

**MINUTES**  
**State Technical Committee Meeting**  
**Raleigh, North Carolina**  
**July 19, 2011**

The meeting convened at 9:04 a.m. at the NCDA&CS Agronomic Conference Room, 4300 Reedy Creek Road, Raleigh.

J.B. Martin Jr., State Conservationist, opened the meeting and welcomed participants. The attendees introduced themselves.

**J.B. Martin, Jr., State Conservationist, NRCS**

J.B. urged further and diversified participation in State Technical Committee meetings.

Ann Coan requested that J.B. discuss the budget. He explained that the U.S. Department of Agriculture will be looking at a 15% cut, and each state was requested to provide a proposed budget. North Carolina is in the process of developing that budget proposal with the goal of increasing staff in order to provide more assistance in the field. North Carolina will be restructuring staff for the long-term due to the 2012 Farm Bill. J.B. encouraged members of the committee to participate in 2012 Farm Bill hearings.

**Greg Walker, NRCS**

**Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) 2011**

Greg displayed a presentation showing a breakdown of 2011 program obligations.

Greg explained the categories emphasizing New and Beginning Farmers and Socially Disadvantaged Farmers. North Carolina is required to have 5% of funds in both of those categories, and NC met and somewhat exceeded that requirement in 2011. NC also wants to be sure to include applicants that have been applying for some time.

The CCPI phase of EQIP has been focused on supporting the state's Lagoon Conversion Program for the last 3-years. It has successfully helped some farmers implement innovative technology for livestock waste treatment that meets high environmental performance standards. This year a portion of the CCPI funds were also used to assist farmers close obsolete waste impoundments.

Should financial assistance for installing Ag Chemical Handling Facilities continue to be available if budget cuts occur? Three or four applications were funded in 2011 out of 20 to 25 applications received.

Three Conservation Activity Plans (CAPs) were funded for Spill Containment, and interest is growing. There has also been more interest in the Organic Transition CAP, Herbicide Resistance CAP, Forestry CAP, Grazing CAP, Integrated Pest Management CAP, Comprehensive Nutrient Management CAP, and the Ag Energy CAP. NRCS would like to see more interest in Herbicide Resistant Weed Control.

Rusty Painter asked why the organic numbers were so low. It was explained that some organic producers aren't familiar with applying for government programs. Many organic farmers are not registered with Farm Service Agency (FSA) because they are small operations, and this affects their

eligibility. There is a misconception that small acreage can't qualify; additionally, counties can make their own guidelines for size requirements. More organic scenarios are added to EQIP each year. NRCS is also trying to improve communication and outreach for organic farmers.

The top three EQIP categories are crop, pasture, and confined animal operations, which correlate with the top three priorities in North Carolina. NRCS tries to rank applications based on the best conservation value for the funds obligated.

Sixty percent of national funding must go to animal agriculture; NC is at approximately 78%. J.B. has been trying to get compensated for animal ag in NC due to lower cropland numbers in the state. NC is trying to target \$18-\$20 million for EQIP in the state's budget proposal.

A participant asked for a clarification on requirements of a New and Beginning Farmer. Greg explained that it applied to any operator operating a farm less than 10 years. The pool for New and Beginning Farmers is required by all states. It is supposed to allow for New and Beginning Farmers to get an adequate chance at EQIP funds.

#### Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) 2011

There are 13 habitat priority areas for WHIP. Fifty-one contracts were funded for \$220,000.

Longleaf Pine – 49 contracts for \$816,000 in 15 different counties, up from \$300,000 and eight to nine counties in 2010.

Lark Hayes asked when funding will be available for 2012 for longleaf. Greg explained that there will be another year of funding for longleaf, and NC wants to compete with other states to increase the amount of funds for longleaf contracts.

Dwight Batts asked what the longleaf funding is used for. Greg explained that many contracts are used to manage and enhance existing stands, but there are tree-planting contracts as well. Another participant asked if any funds were used for research for Longleaf improvement projects. None of NRCS longleaf funds are authorized for used doing research. Other agencies handle USDA's research funding, such as the Agricultural Research Service (ARS).

#### 2012 Program Policy

Greg explained that the EQIP and WHIP Prescribed Burn policy is changing in 2012 to only allow up to two burns on the same land unit in a contract, as opposed to three.

Sean Brogan asked about the length of a typical contract period. Greg said it is four to five years. WHIP contracts may go up to 10 years.

Dwight Batts asked how long it takes to get approval. Greg explained that the program cycle is about one year. For example, applications submitted in the summer will be awarded contracts in January with contracts written in January /February.

