

State Technical Committee Minutes
Richmond, Virginia
July 27, 2010

Attendance: Jack Bricker (*NRCS*), Wade Biddix (*NRCS*), Gary Moore (*DCR*), Jay Howell (*DGIF*), Patricia Stansburg (*VABF*), Dave Byrd (*USFWS*), Dan Solomon (*NRCS*), Chad Wentz (*NRCS*), Betsy Bowles (*DEQ*), Dale Gardner (*WS*), Emily Horsley (*FSA*), Ron Wood (*NRCS*), Keith Boyd (*NRCS*), Julie Hawkins (*NRCS*), Seth Coffman (*TU*), Jack Parker (*VA Pork*), Diane Dunaway (*DCR*), Mike Oesterling (*VIMS*), Rick Meyers (*DCR*), Kristen Hughes-Evans (*CBF*), Sarah Richardson (*DCR*), Matt Poirot (*VDOF*), Dean Cumbria (*VDOF*), Todd Groh (*VDOF*), Maribeth Pettigrew (*NRCS*), Alica Ketchem (*NRCS*), Jim Westin (*VIMS*, via teleconference).

Wade Biddix, NRCS, acknowledged the teleconference participant, Jim Westin, then welcomed the group present in the conference room and opened the meeting at 10:04 a.m. He encouraged all to get handouts from the front table. Introductions were made by attendees, stating names and agencies represented.

Jack Bricker, NRCS State Conservationist: Opening Comments – We are winding down our fiscal year. It has been a productive, hectic year for NRCS staff; we've been stretched thin. A major event has been the AP Hill Boy Scout Jamboree and our involvement with the Conservation Pavilion. Typically 25,000 scouts see the pavilion during these jamborees. It is a big outreach effort for NRCS. Another project that has involved much time and effort is the Chesapeake Bay Initiative. Things are on track for us to receive in FY-11 our portion of an estimated \$72 million to be split between the Bay states. That should equate to about \$17 million for Virginia. This is the first year we've dealt with the Emergency Watershed Protection Program since I have been in Virginia. Because of snowstorms this past winter and major damage, there's been much work to clean out downed trees and woody debris in the far Southwestern counties of Virginia. We've also participated in administering USDA American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA funds) – several projects in Fairfax County specifically; also in Southwestern Virginia and Lee County in the far western part of the state with mine reclamation work. We have brought on a few more staff and had lots of opportunities.

Emily Horsley (FSA) – CRP – Handout; see progress from last month. We have 30 or so new contracts and are continuing to add new signups.

Gary Moore (DCR) – getting everything incorporated in new tracking program. Emily and I will set up informational meetings around the state.

Diane Dunaway (DCR) – 6 new CREP easements lately; 37 total in the state. Article just came out in *Appalachian Woodlands* about CREP and Easements. She has information/breakdowns on locations of easements for anyone interested.

Back to **Emily** – General CRP sign-up that is coming up was announced yesterday; will be starting August 2nd and go through August 27th. This is different from regular sign-up because this is a competitive sign-up and based on environmental benefits index (EBI) scores, may or may not be accepted. Only accept most environmentally beneficial; has info on how EBI is calculated. Passed out practices offered under general sign-up. This will be incorporated into manual. Conservation plan will be written with NRCS staff. Last sign-up like this was in 2007. Information that can help people increase their score. Cap of 32,000,000 acres. Cost is also a factor in the EBI; once maximum rate is determined, if people accept less, that can be a factor in the rating. Still can receive full cost-share benefits.

Farm Bill Status Report – Wade – Reviewed Barry's *FRPP/WRP* and restoration activities handout.

We are fully engaged in easement programs and have advertised for a new employee to help with easements. The position has closed, but the person has not yet been selected. Once in place, we will be increasing our push re: the *WRP* program. We had to turn back over \$3 million this year because we didn't receive enough applications – this pertains to land that was drained prior to 1985. It is a continuous sign-up. We need help from our Partners to promote this program.

Chesapeake Bay – Wade – *Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) Program* – another handout reviewed. This is a pool of money set up so farmers can sign up and don't compete statewide, just within certain areas. All three of these projects are in the Shenandoah Valley area. Only 5 projects were approved in the whole CB area, and we received 3 of them. *CIG grants* – set up state wide for the first time; received 7 applications, were able to fund 2 – one was re: winter cover crops and the other one is for slug management in no-till. Those two used \$143,000 of \$150,000 allocated.

