoration and preservation over simple LLP establishment.

Gary Peters (NWTF) - Older long leaf stands introducing fire for the first time is a tricky business. You are literally playing with fire. It's a different animal. Just something to be aware of. I don't know how this factors in.

Proposed Contract Caps for Forestry and LLP: Right now NC does not have a CAP. There has been a request to consider placing a cap (maximum contract amount allowed). Proposal is \$15,000 per contract for EQIP forestry and \$25,000 per contract in LLP.

Mark Jones (WRC) – Has it been decided that there will be CAPs?

Don - No

Ben (CTNC) - How did you come up with those numbers?

Don/Robert – we've had these in the past, they were done away with.

Comments: you will limit yourself on LLP if you CAP. Might not be able to spend all available money. I don't think \$15,000 is a good place to put the CAP in forestry. The original CAP was \$30,000. I tend to agree it is unnecessary. This should be a quality based program; fund the best ones first.

Send in comments. Don will collect and distribute to the group.

Dam Removal/Stream Restoration: There has been a lot of activity and interest lately. NRCS had a really good meeting with American Rivers. We came up with some strategies on what the farm bill can and can't do. It's going to be very difficult given the Farm Bill constraints to do large dam removals. We can find ways to be involved on the small ones (culverts, small earthen dams that are everywhere, lack of maintenance, etc). Medium size projects where grants are already in place and EQIP can match with an eligible landowner are also feasible. We will need to wait and see regional cost lists on this to see if it will be financially feasible/desirable for landowners as well.

We are not ignoring this topic. We have had many conversations with several partners; we just have not found a silver bullet yet.

SWAT Position:

Barry New with NCFS – SWAT Agreement is between NRCS and NCFS concentrated in 15 priority counties. The focus is improved implementation of long leaf focused projects funded under EQIP, WHIP and CRP. Phil Wallace was hired to coordinate this effort for the next two years.

## **Proposed 2013 EQIP Longleaf Pine Initiative Ranking Criteria**

### **High – applications focused on ecological restoration within the historical range**

These applications must include one or more of the following:

- 1) Multiple burns that are associated with a plan that emphasizes frequent fire in perpetuity  
*\*does not include site preparation burns*
- 2) Native understory establishment on all crop or pasture conversions to LLP
- 3) Site Prep strategies that avoid impacts to existing understory vegetation
- 4) Mid-rotation management of existing stands that enhances native understory
- 5) Planting densities no higher than 450 TPA when practice 612 is included

### **Medium – applications within the historical range, not meeting criteria above**

### **Low – applications outside of the historical range**

*\*site must be determined suitable by appropriate professional to establish longleaf outside of the historical range under EQIP (biologist or forester)*

### **State Issues:**

1. Are the offered acres located within the state designated priority area? (see map) **(XXX POINTS)**
2. Will implementation of this application result in enhancement/preservation of native understory vegetation currently present on the application acres OR will it be established through implementation of this application? **(XXX POINTS)**
3. Are the offered acres permanently protected by a conservation easement? **(XXX POINTS)**

### **Local Issues:**

1. Will prescribed fire be applied on established stands of longleaf pine trees or already established seedlings within the application area during the contract life? **(XXX POINTS)**
2. Will implementation of this application result in a WHEP score improvement of 0.25 or greater on the application acres? **(XXX POINTS)**
3. Are the offered acres contiguous with “like managed” land or existing Longleaf stands? (i.e. – other WHIP land, Gamelands, National Forest, etc) **(XXX POINTS)**