

MINUTES
State Technical Committee Meeting
Raleigh, North Carolina
October 18, 2011

The meeting convened at 9:02 a.m. at the NCDA&CS Agronomic Conference Room, 4300 Reedy Creek Road, Raleigh.

Mike Sugg, Assistant State Conservationist for Operations, opened the meeting and welcomed participants. He briefly discussed the additional program funding that North Carolina received late in the fiscal year. The attendees introduced themselves.

Greg Walker, NRCS (presentation)

2011 Program Summary

- NRCS in North Carolina received \$4.2 million in additional EQIP funding in late August that was used for priority work.
 - Cropland received an additional \$200,000, most of which went to confined animal operations.
- Extra WHIP funds were also received for the Longleaf Pine initiative.
 - 71 contracts were approved in 41 counties.

2012 Policy

- Greg reviewed changes to the Prescribed Burning policy.
 - There will be a two burn limit per land unit in contracts for 2012.
- New and expanding poultry operations:
 - Applicants must be in business for more than 3 years to receive priority for Waste Storage Facility (313), Mortality Incinerator (316), or Mortality Composter (317).
- New and Beginning Farmers:
 - Applicants must provide adequate documentation to prove new/beginning status prior to ranking.
- Water Well (642): The primary purpose of a well is to facilitate water availability in order to remove livestock from surface waters where the surface water is the water source.
 - Prescribed Grazing alone will not be an approved purpose for the use of Water Well.

Payment Schedules

- Citing inconsistencies among states, the NRCS Chief has made a decision to adopt a Regional (multi-state) payment schedules. For 2012, the most widely used conservation practices will have a regional payment schedule prepared.
- The top 15 practices nationwide will be regionalized.
 - North Carolina is part of the Appalachian Region along with Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, and West Virginia.
 - A list of the top 15 practices is included in Greg's presentation. Shallow Water Management is not currently used in North Carolina.

- The 15 regionalized payment schedules will be used for 2012, and the remaining practices will use 2011 rates or 2012 rates adjusted by state. Payment schedules will be regionalized for all practices in 2013.
 - These payment schedules will include Organic, AWEPP, General EQIP, WHIP, CCPI and AMA.
- Up to eight scenarios per practice are available for each region.
 - One payment rate per implementation scenario.
 - North Carolina may not necessarily offer all eight scenarios per practice.
 - North Carolina will use 75% cost based on regional scenario rate, not the actual NC cost. Rates are based on the actual regional cost.
 - Many regional costs are higher than NC costs.
 - North Carolina can interpret scenarios based on general scenario using practice guidelines.

Question: If regional rates are significantly higher than prior NC rates, can costs be capped at 75% or 75% of actual cost?

Answer: No, but NC can offer less than 75% if determined appropriate.

Question: Can NRCS provide partners with information about projects related to surface water?

Answer: Federal agencies are prohibited by law from giving participant information to outside organizations. NRCS can provide the organizations' information to landowners and let the landowners contact the organizations at their discretion.

Tommy Cutts, NRCS

Composters

- Tommy reviewed the change in payment criteria for composters that was proposed at the last State Technical Committee meeting. Payment would be based on anticipated mortality independent of the type of system used.
- It was proposed that the change will not be made in 2012; instead, the 2011 payment criteria will be used with a capped payment of \$100,000.
 - The current system is working to get the best systems on the ground, and eventually a regionalized system will be implemented that will be based on mortality. Additionally, the decision to delay the proposed change is due to the complexity of other changes currently underway.

Don Riley, NRCS

Invasive Species Control

- North Carolina receives good funding and habitat is one piece of the pie. We don't want to direct a large amount of funding to try to control something that will be a losing battle.
- NRCS does not currently have a stand-alone standard for invasive species control. Existing standards are used to meet that need: Brush Management and Herbaceous Weed Control.
- Brush Management for control of woody non-native species is a regionalized practice that NC uses for invasive control. Herbaceous Weed Control is used for control of non-woody non-native species.
 - Neither practice is available for cropland; other measures are used to address invasive species on cropland.

- Scenarios have been adopted in the regionalized practices that were developed in other states that NC has not previously used. Only one of NC's current scenarios is included in the regionalized options.
- The same scenarios offered in 2011 will be allowed in 2012. The only restriction will be that species being controlled will have to be on the state invasive species list or species on the state noxious weeds list.
- In 2013, applications will be accepted for any species on the state listing of invasive species.
- Practices can also be used for invasive species control if they are incorporated into a system of practices. These systems will be discussed in subcommittees.

Question: Is there a program for preventing introduction of invasive species?

Answer: Policy prohibits planting invasive species with cost share.

Question: Is there a process in place that monitors inbound invasives?

Answer: This is not an NRCS function. APHIS and state agencies handle this role.

Question: Does NRCS participate in determining invasive species?

Answer: NRCS is involved and consults with state agencies.

Question: Does a plant have to be identified on the state noxious list?