Another participant asked if there can be stricter criteria for which contracts are awarded. NRCS does not want to exclude anyone, but would prefer that applicants have burn plans written prior to application

and encourage them to be in contact with a prescribed burner prior to signing a contract. NRCS is trying to provide prescribed burner alternatives to landowners other than the Forest Service, but they must have a plan in place first. Having a plan ahead of time will prepare applicants for what implementation of the contract may require. The CAP for Forest Management Plan is offered to provide prescriptions for what is needed, including cost estimates.

NRCS is trying to expand interest in CAPs and trying to help Technical Service Providers (TSPs) become certified to write organic transition plans. If other organizations are willing to host or sponsor training events, NRCS will provide the training.

#### New and Expanding Poultry Operations in EQIP

There is currently a lot of expansion of poultry operations in NC. NRCS wants veteran producers with unresolved natural resource conservation objectives to compete well for funding, so applications from producers three years or newer will receive medium priority in the EQIP screening tool. EQIP policy requires high priority applications be funded before any medium priority or low priority applications are funded.

#### 2012 Water Well Policy

Under current policy, installing wells is cost-shared in order to address water quality resource concerns or when addressing degraded plant condition.

Greg proposed eliminating prescribed grazing alone as being justification for installation of a new well. Wells will only be installed when livestock exclusion is planned to include water quality.

David Williams asked if CAPs can be used for water efficiency audit. They currently do not cover water efficiency, and a proposal would have to be sent to the national office to establish a new CAP for water resource assessment.

Irrigation water management plans improve efficiency of design, but do not address adequacy of supplies. They are also used only to address existing water resources.

#### **Matt Flint, NRCS**

Matt provided a handout containing feedback from subcommittees that have met since the last State Technical Committee Meeting. The subcommittees that held meetings covered topics including organic, herbicide resistant weeds, and wildlife management. Matt encouraged any attendees to participate in subcommittees. The subcommittees serve as forums to discuss specific issues in depth in order to form recommendations for NRCS to consider.

#### Energy

NRCS will provide energy conservation assistance. Energy is a new resource concern with the purpose of improving efficiency on farm headquarters, and minimizing power consumption both on farm headquarters and in field operations. NRCS is adding conservation practices to implement findings of energy audits. These practices are only in the Field Office Technical Guide at this time and are not yet available in EQIP.

EQIP will target energy audit CAPs in 2012 to help evaluate the costs of implementing energy saving approaches. Only TSPs will perform energy audits for the CAPs. There is currently one TSP available to conduct energy audits, but no applications have been received yet. This CAP provides an energy audit service to farmers that is similar to the service the NC Farm Bureau has been providing for the last couple of years. It is hoped the CAP will expand the number of farmers who receive energy audits.

A practice to implement the results of audits will not be available until typical implementation scenarios are received, possibly in 2013. Contracts will be awarded this winter for energy audit CAPs in spring 2012 with audits being conducted in spring/summer 2012. While the audits are being conducted, NRCS will be looking developing payment schedules and practice scenarios for energy implementation practices. By the time the CAPs are in place, scenarios will be available for fall/winter sign-up in 2013. Alternative energy production will be available in 2013.

Matt asked for feedback on the most impactful opportunities for energy conservation on farms or forestry operations. Participants responded that it will depend on the type of farm. For livestock, opportunities exist at the barn; for grain they exist at the driers; for plants, irrigation and pumping; for greenhouses, thermostats, fans, etc.

Energy audits are not limited to organic, CAPs are offered to any farming operations. A participant asked which scenarios are only for organic operations. Josh Spencer explained that there is a nutrient management implementation scenario that encourages organic producers to implement nutrient management plans. This has been offered to traditional cropland operations in the past, but not for organic. NRCS released a national nutrient management strategy last year, which involves not only implementing the nutrient management practice, but also requires other practices in addition. There are separate sets of criteria for organic and conventional. There are a few new scenarios this year for organic, about 11 scenarios are organic-only, but many other scenarios can also be applied to organic. The subcommittee is looking for feedback on practice guidance for the new scenarios.

#### Herbicide Resistant Weeds

The herbicide resistant weed subcommittee met to discuss weeds that have resistance to commonly used herbicide modes of action. A challenge with herbicide resistant weeds is sustaining the land without compromising other conservation practices. How can NRCS provide assistance to make changes?

Options include:

- Change crop rotation to incorporate a crop that is tolerant of an herbicide with a different mode of action.
- Use cover crops differently to get a combined action of weed suppression and shift to another alternate crop in the rotation.
  - Sorghum was identified as a viable alternative crop, also used for typical cost.
- CAPs may be used for crop rotation plans.
- Avoid using tillage as primary weed control.

