

State Technical Committee Meeting Minutes
Natural Resources Conservation Service, South Carolina
November 4, 2009

The Committee met at the U.S. Forest Service, 4931 Broad River Road, Columbia, South Carolina beginning at 10:00 a.m.

Attendees:

Niles Glasgow, SC NRCS State Conservationist, niles.Glasgow@sc.usda.gov

Craig Ellis, SC NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Programs,
craig.ellis@sc.usda.gov

Russell Hubright, SC Forestry Commission, rhubright.scfc@juno.com

Joy Cottle, Cottle Strawberry Farm, johdcottle@aol.com

Jennifer Jordan, Cottle Strawberry Farm, cottlefarms@aol.com

Meredith Murphy, SC Department of Health and Environmental Control Bureau of Water (SCDHEC), murphymb@dhec.sc.gov

Linda Floyd, FSA, linda.floyd@sc.usda.gov

Kenneth McCaskill, FSA, Kenneth.mccaskill@sc.usda.gov

Melvin Tobin, USFWS, melvin_tobin@fws.gov

Joe Cockrell, USFWS, joe_cockrell@fws.gov

Angela Yarborough, USDA-NRCS

Jeff Clark, Kershaw County Soil & Water Conservation District

Jim McLeod, Kershaw County Conservation District, mcleoudjh@bellsouth.net

Larry Boyleston, SC Department of Agriculture, lboylest@scda.sc.gov

Jill Miller, SCRWA, jill@scrwa.org

Billy Dukes, SCDNR, dukesb@dnr.sc.gov

Bill McMeekin, S.C. Farm Bureau, bmcmeeekin@scfb.com

Marc Cribb, S.C. Department of Natural Resources, cribbm@dnr.sc.gov

Welcome by Niles Glasgow, S.C. NRCS State Conservationist:

Glasgow called the meeting to order welcoming everyone to the first meeting of the 2010 fiscal year, for NRCS and the Federal Government's State Technical Meeting. He thanked everyone for coming and stated that the attendees are a vital part to implementing the 2008 Farm Bill programs that have to be administered.

Glasgow stated that the goal of the State Technical Committee is for advisory purposes to himself and the State Conservationists concerning the implementation of the Farm Bill programs. He stated that the ideas and input from the participants are, *"vital and needed, we want to address the resources in South Carolina using these Farm Bill programs to the best of our ability, and your input and ideas allows us to do that."*

Glasgow noted that in the meeting process a vote is not taken, rather everyone is free to express their ideas and opinions, and then as a group they come to a consensus regarding the attendees' issues and concerns. The NRCS then incorporates those ideas, issues, and concerns into the process of implementing the Farm Bill Programs.

Glasgow reviewed the past year stating that it was a very productive year in South Carolina utilizing the Farm Bill Programs. For example, the big program that was administered in the State last year was the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, or EQIP. Last year there were about 29 million dollars in requests for funds, and a little over 7 million dollars allocated to South Carolina. These figures show that there is a big gap between requests and what is received. One of the big factors is the ranking process to determine who gets into a program in any particular year.

Glasgow reiterated the message that if a producer doesn't get in on one years funding they need to continue to sign up. The producers should sign up each year, if he/she doesn't get in one year they may get in another year. He went on to briefly discuss some of the programs.

Another big program in South Carolina is the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program. There has been good success in that program over the past year. A little over a million dollars has been utilized in the WHIP program.

The Wetland Reserve Program was also a very successful program. Of the 6.8 million dollars allocated last year to that program, all but 99 cents was obligated.

The Conservation Stewardship Program rewards producers for doing good conservation work that involves cropland, forestland, and pastureland. A signup was held at the end of the past fiscal year, with approximately 72 thousand acres allocated, about half forest land and half crop land, there were over 200 thousand acres signed up for the program. Nationwide there were 12 million dollars allocated by Congress in the Conversation Stewardship Program and nationwide there were over 33 million acres. Glasgow stated that all the states signed up pretty vigorously in that program.

Glasgow introduced the program packet and directed attention to an issue that was brought up at the last committee meeting regarding erosion control and peach orchards. He stated that there was a document in the packet describing the NRCS conservation position

regarding erosion control and peach orchards.

