

NRCS SC STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

*August 5, 2014, 9:30 a.m.
South Carolina Forestry Commission
Columbia, SC*

Present: Jack Lewis (Acting, STC NRCS), Evelyn Whitesides (SRC, NRCS), Amy Overstreet (SC NRCS) Kellee Melton (SC NRCS); Reginald Hall (SC NRCS), Frances Gibson (United Farmers, USA - Landowner); Russell Hubright (SCFC) Sam Cook (Center for Heirs Property), Willie Simmons (DNR), Dave Lamie (Clemson), Phil Bauer (USDA ARS), Gordon Mikell (NRCS), Dick Yetter (NRCS), Travis Mitchell (SC Cattleman's Assoc.), Scott Phillips (SCFC), Noel Myers (APHIS), Greg Yarrow (Clemson), Kenny Mullins (Richland SWCD), Marc Cribb (DNR), Wendy Adams (NAAS), Joe Cockrell (USFWS), Fred Taylor (Lexington SWCD), Guy Sabin (SCFA), Johny Haralson (SWCD), Breck Carmichael (DNR), Chanda Cooper (Richland SWCD), Karen McSwain (CFSA), Lee McElveen (Commission for Minority Affairs), Marcy Hayden (Commission for Minority Affairs), Bill McMeekin (SC Farm Bureau), Marjorie Palmer (TNC).

Opening remarks from Jack Lewis, Acting State Tech Committee Chair/SC NRCS - State Conservationist:

- Welcomed all participants; provided brief introduction of self
- Conducted roundtable introduction

Comments from Gene Kodama, State Forester, SC Forestry Commission

- Welcomed all to Forestry Commission
- Discussed mission of Forestry Commission
- Provided handout: Update on Forestry in South Carolina - Forest Area; Economic Impact; Forest Ownership; Forest Inventory & Forest Ecosystem Health

Comments from Kellee Melton, SC NRCS - Assistant State Conservationist for Programs:

- **FY 2014 Farm Bill Programs**

Financial Assistance –

- Agricultural Management Assistance Program (AMA)
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

Easements

- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)
- Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)

Partnership

- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

Adjusted Gross Income (AGI)

- \$900,000 for both conservation and commodity program payments and benefits.

- Removes authority to waive AGI limitations for projects of special environmental significance
- RCPP is only program with AGI waiver authority
- AGI requirements do not commence until FY 2015 for most of NRCS conservation programs, with the exception AMA.

Special Emphasis Applicants (Formerly known as “Historically Underserved”)

- New/Beginning Farmer
- Socially Disadvantaged Farmer
- Limited Resource Farmer
- Veteran Farmer – Person who served in the U.S. armed forces who was honorably discharged AND also qualifies as a New Beginning Farmer.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

- New Payment Limitation applied to the period of FY 2014 to 2018.
- EQIP Payment Limitation is now (\$450,000)
- Maximum Contract Length is set at 10 years.
- Advanced Payment (up to 50%) and added a return of funds provision where practice must be installed in 120 days.

EQIP

- Seasonal High Tunnel is no longer an initiative
- Irrigation History is still require for financial assistance
- Still running the Organic program and requirements have not changed
- Still running the Longleaf Pine program with no changes
- Still offering Conservation Activity Plans (CAPs) and continuing to work with TSPs.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

- Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program was repealed.
- EQIP now incorporates WHIP purposes.
- Minimum 5% Funding Targeted for Wildlife Habitat

Conservation Stewardship Program

- Annual Enrollment Cap (10 million acres)
- NIPF Acreage Cap lifted
- Exemption for CRP Transitioning Acres

Eligibility Criteria

- Eligibility: 2 priority resource concerns at time of application, plus 1 at the end of contract
- Renewal Criteria: Be in compliance with current contract and by end of renewal period be able to meet 2 additional priority resource concerns or exceed 2 existing priority resource concerns
- Payment Limitations are \$40,000/year/individual and \$80,000/year/entity

Easement Programs

- Farm & Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP), Grassland Reserve Program (GRP), and Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) were repealed
- Easement deeds from repealed programs remain valid and enforceable