Answer: Yes. In order for a species to be considered a state noxious plant, it must only be in 18 counties or less, must demonstrate the ability to cause harm, and must be able to be controlled. If something is too pervasive, it is not on the list.

Question: What is the difference between the noxious list and the state list of species?

Answer: The state list was developed internally with assistance from partners that contains the "usual suspects" that can be controlled.

Josh Spencer, NRCS

National Nutrient Management Strategy (EQIP)

- The national nutrient management strategy is separate from the 590 (Nutrient Management) practice standard. The strategy sets cost share parameters, emphasizes combinations of practices, and establishes core practices required for planning with cost share.
 - The strategy requires practices that control water table nutrient levels based on crop. This presents a challenge in North Carolina due to different systems used in the state.
 - Other practices required by the strategy include Conservation Crop Rotation and Cover Crop practices
 - Organic will require Cover Crop and more intense crop management.
- Eight EQIP scenarios were suggested for the region; of these, NC will use four that correspond with scenarios used in the past. The remaining scenarios not selected by NC were not endorsed by NCSU for use in the state. Until they are proven effective in NC cropping systems, we will not be using those scenarios.

Question: Do producers have to be practicing Conservation Crop Rotation and Cover Crop in order to be eligible for 590?

Answer: Producers don't have to apply for those practices, but there are specific requirements in the strategy for Conservation Crop Rotation and Cover Crop that have to be included in the 590 practice scenario. Producers may plan for these practices if they are not currently implementing them.

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) – 595

- Integrated Pest Management is more about risk mitigation rather than a control strategy for pests. NRCS is prohibited from cost sharing for pest suppression methods.
 - Pesticide risk mitigation is a more accurate description because the practice mitigates risk for pesticide applications. Risk ratings are based on chemicals and soils.
 - When a high risk is identified, a strategy must be found to mitigate the risk. Risk must be proven before it can be mitigated.
- A 595 plan will show current practices with soil pesticide interaction to find risk. If risk exists, techniques are offered to mitigate the risk. It is more difficult to plan.
- There are five scenarios for the regionalized practice in 2012. General descriptions for the scenarios allow states to determine the implementation necessary to meet standard.

Question: When will scenarios be available for organic?

Answer: Implementation still needs to be determined. Payment schedules will be done by November 1; implementation guidance will hopefully be available over the next few weeks.

Question: Can Technical Service Providers (TSPs) do 595 plans?

Answer: They have in the past, but due to WinPST integration, it may be more appropriate for the District Conservationists to do these plans. TSPs must do IPM Conservation Activity Plans (CAPs), of which risk assessment is a component. An IPM CAP could be required prior to applying for IMP to determine risk.

Question: Will actual IPM ever be offered as a practice, rather than risk mitigation?

Answer: NRCS practices are focused on resource concerns, rather than on production, and the agency is prohibited from recommending pesticides.

Greg Walker, NRCS

New Initiatives (presentation)

- EQIP Initiatives will have three batching periods in 2012. Now a decision is made whether to include general EQIP in the batching dates:
 - Batching period 1 ends February 3, 2012; batching period 2 ends March 30, 2012; batching period 3 ends June 1, 2012; the final cutoff is July 1, 2012.
 - Applications are continuously accepted and “batched” three times during the 2012 year. These dates apply to all initiatives; applications will be ranked shortly after these dates.
- Basic functions will be centralized and performed at national headquarters (NHQ) for making selections. States will develop local ranking criteria, manage funds, accept applications, etc.
- Organic – states have been inconsistent with program offerings and payment rates within this initiative.
 - The first organic batching date is February 3, 2012 and will go on to the next batch as long as funds are available until funding is exhausted.
- High Tunnels – NHQ holds funds for Seasonal High Tunnel Systems; states will request funds prior to batching.

- Funds for high tunnels will not come out of general EQIP allocations.
- Air quality – North Carolina is not a priority state for air quality because there is a lot of overlap in the state.
- On-farm Energy Initiative – Headquarters and Landscape Conservation Activity Plans will be offered in NC called Ag Energy Management Plan (AgEMP). These CAPs are basically an audit performed by a Technical Service Provider. NC has one TSP certified for this CAP. Implementation will be offered in addition to plans as Practice 374, On-Farm Energy Improvement. A CAP plan or equivalent audit will be required in order to qualify for Practice Code 374. The CAP (audit) must meet criteria set forth in the ASABE S612 standard.

Required Practices and CAPs

- States will offer all practices and CAPs released in a National Bulletin for on-farm energy, but will not be able to offer additional practices that are not listed on the National Bulletin. Some practices have been used for years to address other resource concerns. However, states may request practices to be removed from the list.

Question: Are biofuels included in this initiative?

Answer: Renewable Energy System is not on the Chief's list.

Question: For the February 3rd batching of forestry applications – should applicants plan to wait or complete without cost share for next fall if they are planning to burn in October, November or December?