Glasgow then recognized Craig Ellis, S.C. NCRS Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, to present the various program tools.

Factors for Allocation Formulas for EQIP and WHIP:

Ellis first reviewed what criteria the NRCS had come up with, and then asked for input regarding those criteria. He stated that it is National Policy this year that EQIP and WHIP allocations to the local levels have to be based on a fact-based formula, and that formula has to be in a format that can identify where the factors come from that make up that information. The NRCS put together spreadsheets with factors that they think should be considered in trying to develop this formula to allocate funds down to the local level.

Ellis stated that what the NRCS tried to do was pick items that were pretty obvious and wouldn't take a whole lot of research to come up with the numbers; and that were based on the ag census for South Carolina, the rapid watershed assessment of the state, information from DHEC, and the forestry acres coming from the South Carolina Forestry Commission. The NRCS tried to go to sources where they could get "hard fast numbers" to try to put this together. Ellis stated, "we tried to keep it simple but cover the major topics."

Ellis began by explaining the 2010 EQIP Allocation spreadsheet, stating that the operational structure in South Carolina is based on a watershed approach with each of the watersheds having about four or five counties. The information is listed by county but could also be summarized by watershed.

The plan is to develop the factors based on the watershed approach but keeping it county specific at the same time. The ranking will be one through forty-six. He stated that with input from this meeting as to which of the factors is most important, a multiplier can be put in thus allowing it to be calculated down to a percentage of the dollars as to how much funding will go into the watersheds. At that point each watershed will determine what percentage of their allocation will go into the established sub-accounts.

Ellis opened the floor for discussion on the factors listed on the EQIP spreadsheet asking if the participants felt more factors needed to be considered, or if some of the factors needed to be taken off. Some of the concerns discussed included:

The rank multiplier for some of the factors that needed more emphasis. How would the multiplier be arrived at? Would the multiplier apply to the categories and would all counties get the same multiplier?

Ellis explained that the ranking number would separate out the county, while the multiplier would separate out the resource being addressed. There was a thorough discussion concerning the category regarding the number of farms by county, and a way of determining which of the legitimate farm concerns were being addressed. For example a 5-acre hobby farm vs. 500-acre row crop farm, the impact of each is so widely varied would that category give an accurate assessment, or would it skew the data in favor of one type of producer over another? The question was posed if number of farms by county is even a reasonable category to be considered, or could there be a better breakdown of exactly what the farms are? The discussion indicated that this wouldn't be a reasonable

category to be considered.

Ellis stated that by statute the size of the farm or the dollars requested cannot be used in the ranking criteria. By statute everybody has to be considered the same. A big farmer can't be given preference over a small farmer in terms of acres or the dollars of cost share they're requesting, and a large farmer over a small farmer.

It was asked if the number of farms in the county would have an impact on ranking without considering the environmental impact? Discussion ensued regarding animal waste management and other environmental impacts. A suggestion was made to exclude the number of farms from the criteria. It was the participants consensus that the category should be excluded.

Ellis stated that the funds would be divided into sub-accounts for distribution in order to track that enterprises compete against each other. For example, poultry producers aren't competing against timber producers for the same pot of money. He also stated that by statute 10% of the funding has to go toward new/beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers. The question was asked how a person would know if they were a disadvantaged farmer. The criteria is located on the website.

In the poultry category the participants had many questions concerning how the category was being considered. For example, whether the category was considering number of birds or number of houses/facilities? Turkeys vs. chickens? Waste management and impact of the facilities, and other issues specifically regarding the poultry category. Discussion ensued regarding the different types of poultry and poultry facilities, and the factors that could come into play with each.

Meredith Murphy from DHEC agreed to locate numbers of permits and

other information regarding poultry producers and provide those to the NRCS. Murphy also proposed to have the DHEC GIS people go county by county and do a percentage ranking. Ellis agreed to have DHEC do that ranking. She also said she would check on some of the data the NRCS pulled from the DHEC website, to insure the data was accurate concerning 303d impaired watersheds and existing 319 projects. After further discussion on having a separate category for turkeys and chickens, it was suggested that a further breakdown was needed in the poultry category.