ACEP

- ACEP funded at \$400 million in fiscal year 2014, increasing to \$500 million in fiscal year 2017, and reducing to \$250 million in fiscal year 2018.
- Funding was significantly cut. Only ½ of what was in the 2008 Farm Bill.
- ACEP has 2 components:
 - ❖ Agricultural Land Easement Component (ALE)
 - For the rest of FY 2014 NRCS will use existing FRPP and GRP regulations to enroll ACEP-ALE agreements.
 - New Ineligible Lands:
 - ✓ Lands owned by the United States, State government, or local government.
 - ✓ Land subject to an easement or deed restriction that provides protection similar to ACEP.
 - ✓ Lands where the purposes of the program would be undermined by on-site or off-site conditions.
 - Easement is still held by a cooperating entity.
 - The non-Federal contribution must now be 50% of the Secretary's contribution, instead of 25% of the purchase price.
 - This will decrease the amount of landowner donation that can be attributed to the entity match.
 - Enrollment Options: Permanent only
 - ❖ Wetland Reserve Easement Component (WRE)
 - Reduces ownership requirement from 7 years to 24 months
 - Authorizes waiver process to allow enrollment of CRP land established to trees.
 - No option to enroll stand-alone restoration cost-share agreements.
 - Enrollment Options:
 - ✓ Permanent
 - ✓ 30-year Easement
 - ✓ 30 year contract to Indian Tribes
 - ✓ Note WRE eliminates 10 year restoration cost-share only agreements.
 - ❖ Healthy Forests Reserve Program
 - Promote the recovery of threatened and endangered species
 - Improve Biodiversity
 - Enhance carbon sequestration
 - Enrollment Options
 - ✓ Permanent
 - ✓ 30-year Easement
 - ✓ 30 year contract with Indian Tribes
 - ✓ Restoration Cost Share Agreements

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

- RCPP is a new regional program that:
- Encourages partners to cooperate with producers
- Provides assistance through:
 - Partnership agreements
 - Program contracts or easement agreements
- Combines and replaces the purposes and functions of:
 - Agricultural Water Enhancement Program (AWEP)
 - Chesapeake Bay Watershed Program (CBWP)
 - Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI)
 - Great Lakes Basin Program for Erosion and Sediment Control
- Covered programs:
 - Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)
 - Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
 - Conservation Stewardship Program (CStP)
 - Healthy Forests Reserve Program (HFRP)
- RCPP Funding
 - Available Funding
 - ✓ \$157 Million each year will come directly from the Farm Bill for the National funding pool and \$100 Million for the State funding pool.
 - ✓ 7 percent of funds from the four covered programs (ACEP, CStP, EQIP, HFRP) will be reserved annually through April 1st
 - ✓ Over 5 years, USDA plans to invest up to \$1.2 BILLION with partners matching funding that could be as much as \$2.4 BILLION for conservation
 - ✓ This resulted in \$400 million in FY2014.
 - Funding Allocation
 - ✓ 25% reserved for State Projects
 - ✓ 40% reserved for National Projects
 - ✓ 35% reserved for Projects in Critical Conservation Areas (CCAs)
- Critical Conservation Areas (CCAs)
 - Secretary will select up to 8 critical conservation areas
 - Priority consideration given to geographical areas which:
 - ✓ Include multiple States with significant ag production
 - ✓ Have an existing agreement or work plans
 - ✓ Benefit water quality improvement
 - ✓ Benefit water quantity improvement
 - ✓ Assist producers to meet natural resource regulatory requirements
 - Critical Conservation Areas (CCAs) chosen by the Secretary include:
 1. Great Lakes Region
 2. Chesapeake Bay Watershed
 3. Mississippi River Basin
 4. Longleaf Pine Range (this includes SC)
 5. Columbia River Basin