Answer: Yes, but if the applicant is ready to act, has the application in and the plan complete, they may request a waiver to start the practice before a contract is obligated to the applicant. However, requesting such waivers carries with it risk that IF an application proved not to rank high enough to be funded, NRCS accepts no responsibility to provide a contract. All requests for such waivers are done in writing and addressed to the State Conservationist.

Question: Can NRCS send out deadline information for forestry landowners?

Answer: Robert Horton will work on something to send out.

Subcommittees

- Julie Elmore is the main NRCS contact for all subcommittees.
- Subcommittees provide a feedback loop. Anyone can participate in any or all of the subcommittees. Julie asked for suggestions for new subcommittees or interests needing to be addressed by subcommittees.
- The Organic subcommittee is chaired by Dana Ashford-Kornburger and Josh Spencer. The Wildlife and Forestry Conservation subcommittee is chaired by Robert Horton and Don Riley.

Question: Does the Wildlife and Forestry Conservation subcommittee focus more on management than conservation?

Answer: The Wildlife and Forestry Conservation subcommittees address practice scenario development, program updates, new technologies, outreach strategies, and technical background.

Subcommittee suggestions:

- A new Energy committee in 2012 to review energy audits and prepare for 2013.

- A new Confined Animal subcommittee.
- Organic Committee – meet to prepare for 2012.
- Try to hold meetings in November or early December to plan for 2012.
- Julie will send emails about new committees and schedules for upcoming meetings.

Question: Which committee(s) would be most appropriate for habitat improvement issues?

Answer: The Forestry and Wildlife subcommittee and the Conservation Easements subcommittee.

Jim Howie, Southern Marketing Agency

- The Southern Marketing Agency has joined together to market milk in the southeast more efficiently.
- The southeast has a deficit of milk year round, and the Dairy Advantage Program in North Carolina was established to encourage new and expanding dairy farms in the state.
- Approval is sought for EQIP funds for composted bedded packs for dairy housing as well as composting and manure storage. It allows farmers to handle waste in a dry form rather than a liquefied form. There are several NC dairies that would like to install these facilities.
 - NRCS offers cost share for pack barns in other states, two at 28-30 percent of total cost.
 - The Southern Marketing Agency is requesting the consideration of pack barns for future cost share through EQIP and through Conservation Innovation Grants (CIGs).
 - This technology could help the dairy industry to expand in North Carolina.
- Greg suggested that this would be a good topic for the Confined Animal subcommittee. In order to be considered under EQIP for 2013, the practice must result in environmental improvement to be eligible to be considered for EQIP..

Organization Reports

- EPA extended the deadline for above ground fuel storage tanks to May 10, 2013 for farmers due to weather events that have affected farming. NC does have a TSP for this.
- DENR has lost its Working Lands Coordinator.

Question: Has there been any effort to get the Healthy Forests Reserve Program in NC?

Answer: It is not funded at a high enough level to make a difference in the state. There is only one grassland reserve project in the state.

- DSWC is developing the Agricultural Water Resources Assistance Program (AgWRAP); \$1 million has been allocated to the program, and funds will be available to the field soon.
 - Funds will be allocated by district; 40% will go to competitive state requests.
 - Contracts will be approved in March.
 - Cost share committee will discuss conservation planning for AgCSP.
- The Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (CFSA) will hold the Annual Sustainable Agriculture Conference in November.
 - Assistance will be available for NRCS and district employees who wish to attend.
 - A workshop will be held at the conference for defining New and Beginning Farmers.
- CFSA will be organizing training for District Conservationists regarding organic agriculture and hoop house production.
- DENR has received funding to start a statewide source water collaborative. One of the first initiatives will be an awards program for achievements in source water protection work.

- The Conservation Trust of North Carolina is working on a farm and ranch land protection program. The Trust has received a grant for work on the upper Neuse Clean Water Initiative, which involves outreach to landowners for forest management techniques for protecting and improving water quality.
- NCDA is accepting grant proposals from non-profits and county governments through December 15. There will be a resistant weeds pilot project this year; meetings will be held this winter.
- The USFWS is transitioning from smaller projects to landscape projects to promote growing season burns primarily in longleaf stands. The projected deadline is in November.
- NC Farm Bureau's Neuse, Tar-Pam and Jordan projects will be establishing baselines and are exceeding nitrogen reduction goals.
- NC Tree Farmers just held their annual meeting in conjunction with the NC Forestry Association. Landowners are becoming more aware of programs that are available, but there is still more work needed to educate landowners about managing their land.
- NC Longleaf Coalition is pleased with NRCS WHIP implementation in North Carolina. There was a very high level of demand in 2011 for the Longleaf initiative. The Coalition will be working to encourage maximum participation in 2012.
- NC Farm Bureau has initial funding in place for implementation of a market-based conservation initiative; funding is not yet available for contracts.

Mike Sugg reminded the committee to contact NRCS with any suggestions for improvements for Farm Bill programs. He also encourage participation in subcommittees for more detailed discussions of topics brought up in the State Technical Committee meetings.

The meeting adjourned at 11:47 a.m.

/s/

Debra Ireland
Recorder

cc:

All State Technical Committee Members