The discussion then moved on to which categories should have a multiplier to give them more weight. It was stated that the local work groups will need to be specific in their questioning to target the specific local concerns that the groups really want to give priority to. Ellis stated that the groups should, "Zero in on where they want to put their funding."

Within the watershed the local groups will make the decisions as to how the money will be distributed. It is possible that some counties may not get funds in every category. Ellis stated that the goal is to make the distribution local while keeping it reasonably manageable with the sub-account method. This would allow the local watershed groups to decide distribution of the funds between the sub-accounts, and "hopefully they will consider how much they put in each one to ensure that every county gets some funding."

2010 WHIP ALLOCATION AND PLANNING

Ellis explained the spreadsheet for the WHIP Allocation and Planning. Discussion again returned to the number of farms by county and it was decided that numbers of farms should be eliminated from both the EQIP and WHIP criteria.

Next there was discussion over another way to enumerate the invasive species and T&E species. As one participant stated, "all invasive species are not created equal." It was proposed that these categories may need to be broken down more specifically. Example, Charleston having the highest T&E species, a lot of those could include marine species, such as whales, sea turtles, and things that may not apply very much or be given the same weight as other T&E species in other areas of the state.

In the invasive species category, it was also discussed whether or not it would be possible to find a breakdown of how much acreage is impacted by specific invasive species such as Chinese Privet and Kudzu. One of the participants stated that he would investigate if that type of data would be available from other sources such as the Forestry Commission and possibly other State and Federal agencies.

WHIP APPLICATION RANKING SUMMARY DISCUSSIONS

The WHIP Application Ranking was basically the same as the EQIP Rankings. However, Ellis explained how the point system is set and will break down on the ranking tools as follows:

According to new national directives, 25% of the points have to go to the national questions;

10% of the points have to go to an efficiency score;

The remaining 65% will be divided between the State and local questions, with the local having to have a minimum of 25%.

Ellis stated that last year the ranking tool was as follows:

20% on the national questions;
10% on efficiency questions;
30% on State questions; and
40% on local questions.

Ellis stated that the proposal for this year is to be as follows:

25% on the national questions;
10% on efficiency questions;
30% on the State questions; and
35% on the local questions.

This breakdown would allow the local questions and concerns to retain the biggest percentage.

A discussion ensued regarding the question on educational events, whether or not it needed to be kept in or eliminated. No consensus was reached immediately, but after revisiting the issue later in the meeting it was decided that the question would remain as is.

On the WHIP Application Ranking Summary, under the State Issues Addressed it was decided to eliminate question 6 which read as follows: "Will the management of the land identified in this application encourage the sustainability of a natural predator/prey balance which promotes diverse wildlife habitat and species richness typically found in South Carolina?" The question was eliminated.

EQIP APPLICATION RANKING SUMMARY DISCUSSION

On the EQIP General FA-Forestland Ranking Summary, it was suggested that question 12 under State Issues Addressed be changed to include the words "*or is a Certified Stewardship Forest.*" Question 12 would then

read as follows: *"Is the land offered in the application a Certified Tree Farm, or a Certified Stewardship Forest?"*

CSP Geographic Area and Resource Conserving Crops:

Ellis revisited a topic that had been discussed during the July 1, 2009, State Tech. Committee meeting regarding Resource Conserving Crops and the geographic areas of the State. In that meeting, after a presentation by SCACD's Greg Henderson, the participants made suggestions regarding additional Resource Conserving Crops being added to the list of qualifying vegetation. Ellis stated that the NRCS had decided that the State would be divided into three geographic areas, and new Resource Conserving Crops were added. A handout was included in the package explaining these changes.

The new Conservation Stewardship Program was then discussed. It was stated that there were about 420 applications under the new Conservation Stewardship Program; South Carolina was allocated around 73,000 acres; and at this time the field offices are finishing the ranking on these applications. Once the ranking has been completed the National Headquarters will then say who will be funded and how much money they will receive. The NRCS will then begin writing plans and developing contracts on those funded applications.

It was reiterated that the new Conservation Stewardship Program is a continuous sign up. Participants were urged to let folks know that if they didn't get in before the cutoff date for the first round of funding they need to come back and sign up again. There will be another cutoff coming up in January 2010. Participants were reminded that all the information is on the website.