Patricia Stansburg asked re: nutrients in soil and enhancing management; clarification was provided.

Dan Solomon (NRCS) – *EQIP and CBI* – Handout reviewed – current as of the middle of July. There is no money left on Chesapeake Bay CCPI projects; even though there is some money still showing, that will all be spoken for by the end of August. There's still a backlog of unfunded high priority applications. Nothing was funded that wasn't high priority. On EQIP side, some money shows as remaining, mostly reserve, but the rest has been allocated since the middle of the month. With this program too, there is a large backlog of unfunded applications waiting to be rolled over into next fiscal year's program.

CSP - 173 applications preapproved. About 46 forestry applications approved; the rest were agriculture. We have requested more money from NHQ to fund the rest of our applications. All CSP contracts and fund obligations have to be completed by the end of August.

Question re: groundwater conservation and what kind of projects that covers. Response was *center pivot irrigation*. Comments was made that folks who had old systems are switching over to 85% efficient system, so there is less withdrawal from deep water aquifer. Another question: If someone wanted to switch to more like a low-level water (like a lawn sprinkler system), would this be an area they could apply for? Response: There has been some request for that, but out of qualified area. To qualify, they would have to go to 85% rate, but thinks they are located outside area of consideration.

Ron Wood (NRCS) – Reviewed *WHIP* program: see handout. We have 77 contracts for WHIP – looking for another 6 more to come in during the next few weeks; special initiative in SE section of VA that combines with other southeastern states – longleaf pine habitat targeted. That money came late in the season. Still trying to get the word out and get sign-up.

The organic initiative is a separate pot of money and our contracts are up from 8 contracts in 2009 to 31 in 2010. Big winners were conservation crop rotation and seasonal high tunnels. Good year; hoping for better next year.

Mike Oesterling (VIMS) – Re: shellfish industry is considered agriculture for purposes of the Farm Bill. Thanked group for letting him come and share. Stated that he's the new kid and trying to understand all the letters and acronyms; said "I do understand CBWI." Shellfish comes under CBWI – pilot year this past year. Handout – economic status – re: hard clams and eastern oyster. Virginia is largest producer of hard clams – \$21 to \$22 million market value. Also seed business that adds another 4-5 million, so \$26 million industry. Basically comes from two Eastern Shore counties of Accomack and Northampton. There has been a slight decline in hard clam production – related to overall economic situation in country – people not going out to eat as much, etc. About 90% of product is sold outside of the state so the money that comes into the state is almost all "new" money.

The oyster culture industry has continued to expand over the last 5 years; it's grown about 10 fold. Half shell marked for single oysters and other focus is shucking industry. Spat on shell – larvae produced in onshore hatchery, then shells are planted overboard and are for shucking industry. Next year will report shucking market. Look at graphs in report. Approximately 12.6 million half shell sold in 2009. Seeing some oyster aquaculture expansion on Eastern Shore, but main expansion is on western side. 90% of \$145 million of hard clam profit comes from Eastern Shore.

The bottom line is that the shellfish industry in VA is expanding. Virginia is recognized as a leader in production, marketing etc. Mike commented that it is nice to have USDA paying attention to them.

Industry concerns on coverage of aquaculture pilot: 1st - Seaside area is not covered by pilot. Programs available to bayside people aren't equally available to seaside people. Currently seaside has gear management monies. They would like to see it expanded. One area for expansion is nutrient removal. Oysters are 1.4% nitrogen by weight; every time oysters are removed, a significant amount of nitrogen is being removed. Good data is available for what is being removed. When oysters die in water, elements go back into water. When oysters are removed, elements are obviously removed permanently from water. It's a novel approach to think about nutrient exchange. There is an 18-24 month growth period with improvements with root stock. Triploid vs. diploid – sexually sterile oysters, no energy goes into reproduction. They are working on growth characteristics, not just disease resistance. Appearance differences: triploid is half shell marketable during summer when diploids would be reproducing.