6. California Bay Delta
7. Prairie Grasslands Region
8. Colorado River Basin

- Eligible Lands and Partners
- Eligible Land Includes: cropland, grassland, rangeland, pastureland, nonindustrial forest land, other land incidental to agricultural production (wetlands, buffers etc.)
- Eligible Partners Include: agricultural producer associations, silviculture producer associations, groups of producers, State or unit of local governments, Indian tribes, farmer cooperatives, water districts, irrigation districts, rural water districts, municipal water or wastewater treatment entities, conservation driven nongovernmental organizations, institutions of higher education
- NRCS will select RCPP projects based upon 4 ranking categories:
 - Solutions (25%) - projects that generate measureable results
 - Contributions (30%) – leveraging Fed and NonFed resources. At least doubling the total investment.
 - Innovation (20%) – innovative projects that integrate multiple conservation approaches.
 - Participation (25%) - maximize the number of organizations that participate in and contribute to projects
- Partners are responsible for:
 - Contributing a significant portion of the overall costs
 - Conducting outreach and education to eligible producers for potential participation in the project
 - Acting on a landowner’s or producer’s behalf, if requested by the landowners or producer in applying for assistance
 - Leveraging financial or technical assistance provided by NRCS with additional funds to help achieve the project objectives.
 - Conducting and providing an assessment of the project costs and conservation effects
- In these selected partner project areas, RCPP program assistance is delivered to producers through conservation program contracts and easement agreements under the covered programs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT:

www.nrcs.usda.gov/FarmBill

Questions may be submitted via Email to:

FarmBillQA@wdc.usda.gov

- FY 2014 Program Update
 - Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP):
 - Allocated total of \$12.7 million
 - Currently obligated \$9.3 million
 - EQIP Funding Pools
 - Organic Transition - \$86,700 (no applications for Certified)

- On Farm Energy - \$637,000 (5% of state allocation)
- LLPI - \$1.6 million
- Animal Waste - \$637,000 (5% of state allocation)
- LRF - \$99,000
- NBF - \$637,000 (5% of state allocation)
- SD - \$637,000 (5% of state allocation)
- Specialty Crops - \$318,000 (2.5% of state allocation)
- Planning - \$291,000
- NWQI - \$142,000 (returned \$521,000)
- Watershed Accounts - \$6.4 million (50% of their total requests)
- CIG - \$300,000
- Conservation Stewardship Program - Received \$390,013 to cover only 59 contracts statewide.
- Easements (Requested)
 - WRE – \$1.6 million (Sumter)
 - ALE - \$517,370 (Sumter and Orangeburg)
- RCPP
 - Nationwide: Requests totaled over \$2.7 BILLION with only \$400 million available
 - ✓ 197 CCA
 - ✓ 63 National
 - ✓ 278 State
 - SC received:
 - ✓ 6 State
 - ✓ 2 CCAs
 - ✓ 0 National
 - Those selected must submit full proposals by October 2, 2014. Final project selection will be made by November 14, 2014.
- Any additional questions or thoughts regarding programs can be directed to Kellee Melton, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, kellee.melton@sc.usda.gov

Comments from Evelyn Whitesides, SC NRCS – State Resource Conservationist

- Conservation Compliance and the 2014 Farm Bill
 - Agricultural Act of 2014
 - Recouples federally subsidized Crop Insurance with Conservation Compliance
 - Provides NRCS with ten million dollars to operate a program to establish/use wetland mitigation banks
 - New national reporting requirements on Wetland/HEL determination progress and backlog

