

Minutes – Texas State Technical Advisory Committee  
December 8, 2009 - Radisson Hotel, Austin

Meeting called to order by Don Gohmert at 9:40am. Mr. Gohmert welcomed attendees and made a few opening remarks. Susan Baggett served as moderator for the meeting.

Report from Farm Services Agency

Micky Woodard discussed Conservation Programs. He gave a status report on the Emergency Conservation Program for Hurricanes Rita and Ike and wildfire. He discussed the counties that have been designated for disaster assistance and described their Biomass Crop Assistance Program (BCAP). The CRP discussion contained the following items:

- Approximately 660,000 acres that will expire from CRP in TX in FY 2010
- There is not expected to be an extension program in FY10
- Some are saying that there will be another general sign-up in FY2010
- Described some facets of a general signup such as direct attribution and AGI.

Report from NRCS Program Staff on Farm Bill Programs

Mark Habiger provided flow charts that explain the application and approval processes for Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Security Program (CStP). Copies of these are attached.

He discussed the Statewide Resource Concerns:

- The possibility of minimizing the number of concerns to allow us to direct more funds to county-based applications
- The benefits of moving all wildlife resource concerns to the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) where Texas has gotten ample funding in recent year
- several statewide resource concerns have little to no activity in FY2008 and FY2009

**COMMENTS FROM THE FLOOR:**

Two recommendations that the numbers of statewide resource concerns be reduced.

One comment that wildlife resource concerns be kept in EQIP

One person expressed frustration with CStP. He is confused by the program and stated that he thinks the state or national leadership over the program was faulty. He said that field office personnel were made to be the bearers of bad news where NRCS backed out on a contract. He wanted to know how CStP works with EQIP and WHIP. He reiterated that employees at local level were great but that program was rolled out “in frenzy”. He suggested a common sense approach.

One comment questioned why the acronym for “CSP” did not change – this may have added to the confusion people have.

**RESPONSE FROM NRCS:**

Habiger explained the recent federal financial audit process over contracts and payments and said that the Texas State Office tries diligently to keep producers “safe” from problems and complicit payment issues. The Texas State Office is given guidance from our national NRCS office and we try to interpret it for the field and send out good information. We have little control over program policies and guidelines. He urged those

in attendance to be involved in future Farm Bill development and to submit their concerns nationally; the 2012 Farm Bill is already being developed by Congressional subcommittees and aides.

Report from STAC Subcommittees:

AFO/CAFO – Ross Wilson gave this report. The subcommittee would like to see AFO/CAFO to remain as Statewide Resource Concerns but would like to see resource concerns other than water quality issues addressed programmatically. He stated that we should be looking to address air quality issues since they are current problems in certain locations that will continue to challenge us in the future.

EASEMENT- Claude Ross reported that this subcommittee will meet in January 2010.

FEVER TICK – No report.

FORESTRY – Bill Oates gave report. This subcommittee is agreeable to moving the longleaf pine statewide resource concern to WHIP and agrees with deleting the “reforestation” statewide resource concern, which was targeted at areas affected by Hurricanes Rita and Ike.

GRAZING LANDS – Kent Ferguson, State Rangeland Management Specialist, gave the report and stated that they concur with elimination the Statewide Resource Concerns for Brush Control that have had little or no use. He introduced Steven Diebel who made a presentation on green flatsedge and proposed this to be a new Statewide Resource Concern, which has infested about 190,000 acres in the coastal prairie regions of Texas.

IRRIGATION – Ron Gentsen gave the report and stated that their group is pleased that the pay schedules are moving toward the 50% to 60% rate of sharing costs for practices. Since irrigation practices tend to be very costly, this will help the funds to go farther. The subcommittee agrees with doing away with little-used Statewide Resource Concerns. He reported that agricultural irrigation uses 56% of the state’s water and Texas has average water use of 17 inches per acre as opposed to that of California which is 31 inches per acre. The subcommittee is very interested in educating the public about the value of water used by agriculture in Texas.

WILDLIFE- Don Wilhelm gave the report; the group supports eliminating the Atwater’s prairie chicken and longleaf pine statewide resource concerns. They would like to keep the other wildlife statewide resource concerns in EQIP, but would like to relocate the treatment area of the Rolling Plains Quail eastward and southward.

COMMENT FROM THE FLOOR: It was suggested that NRCS perform more outreach for WHIP.

Reports on the Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative (CCPI) projects:

Houston Toad CCPI – David Wolfe with Environmental Defense made the report. He stated that they are working to attract applicants. They have been working with NRCS on the EQIP pay schedule to include conservation practices that are needed to manage or create habitat for Houston toads. All work is in close vicinity to known populations of Houston toads in Bastrop and Lee Counties. The CCPI is a five-year project and involves \$1.1 million in Farm Bill funds and \$1.2 million in private landowner funds. Currently they have 3 interested landowners that control 3000 acres.

COMMENT FROM THE FLOOR: These conservation activities benefit bobwhite quail and wild turkeys, as well as toads.

Canadian River CCPI- Vernon Beville with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department gave this report on a project between NRCS and the National Wild Turkey Federation; the purpose of the project is to control invasive brush species (saltcedar, Russianolive and eastern redcedar) in the Canadian River riparian zones.

#### State WHIP Plan

Russell Castro, State Wildlife Biologist, presented the State Plan for the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (attached).

#### Easement Programs

Claude Ross, NRCS Programs Staff, gave this report:

- Healthy Forest Reserve – Texas proposal was not approved by national NRCS office
- Wetland Reserve Program
  - Texas goal for new enrollments is 50,000 acres per year for next three years
  - We will employ an aggressive outreach plan to reach interested applicants
  - There will be a continuous ranking and funding periods until we get close to our goaled amount
  - Reviewed Geographic Area Rate Caps based on Land Value Survey (attached)
- Grassland Reserve Program
  - We have funded 5 easement for 1465 acres in FY2010 and 9 rental agreements
  - Texas has \$4.6 million for GRP in FY10
- Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program
  - Continuous sign-up
  - Easements must be cost-shared with conservancy-type entity
  - March 1, 2010 will end our first ranking period for applications under this program

GENERAL DISCUSSION: Mr. Gohmert explained that the proposed changes to the Statewide Resource Concerns will be for this year only. Then we will analyze and rethink future plans. He reasserted the fact that all recommendations are heard. Mr. Gohmert will take all comments regarding statewide resource concerns into consideration and make his final decisions in late January 2010.

Baggett stated that water quality will continue to be a rising issue in Texas and it may be assumed that production agriculture will be a target for criticism. We will likely face the challenges of more and more regulations. She would like to fully staff a Water Quality Subcommittee of the STAC. Please let her know if you are interested in serving on the Water Quality Subcommittee of the STAC. John Foster with Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board had agreed to chair this subcommittee.

COMMENT FROM THE FLOOR:

Member stated that he enjoys the reports and information about new challenges and believes that we can best treat resource problems by pushing as much money as possible down to the local level.

Meeting adjourned at 12:45pm

*Respectfully submitted,  
Susan C. Baggett  
February 5, 2010*