There were questions back and forth among the committee. Oyster gardening involves more than 2,000 oyster gardeners in state. Not commercial, but also interested in fast growth – has largest “green” organization in state – largest marine program in the state. Is oyster gardening a nascent industry; will we see expansion? Response: In VA, we're maxing out, but in other places, it's still growing. Only has been within the last three years that commercial industry in VA has produced more oysters than oyster gardeners. Consumption, conservation and restoration are the three reasons for oyster industry. Some people grow only for their own consumption; some for donation to sanctuary programs, etc.

The 2nd issue that is a concern revolves around disease testing for shellfish. Endemic diseases impact clams and oysters. Rhode Island has funded this program. Disease testing is expensive. NRCS has helped. Water quality is supposed to be the criteria. Some of disease pathogens do affect water quality. When animals die, infected particles that are released in water spread disease.

A 3rd area of concern: Petroleum spill kits – all farmers are supposed to have on their vessels, but most don't have them.

Jack asked re: cost for testing. It costs about \$400 per sample for testing. VIMS covers the expense right now. Pathologist says they are still doing gratis for VA farmers but are having to look closely at that service. Out-of-state people who use our shellfish pathologists are charged \$400. When products are shipped to any state, it has to be certified that they are disease free. A sample has to be provided with each shipment (shipments separated by 30+ days have to have new tests).

Six contracts were funded under CB aquaculture – **Jim Westin** (*on telephone*) reported. Two contracts have been completed and been approved. Four more are still going. No one signed up for clam nets. Smaller processors were the ones who applied. Since it was new, there was concern about paperwork and unknown factors. The six who did sign up were allowed additional cages and were allowed to use air drying instead of power washing for recycling. (Cages are substantial; nets aren't reused. In other states, nets are being removed and NRCS helps pay for waste transfer). Most of the contracts were small: \$20-\$25,000 at a time that they were recycling. There were more applications but they didn't get all their eligibility info in, so there is more interest. **Dan** asked about projected future interest. Response: they think it has been a good

experience for those who have participated, so future sign-up should be more widespread. People who were not eligible in the past have learned why so would make themselves eligible next year.

It was suggested that if expansion is desired, there needs to be a “sit-down” to confer about lessons learned. **Jack** proposed that be done “on-site”.

Wade asked, “What is the estimate of the water quality benefit with the current pilot?” Response: It’s definitely localized, but it is a LOT.

Wade addressed VIMS first concern re: bayside/seaside inequity. CB funds can’t be used for seaside, but perhaps a pilot can come through EQIP funds. The challenge is to get the best “bang for our buck”; it’s just a matter of trying to determine the water quality benefits of this kind of project; we always have more applicants than money.

Seth Coffman (TU) – stream restoration – A meeting was held two weeks ago to discuss opportunities for stream restoration and bank stabilization projects, mostly in Valley. Sediment being delivered in waterways is mostly bank erosion. Fencing and buffers can help recovery. They are proposing bank protection projects – reconnect streams to flood plains, connected to livestock water facilities; need to eliminate problem of sediments coming into streams. A lot of aquatic life in streams is damaged by sediment, silt, etc.

Jack and Wade and Galon were involved in a conference related to this with Fish and Wildlife, etc. NRCS doesn’t really have the staff to provide engineering assistance to this. There is also a need for funding. They have come up with a plan. Some streams in certain locations may need extra boost to stabilize. How can that be stabilized? A lot of watersheds, a lot of erosion – how to hone in to focus on the most needy places? Fish and Wildlife has established a stream assessment protocol to determine need. Bank erosion, etc. can be calculated. Projects take time, designing and engineering – pilot project is a possibility to get funding to get started.

Question: how are you identifying sites? Response: Depends on willing landowners – they can come to us, but we can approach them, too. No other way to identify sites and willing landowners without being on the land really; have to look for indication where streams have gotten wider. Sometimes you can just see where it’s not connected to the floodplain anymore.

We are trying to understand strategy. CCPI might be a great fit for joint effort for several watersheds, even if they are scattered across the state. If it is in CB, it has to be water quality connected – can’t be habitat. It was suggested that the Virginia Stream Alliance is pretty active – VCU professor Greg Garmin may have already identified streams that need restoration. Funding – may be possible through Corps of Engineers. Seth knows about Alliance; will look into database. Initially just talked about grazing and pasture – that’s the primary need in Valley. It could also apply to cropland.