- No change for traditional USDA customers
 - Producers who have traditionally participated in Title I (FSA) or Title II (conservation programs) should see no new changes to conservation compliance.
 - Approximately 10-14K producers will be impacted by the 2014 Farm Bill according to Risk Management Agency (RMA).
 - Producers not in conservation compliance can still buy crop insurance but will no longer be eligible for premium subsidies paid through RMA.
- The FSA AD-1026
 - The 1026 Form has been modified to incorporate the new Crop Insurance Provisions (6-30-14.) Item #3 has been added for producers to indicate they are “new to compliance”.
 - The 1026 is a continuous certification and only needs to be updated or revised when the producer plans to take an action that will affect how the questions are answered.
- Failure to Certify Compliance - Producers new to compliance will be ineligible for the premium crop insurance subsidy for the subsequent crop insurance year (July 1, 2015) if they do not have a 1026 on file certifying their HELC/WC compliance prior to June 1, 2015
- Commodity Crops-As it applies to producers new to compliance
 - New Conservation compliance requirements along with the original requirements only apply to commodity (annually tilled) crops.
 - Ag commodity FSA 6-CP (Exhibit 2)
 - ✓ Agricultural Commodity
 - An agricultural commodity is any crop planted and produced by annual tilling of the soil, including tilling by 1-trip planters or sugarcane.
 - ✚ Example 1: Producer plants a wildlife food plot to wheat
 - ✚ Example 2: Annual rye grass
 - ✚ Non example: Alfalfa/Perennial grasses
 - ✚ Non example: Orchards
- Crop Insurance Only Producer Exemptions - Producers who only participate in the premium crop insurance subsidy programs offered through RMA can plant on a converted wetland that was converted prior to 2-7-2014 without risking loss of these benefits.
- Wetland Mitigation Timelines
 - If the producer is “new to compliance,” they have 2 years to mitigate the violation following a final CW determination
 - There is a one-time only option available for wetlands less than 5 acres in size for Payment in Lieu for Wetland Mitigation.
- HEL violation timelines - Producers who have never been subject to compliance have 5 years to develop and implement a conservation plan.
- Outreach and Information

- What will we see coming out from NHQ in the next few months related to the Farm Bill?
- Listening sessions have been scheduled in IA, MN, ND, and SD-not directly related to crop insurance provisions
- 2015 EQIP PAYMENT SCHEDULE(Possibilities)
 - Additions to Payment Schedule
 - Structures for Wildlife (Code 649)
 - Bees, Bats, Cavity Nesters, Wood Ducks,
 - Brush Piles (new)
 - Cover Crop (Code 649)
 - 5 Species Mix (new)
 - 1 Specie
 - Water Well Testing (Code 355)
 - To be used in conjunction with Water Well (642) to ensure adequate water quality for the intended purpose of the well.
 - Required for Irrigation System, Microirrigation (441) and Sprinkler System (442) for irrigation
 - Lighting System Improvements (Code 670)
 - Lighting systems for agricultural operations (e.g. livestock and poultry housing)
 - Building Envelope Improvements (Code 672)
 - Insulation
 - Solid side walls

The addition of 670 and 672 removes the lighting and building envelope components from Farmstead Energy Improvements (374).
 - Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) - CIG is a voluntary program intended to stimulate the development and adoption of innovative conservation approaches and new technologies while leveraging Federal investment in environmental enhancement and protection, in conjunction with agricultural production.
 - CIG enables NRCS to work with other public and private entities to accelerate technology transfer and adoption of promising technologies and approaches to address some of the Nation's most pressing natural resource concerns.
 - CIG will benefit agricultural producers by providing more options for environmental enhancement and compliance with Federal, State, and local regulations.
 - State Component
 - The intent of the State Component is to provide flexibility to NRCS State Conservationists to target CIG funds to individual producers and smaller organizations that may possess promising innovations, but may not compete well on the larger scale of the national grants competition.
 - State Conservationists will determine the funding level for state competitions, with individual grants not to exceed \$75,000.
 - 2013 Funded State Projects
 - Greenville County Landowner-\$17K Whole farm drought resistant grazing system for sheep and goats
 - Clemson University -\$75K Feral Hog Information & Trainings

- Richland Soil & Water Conservation District-\$45K Multispecies Cover Crops & Soil Health
- Center for Heirs Property-\$75K Forestry Outreach to Underserved Landowners
- Question for State Technical Committee
 - Do we want to offer a SC component of CIG?
Will send in responses via email
 - What type of proposal topics or areas should we focus?
 - Broad
 - Narrow/Specific
 - Should certain topics rank higher?
 - Possible SC Proposal Topics
 - ✓ Water Resources
 - ✓ Soil Resources
 - ✓ Air Quality
 - ✓ Grazing Land
 - ✓ Forest Health
 - ✓ Wildlife Habitat
 - ✓ Organics
 - ✓ On-farm Energy Efficiency
 - ✓ Nutrient Management
 - ✓ Water Management
 - ✓ Outreach
 - ✓ Soil Health
- For additional information: Visit:
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/cig/index.html>
- Address questions or comments to Evelyn Whitesides evelyn.whitesides@sc.usda.gov .

