



ASSOCIATION *of*  
FISH & WILDLIFE  
AGENCIES

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## **Agricultural Conservation Committee Report**

Chair: Mark Reiter (IN)

Vice-Chair: Dan Forster (GA)

September 12, 2016

Marriott Philadelphia Downtown, Philadelphia, PA

### **Committee Charge**

The **Agricultural Conservation Committee** is charged with advancing administrative and legislative policies which create, enhance, and protect fish and wildlife habitat and expand recreational access on farm, ranch, and forest land. The Committee is also charged with helping document program and policy benefits and outcomes, as well as assessing the habitat risks and impacts from biomass production, food and fiber production, and urban expansion to inform Committee policy recommendations.

Meeting convened from 10:15am-12:00pm and 1:00-3:00pm on Monday, September 12, 2016, chaired by Director Mark Reiter (IN). 46 participants were in attendance, including 28 current Committee members.

### **Scheduled Discussion Items**

#### **Frontiers in Agriculture Speaker Series**

- The Committee continued its Frontiers in Agriculture speaker series with a presentation on Precision Agriculture and Precision Conservation by Ryan Heiniger, North Region Manager for Pheasants Forever, followed by a Committee discussion.
  - o In recent years, interest in precision agriculture has grown significantly as new technologies become more accessible to farmers and producers. Precision agriculture is defined as a “management system that is information and technology based, is site specific and uses one or more of the following

sources of data: soils, crops, nutrients, pests, moisture, or yield, for optimum profitability, sustainability, and protection of the environment.”

- In addition to the benefits provided to agricultural production, the tools employed through precision agriculture also has the potential to provide benefits for wildlife. Mr. Heiniger discussed the opportunities for precision conservation, as well as some examples of applied precision conservation.

### **Grasslands Status in the Great Plains**

- Jeff Nelson, Deputy Director of World Wildlife Fund’s Northern Great Plains Program, presented on WWF’s work on tracking grassland conversion to cropland across the Great Plains region. The presentation provided an overview of the threats to Great Plains grasslands, the goals and methodology of the Plowprint report, and the status of grasslands in the region.
  - Grasslands are steadily being converted, and losses outweigh restored acres.
  - Grassland conversion rates in Canada are regularly higher than in the US.
  - 53 million acres converted in Great Plains since 2009; 60% of new conversion in cropland (2015).
  - Tracking cumulative conversion and restoration separately gives unique insights.
  - Grassland birds are in steady decline, and several species could be listed if trends continue.

### **Federal Agency Updates**

- Brad Pfaff and Martin Bomar, Farm Service Agency
  - FSA staff provided an overview of the status of the Conservation Reserve Program. Legislated Mandate Limits CRP Enrollment to 24 Million Acres by October 1, 2016
    - Current CRP Enrollment at 23.9 Million Acres (July 2016)
    - First CRP Grasslands Approvals (101,000 acres)
    - General CRP Signup 49 Approvals (411,000 acres)
    - Retention of CRP Wildlife Conservation Practice Enrollment
    - CRP Mid-Contract Management Review
    - CREP Riparian Forest Buffer Incentive in Chesapeake Bay
  - State Acres for Wildlife Enhancements (SAFE)
    - 38 Participating States; 98 Approved Projects
    - 1,924,899 Acres Loaded in Conservation On-Line System (COLS)
    - 1,750,000 Acres Allocated
    - 19 States/31 Existing Projects Requesting 290,400 Additional Acres
    - 7 States/9 New SAFE Projects for 265,000 More Acres Proposed
    - No Action Taken on Requests for Additional/New Project Acres

- Less Than 60,000 Acres in the CRP SAFE National Reserve
  - Constrained Level of Funding in the PAYGO Bank
  - Limited Availability of Acres under the CRP National Enrollment Cap
- Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program
  - Partnership with State governments to address high priority conservation concerns
  - 33 Participating States, some with multiple CREP projects
  - Focus is on water primarily though some State address wildlife habitat concerns as well.
- CRP Grasslands
  - Helps landowners and operators protect grassland, including rangeland, and pastureland, and certain other lands while maintaining these lands as grazing areas.
  - Continuous offer signup with offers are batched periodically.
  - Grasslands threatened with conservation to other uses receive priority.
  - Includes enrollment in 19 States
- Farmable Wetlands Program
  - Restored wetlands improve groundwater quality, helps trap and break down pollutants, prevents soil erosion, reduces downstream flood damage, and provides habitat for water birds and other wildlife
  - Includes enrollment in 23 States
- Looking Ahead
  - Balancing soil, water, and wildlife benefits derived from CRP, meeting producer expectations, and staying within Congressional acreage caps.
  - Continuing partnerships
  - Interest in maintaining open communications and networks to the wildlife community.
- Dave Walker, US Fish and Wildlife Service
  - Lesser prairie-chicken taken completely off of ESA listing, no ESA status of LPC at present.
  - Working with FSA on conference opinion on CRP Grasslands.
  - Initiated status review of monarch butterfly; June 2018 decision.
  - Commitment of \$4 million for monarch conservation over the next four years for a total of \$20 million.
  - Working with NRCS on predictability and monarchs.
- Bridgett Costanzo, Natural Resources Conservation Service
  - Working Lands for Wildlife 2.0 notice earlier this summer: Beginning in FY2017, NRCS is encouraging state offices to use the WLFW model to identify more target species and priority landscapes. State NRCS offices

were asked to submit proposals to NRCS HQ identifying the landscape, target species, threats, acreage goals, and other information that address the critical elements that comprise the WLFW model. Proposals were due by August 31, 2016. 13 proposals were received, NRCS is evaluating the proposals now.

### **2018 Farm Bill Working Group**

- Committee staff provided an update on AFWA's plans for developing policy priorities and platform for the 2018 Farm Bill. The Committee created a 2018 Farm Bill Working Group to meet for a multi-day meeting in January 2017 to identify reauthorization principles/priorities and develop a draft platform to be adopted by AFWA at the AFWA Business Meeting at the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in March 2017. Timeline:
  - o November 2016: ACC Working Groups hold conference calls to follow up on discussions at the Annual Meeting, identifying and defining specific priorities.
  - o November 2016-January 2017: AFWA staff and ACC/working group leadership organizes and compiles outcomes from these discussions.
  - o Mid-January 2017: Farm Bill WG meets for multi-day meeting (details TBD)
  - o Beginning of February 2017: AFWA staff distributes draft AFWA platform and recommendations to Farm Bill WG for review and additional comments.
  - o End of February 2017: AFWA staff sends draft to full ACC for review; state Farm Bill coordinators brief Directors.
  - o 2017 North American: ACC proposes adoption of AFWA Farm Bill platform at AFWA Business Meeting.

### **Review of Committee Work Plan**

- Due to time constraints, the Committee was unable to hold a discussion on the 2017 ACC Work Plan. Committee staff will distribute the draft work plan and solicit comments via email following the meeting, which will then be finalized and submitted to the AFWA Executive Committee in December.

### **Action Items**

- ACC Working Groups hold conference calls in November/December to identify and define priorities for 2018 Farm Bill.
- Review draft Farm Bill platform prior to North American; state Farm Bill coordinators brief agency Directors on AFWA Farm Bill platform in preparation of adoption at the AFWA Business Meeting.