Comment re: EPA and fencing out cattle – there are other issues causing streams to erode; with no perennial vegetation on banks, freezing and thawing caused big chunks of bank to fall in – questioned re: cause – that’s a separate issue – will try to adjust to natural geometry. Can be historical, often unknown. Has to focus on watershed; can’t do one part of a stream and not another. Should be a natural balance. Progress has been made with Fish and Wildlife. Decision not needed today. No money during this fiscal year, but looking for what may be happening in FY11. It is certainly something to consider. Currently have a project going through CCPI and with another grant that, once completed, will give an idea of what can be accomplished.

There was a suggestion about trying to focus on a stream where even an urban part of watershed could be involved so more variety is included/involved. Want to demonstrate how a community can address problem. **Wade** asked Seth to come up with potential watersheds.

2011 FB Program Development - Wade: Framework – In 2010, there were fairly significant changes to practices and offerings. NRCS is not proposing to do a lot of changes to that program. A few practices are being considered. We have our local work groups (LWG) where partners get together and discuss issues. Comments are coming in from LWGs. They are due by end of July. We are hoping to be able to work with those comments. JED meetings also solicited comments. Dan covered key points made during JED sessions.

Two page hand out with suggestions: What are improvements we can make to be more user friendly?

Want to kick off programs earlier; not wait until funding comes. Proposing Dec. 30th as first cut-off date. That will give more time for planning. We want to *emphasize* good planning. For forestry, we usually run into February. We want to have first ranking period cut off January 14th for forestry and orchard pest management applications. Will that work? Response: the earlier the better.

We're trying to get forestry and orchard rankings first. In SE VA, planting is done in January. We can still do waiver process, but can't guarantee funding. Continuous sign-up but ranking is based on what's come in prior to specific cut off dates.

Don't anticipate major changes: just tweaking – emphasize good conservation planning – that's one of the main reasons for putting cut-off periods earlier. Want good conservation planning to be more emphasized in the ranking process. Also want to add grazing practices to animal waste concerns so we can combine these into one contract. Asking Dave Faulkner to look at current well caps – propose to increase it to \$6,000 per well. Also, we want to give good applications that are not in higher priority areas more of a chance to be funded. We're proposing to add access road practice into program so farmers have more flexibility with where to put feeding operations in remote areas of farms. This will require a cap on the amount allowed.

Windrowing and poultry houses – has been controversial – want to delete that from the program. We only have four contracts with that practice anyway. Delaware and Texas are the only other states cost-sharing with that practice. Ammonia release is a major issue. Discussion: Strong support for removing that practice. There has been some dependence from poultry people on this program, so there is a balance issue. Questionable practice re: air and water quality. Another comment from **Dale Gardner** re: LWG with whom he was involved supporting getting rid of practice and there were poultry growers in group.

The second page of handout has proposed additions. Chemical handling facilities need to be added to that list (not on handout). We do get requests for these sometimes; they are expensive. Dan asked Chad for comment regarding treatment of run-offs from barnyards – vegetative treatment areas. That is one of the practices that's being considered as an alternative for animal production areas. Question re: why separators haven't been offered in the past. Response: That was looked at more as a production practice, but it's been reconsidered. Discussion of various kinds of separators for reuse of bedding materials and reuse of solids after separation.

Herbaceous weed control used to be paid for under pest management standard. New standard to take the place of that is being proposed. NRCS proposes to take out 595 payments from grazing and incorporating the cost-share into herbaceous weed control or brush management.

Ron noted that vineyards are up for consideration re: pest management on orchards. Virginia Tech has expressed that research may not be “there” yet; may have to wait another year. Ron brought up **Mark Schoenback**'s ideas about adding 590 Nutrient Management to EQIP – Organic farming. There was agreement to continue to watch for potential expansion of the Organic offerings.

Discussion about containment under chemical handling facilities; note that cost is high. It is a water quality issue, but there seems to be limited interest. We only get a few requests. It covers a lot of different kinds of storage – chemical, bulk liquid, etc. With no strong support, chemical handling facilities will not be offered in the program in 2011.