Comments from Reginald Hall, SC NRCS, Natural Resource Specialist

- NRCS Client Gateway
- The Client Gateway (CG) is the new map-based NRCS public web application for agricultural producers. CG will allow clients to:
 - request technical and financial assistance,
 - obtain easy, secure, and intuitive access to their plans, schedules, applications, and contracts,
 - review and electronically sign plans, applications, and contracts,
 - document completed practices, and
 - request and track payments due them.
- NRCS Client Gateway - Release Strategy, Timeline, Client Access
 - The Early Adopter Public Release

- The initial publicly accessible deployment of Client Gateway, which will occur later this year.
 - Early Adopter clients will help NRCS evaluate, monitor and fine tune CG performance and functionality.
- Fully marketed and promoted public release
 - Will follow the Early Adopter Release.
- Individual Clients
 - Will be able to access and work with their records in CG Version 1.
- Representatives of Business Entity Clients
 - Will be able to access and work with their records in future versions.
- Other CG future releases features
 - Spanish language options, smart phone access, enhanced geospatial tools, conservation project modelling and monitoring tools.
- NRCS Client Gateway - Client Access and Communications with Conservation Office Staff
 - Client Access
 - eAuthentication Level II credentials.
 - New self-service or traditional options
 - Communications with Conservation Office Staff
 - CG Version 1 – secure emails to Office Information Profile contact.
 - ✓ NRCS Field Office contact
 - ✓ Conservation District Office contact
 - Request Assistance
 - Access Technical and General Reference Websites, Apply for FA and TA
 - View Client generated draft and submitted requests
 - Plans and Practices
 - Manage plans and practices
 - View Plan Modification Requests, View Practice Requests
 - Agreements
 - View Applications, View Contracts, View Contract Modification Requests, View Practice Requests

- Payments
 - View Payments
 - Account
 - My Profile, View Profile Update requests, My Land, My Documents
 - View All Requests
 - Client Gateway Points of Contact (POCs) have been designated.
 - Final CG testing is in process.
 - Rollout Timeline has been decided and will be announced soon.
 - Communication Plan has been developed and will be executed:
 - Internal Communications and resources for POCs.
 - External Communications and outreach materials.
 - Client “Help Desk” and internal staff support protocols have been developed.
 - Train the Trainer sessions will be provided to POCs.
 - Training sessions and materials will be posted.
- Address questions or comments to Reginald Hall Reginald.hall@sc.usda.gov .

Comments from Amy Overstreet, SC NRCS, Outreach Coordinator

- Conservation Compliance and the 2014 Farm Bill

Comments from Willie Simmons, DNR Small Game Program Supervisor

- Northern Bobwhite Habitat Restoration

- Decline of Quail in South Carolina
 - ✓ Data from the North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) indicates that in South Carolina the Northern Bobwhite has declined at a rate of 6.1 percent annually since 1966.
 - ✓ These losses are directly related to declines in the quantity and quality of early successional habitat types across the state.
 - ✓ This decline was due to large-scale habitat changes brought on by urbanization, modern agriculture practices and intensive forestry practices.
 - ✓ It is estimated that less than one percent of South Carolina’s non-developed lands are currently in a productive and useful state for grassland birds.
- Why Bobwhite Quail Restoration
 - ✓ Quail are the ideal focal species for early successional habitat restoration efforts because:
 - ✓ (1) Quail are declining at a faster rate than any other grassland bird species;