WRP Ranking

Ellis stated that the WRP is essentially the same as last year with the exception of "a little adjustment on the points." Per direction of National Headquarters at least 50% of the points have to go towards some type of hydrology restoration. The NRCS has shifted the points slightly to make sure that 50% of the points met that criteria.

Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative

Ellis stated that last year the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative had two applicants, and both were accepted. One applicant was for WHIP, which was the Foothills RC&D, for their trout stream restoration project.

The other application was with the South Carolina Poultry Federation. The NRCS has worked out an agreement so that the NRCS will provide funds; and the South Carolina Poultry Federation is going to work with local producers, primarily on new operations or people setting up new operations. The NRCS will provide the funding for new operators' CNMP and for their resource concerns when they're building their facilities.

If the new operators have potential erosion problems or some other type problems, when they're constructing their facilities the NRCS is going to treat those other concerns at the same time and provide cost share for them.

In order to participate in this program an operator would need to go through the South Carolina Poultry Federation where they will have some type of a ranking process. The Poultry Federation will then submit a

number of applicants to the NRCS field offices to have the contracts written and funded.

Ellis stated that somewhere around a half million dollars a year will go into this effort. The NRCS has already worked out an agreement with the South Carolina Poultry Federation and that process is in place.

Participants were urged if they know somebody who is getting into poultry operations, to send them through the Poultry Federation and the NRCS can help with some of the funding. Ellis stated that the goal of this program is to try to stop some of the issues in the beginning before they can become real problems.

Another topic Ellis discussed was that there had been a reauthorization of the Grassland Reserve Program (GRP) in the new Farm Bill, and that last year was the first year in a few years that the GRP had been funded. Last year there was a lower response to this program than the NRCS had hoped for.

Ellis stated that if the participants knew of any interest in this GRP, it's a continuous signup, they should have them go by the local office and sign up. Last year all of the funds allocated for the GRP were not used and the unused portion had to be returned. It was the consensus from everyone present that, if possible, no money should be returned.

The question was asked if easements as well as rental agreements would be funded this year under the GRP. Ellis responded that during the past year the desire was to do all rental agreements, but that in the entire State last year there were only four applicants for rental agreements, and

all four were funded.

There were only two applicants for GRP easements last year. The NRCS offered both easement applicant's funds, one took the funds and one did not. Ellis stated that South Carolina sent back 300-something thousand unallocated dollars under the GRP last year.

The question was asked whether or not the GRP would cover the establishment of grasslands and/or what type of land would be covered. It was discussed that the GRP does not typically cover the establishment of grasslands. However, it will cover renovation to some extent. Ellis stated that the GRP is supposed to be for managed production grasslands.

Glasgow discussed that one of the big challenges for the NRCS over the last few years has been to get the old contracts, written in the 2002 Farm Bill, on schedule. At this time about 85% of those old contracts are now on schedule. In the past getting people with those old contracts on schedule has been an issue, but good progress has recently been made. Glasgow stated that South Carolina is now one of the leading State in the East region for being on schedule.

Glasgow emphasized that one of the big challenges we have is to make sure that what's in those contracts gets put on the ground exactly as written, and that the proper payments are made.

Glasgow also reported on the status of the ongoing audit at the NRCS, reiterating the various directions the NRCS is addressing simultaneously. The NRCS is working on many concerns and is making progress in many areas at this time.

It was discussed that the WRP program is a good program. However, one of the biggest challenges the WRP program faces has been that there haven't been a lot of dollars allocated for technical assistance. Technical assistance is needed to follow up on those WRPs to make sure that everything is being done as applicants are accepted into the program.

Glasgow also stated that technical assistance was going to be one of the emphasis items on the old Wetland Reserve Program to make sure land owners are doing what they are supposed to be doing under that program.

Finally, Ellis mentioned that if the group knew of anyone interested in becoming a certified Technical Service Provider (TSP), contact Erica Westbrook, State Resource Conservationist, at erica.westbrook@sc.usda.gov, for more information.

Glasgow thanked everyone for their attendance and participation, and reiterated that if anyone had any suggestions or thought of any other matters that needed to be included, feel free to contact the NRCS.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 11:46 a.m.