Subcommittees: A September 9th subcommittee meeting was proposed to discuss these suggestions prior to Sept 28th meeting. Previously suggested subcommittees:

Animals in Confinement
Pasture/Grazing
Cropland/Erosion Control/Soil Quality
Wildlife Issues
Wetlands
Forestry
Specialty Crops

Wade proposed making 4 groups and starting meetings at 10 a.m. on the 9th. The committees will be: 1) EQIP/CBWI, 2) WHIP, 3) Easements, and 4) Wetlands. He asked everyone to sign up for committees on which they'd be interested in serving. (Signup sheets were provided.)

It was decided that the Subcommittees for EQIP/CBWI would start at 10:00 a.m. on September 9th and the Subcommittees for WHIP, Easements and Wetlands would begin at 1 p.m. that day.

Gary asked about CB monies. Is there an assumption there will be a 75% increase in both programs? Response: It's ramping up and then going back down. **Jack** commented that EQIP monies will probably be about the same as we've had the last few years. Question: So new practices can be added without negatively affecting former programs? Response: We're not proposing a whole lot of changes.

Agency Reports:

TU - Seth Coffman - Money will be allocated in Rockingham and Frederick County CCPI within the next week.

DCR – Rick Meyers – Mapping work in eastern half of VA using aerial technique regarding fish and wildlife refuge funding. Over 4000 acres of phragmites in the Back Bay area. This is bad news. How much and locations make it easier to manage problem. This is not just public land; this is throughout the watershed. There are a lot of non-native species. DCR has been aggressively attacking the problem for years, but it is very difficult to control. This includes 12-14 thousand acres in VA and is expanding at a rate of 5-15% per year. DCR is treating 400 acres this summer and that is the end of current availability of funding. State Parks scrapes together some monies, but there is no dedicated funding for this purpose. Wade suggested that might be a good area for a CCPI grant. Rick will call Wade for information.

Patricia Stansburg mentioned the Virginia biological conference. Elliot ?? who wrote the book on high tunnels will be main speaker, Feb 9 and 10 in Danville.

CBF – Kristen Hughes-Evans – Heard from Libby. It looks like they have received lots of sign-up for CCPI funds and are working to make sure they're not overlapping with RC&D CCPI applications.

DOF - Dean Cumbria – NRCS and tree farm committee have signed a new MOU. It is a real boost for landowners who can coordinate programs. Also, reviewed the “news release” handout – this is the 1st 3-way agreement like this in the nation. It has been a year and a half process to develop documents. They are on their website.

DCR - Diane Dunaway – There is considerable funding on the table for incentive payments. She reminded everyone to keep that in mind.

NRCS - Keith Boyd – Conservation Technology Information Center (CTIC) is holding a tour on August 3rd in New Kent County. It was \$100/per person, reduced to \$25 for federal employees. Sign up with Colonial SWCD. Also, the Ag Expo – 5th of August (Westmoreland Co.).

DEQ – Betsy Boyles - EPA came out and did another round of inspections on Eastern Shore; potential CAFOs. DEQ staff also with them - visited five sites, all poultry facilities. Waiting to hear results of findings. It went well. Mostly housekeeping or storage issues, i.e. if ditches are around facility, stormwater can pick up dust and move out. Understanding is that EPA won't be back this year. Quick and easy certificates are not the way to go. They are proposing individual permit process. It's already set up and public info is out there. Certificate would be site specific. That has the potential for best management. They have tried to contain waste previously, but also need to consider storm water issues. Info from EPA goes straight to individuals; DEQ is not a party to penalties, etc. DEQ just gets a copy of reports. Two orders came out of Valley inspection. They will probably result in some kind of administrative orders. Poultry waste regulation is set to go to the Board in September.

DGIF – Jay Howell – DGIF is about to release their strategic plan in August. They are starting ranking process and will be putting out changes for next year. They are still committed to their 5 year plan.

The next meeting is scheduled for September 28, 2010, at 10 a.m. **The Subcommittee meetings for EQIP/CBWI will start at 10:00 a.m. on September 9th and the Subcommittees for WHIP, Easements and Wetlands would begin at 1 p.m. that day.**

Wade closed the meeting at 12:30 p.m.