- ✓ (2) Quail are an iconic symbol of South Carolina rural culture and traditions and have a devoted and organized grassroots constituency based on their tradition as a hunted species;
 - ✓ (3) Planning efforts for quail are more advanced at the regional and national scales than those for other grassland bird species;
 - ✓ (4) A range-wide recovery plan, the National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative, with specific habitat and population objectives has been developed; and
 - ✓ (5) All declining grassland bird species are expected to respond to habitat restoration efforts targeting quail.
- National Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI)
- ✓ Unified strategy to restore wild quail.
 - ✓ Nine core principles which provide justification for bobwhite restoration.
 - ✓ Prioritizes technical and financial resources from state agencies and conservation partners.
 - ✓ Incorporates landscapes with the highest bobwhite restoration potential through the use of Biologist Ranking Information (BRI).
 - ✓ Divides the state into four NBCI Focal Regions based on BRI.
 - ✓ The next step is to establish focal areas within the regions that are a minimum of 1500 acres
- NBCI PRINCIPLES
- ✓ HERITAGE:
Northern bobwhites (*Colinus virginianus*) are traditionally a valued part of our nation's cultural, rural and hunting heritage. Widespread restoration of wild quail populations to huntable levels will have myriad positive societal benefits for individuals, families, landowners, communities, cultures and rural economies.
 - ✓ STEWARDSHIP RESPONSIBILITY:
Reversing long-term and widespread population declines of wild bobwhites, associated grassland birds, and the native grassland ecosystems in which they thrive is an important wildlife conservation objective and an overdue stewardship responsibility.
 - ✓ HABITAT PROBLEM:
Long-term, widespread population declines for bobwhites and grassland birds arise predominantly from subtle but significant landscape-scale changes occurring over several decades in how humans use and manage rural land.
 - ✓ SOLUTION IS HABITATS ON WORKING LANDS:
Bobwhites and other grassland species can be increased and sustained on working public and private lands across their range by improving and managing native grassland and early-succession habitats, accomplished through modest, voluntary adjustments in how humans use rural land.

✓ INTER-JURISDICTIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES:

State fish and wildlife agencies bear legal authority and leadership responsibility for bobwhite conservation, and migratory grassland birds are a federal trust resource; however, the vast majority of actual and potential native grassland habitat is privately owned.

✓ PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATION:

Restoration success depends on a network of deliberate, vigorous and sustained collaborations with land owners and managers by state, federal and local governments as well as by corporate, non-profit, and individual private conservationists.

✓ STRATEGY:

Success is reliant on long-term, range-wide strategic planning combined with coordinated, effective action at all levels of society and government, to address conservation policy barriers and opportunities that could have the needed landscape-scale influences.

✓ ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT:

Principles of adaptive resource management must be embraced to both inform and increase the efficiency of management and to satisfy multi-resource and multi-species needs.

✓ LONG TERM:

Following a half-century of decline, restoration of bobwhite and grassland bird habitats and populations across their range will require determined conservation leadership, priority, funding and focus for decades to come.

- Establishing a State Quail Council - Would include state agencies, federal agencies, and private landowners who share the vision of bobwhite management and facilitate and monitor habitat restoration progress on a statewide scale.

- Address questions or comments to Willie Simmons, simmonsw@dnr.gov

Comments from Amy Overstreet, SC NRCS, Outreach Coordinator

- 2015 is the International Year of Soils, and Amy is detailed to national headquarters presently to work on a communications plan for how the agency will celebrate this special year. She is working with the Soil Science Society of America (SSSA) to create the outreach plan which will include materials and resources for all our conservation partners to use. She is also finishing up the design and writing of the 2015 Soils Calendar, which reflects the 12 monthly themes that SSSA designated. You can learn more about the International Year of Soils, and see the 12 themes for the year, by visiting <https://www.soils.org/IYS>.

Closing Comments from Jack Lewis, Acting State Conservationist:

- Thanked Gene Kodama for use of the SC Forestry Commission facility and also thanked all for taking time out of your schedules to be here.
- Lots of information covered – feel free to contact NRCS with any questions you may have via phone or email.
- Thanked all partners, speakers and everyone for attending.
- Have great week!

The meeting was adjourned at 12:00 p.m.

The next SC State Technical Committee meeting date, time and location to be determined.