There are no upcoming meetings scheduled for Organic or Herbicide Resistant Weed Control subcommittees until 2013.

#### Forestry and Wildlife Subcommittee

The subcommittee discussed improving the environmental outcomes of CRP. It also recommended the Prescribed Burn policy discussed earlier by Greg Walker.

The subcommittee suggested regional pools for varying priorities for EQIP forestry, and compiling a statewide list of burn contractors.

Currently there is no CAP for development of burn plans. Matt Flint will find out how to propose a new CAP.

Sean Brogan proposed posting various priority maps or links on the State Technical Committee web page.

#### Other Subcommittee Topics

A participant suggested forming a WRP and wetlands subcommittee. Matt mentioned that an easement programs subcommittee was under consideration.

Subcommittees will brainstorm how to increase organic applications, and start devising a communication strategy for 2012/2013 applicants.

Dewitt Hardee suggested that there is an overall need for increased communication and education. Another participant suggested providing press releases or news articles to cooperators to highlight and disseminate. Other suggestions included using county extension to reach landowners, such as creating a video to provide to extension for educational purposes. Continuous, year-round sign-up and requests for plans needs to be promoted in order to allow NRCS to award funding faster.

A participant raised concern regarding expanding poultry operations. Matt Flint explained that FSA has estimated that at least three quarters of new and expanding operations seek financial assistance through USDA loans. In order to qualify for these loans, operations must have a waste utilization plan to meet environmental compliance requirements for the USDA backed loans.

Suggestions were made for new subcommittees, including energy, spill prevention, Farm Bill communications and outreach, poultry/animal operation expansion, and farmland protection.

A participant suggested that NRCS should participate in the North Carolina water planning committee

#### Biofuel Grasses

Matt Flint asked for the committee's input on the proposed policy of not providing technical assistance for using invasive plants as potential biofuel feedstock crops. What should NRCS's role be in helping private landowners control introduced pest plants on their property? The NRCS mission is limited to controlling pest plants, not pest insects or wildlife damage.

The use of two species of introduced grass, *Arundo donax* (Giant Reed) and hybrid Giant Miscanthus, has been under consideration in North Carolina for cellulosic ethanol production. The policy proposal is that NRCS will not provide technical assistance for any plant on the NC invasive species list, other than for control purposes using Farm Bill programs, or if it is specifically approved by the State Conservationist on a case by case basis.

NRCS will support renewable biofuel feedstock in a responsible way. Technical assistance may only be provided for waste utilization if *Arundo donax* is already established, but no assistance will be offered to establish *Arundo donax* because it is known to behave as an invasive plant despite not being on the NC noxious weed list. Assistance will be provided only for certified sterile hybrid *Miscanthus* varieties that can only be reproduced vegetatively, emphasizing that these varieties are sterile. Assistance may be provided for these varieties of *Miscanthus* for establishment and for inclusion as a crop receiving waste application.

Matt will email a list of invasive and noxious weeds to participants for feedback.

#### Fence Payment Rates

Per policy, NRCS program contracts are required to limit cost share to the least amount necessary to build a practice to meet the minimum Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) requirements. The North Carolina fence practice standard will be revised to have four separate fence purposes instead of the current three, so that technical specifications for dissimilar fence purposes are separate and clear. There will be three scenarios for EQIP fence costs; this does not dictate technical specifications for fence. Payment rates are based on data from university crop budgets, fencing contractors, receipts from farmers, and quotes from vendors. NRCS will not pay 75% of the cost to build a fence; rather, it will pay a specified rate to build a certain type of fence.

#### Tommy Cutts, NRCS

##### Planning Extent for Livestock Mortality Management

There is 200 million pounds of swine mortality in NC each year, and there may be 1,000 pounds per day mortality for some turkey operations.

NRCS has been encouraging composting, with three different payment scenarios with varying costs for each based on capacity.

The revised payment schedule for composting will be based on the minimum acceptable system irrespective of the processes used and will be implemented in the 2012 program year. The payment rates were determined using RSMeans Construction Cost data for a typical scenario per pound of mortality per day.

#### Other Business

The next State Technical Committee meeting will be held October 4<sup>th</sup> or October 11<sup>th</sup>, with many participants preferring the 4<sup>th</sup>.

Topics for the next meeting will include:

- How new scenario costs compare against current costs.

Matt Flint suggested workgroups on the following topics meet prior to the next State Technical Committee Meeting:

- Farm Bill programs
- Easement programs
- Wetland and highly erodible conservation compliance

- Energy

The meeting adjourned at 12:30 p.m.

/s/

Debra Ireland  
Recorder

cc:

All State Technical Committee Members