

**Agricultural Conservation Committee**

**Chair: Jim Douglas (NE)**

**Vice-Chair: Kevin Robling (SD)**

**Date: March 13, 2020**

**Time: 8:00 AM – 12:00 PM**

**85th North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference**

**Room: Grand Central Ballroom A, Hilton Omaha**

**Omaha, NE**

**Agenda**

8:00 AM Call to Order Review Agenda

8:05 Introductions

8:10 Approval of Minutes from the September 2019 Annual Meeting

* *The minutes from the September 2019 Annual Meeting in St. Paul, MN were approved.*

8:15 Working Group Reports (5-10 minutes each)

* + *Chairpersons from each working group provided high-level summaries of their meetings. There were no action items from the working groups.*
* CRP – Todd Bogenschutz, IA; Sal Palazzolo, ID
* Forestry – Lisa Potter, MO; Mark Jones, NC
* EQIP/CSP – Mike Kuttle, WA; Mark Gudlin, TN
* Easements – Catherine Wightman, MT; David Breithaupt, LA
* RCPP – Steve Riley, TX; Eric Zach, NE

8:50 Public Access WG Discussion – Sal Palazzolo, ID

* *The interim rule for the VPA-HIP was the first conservation program rule issued after the 2018 Farm Bill. The interim program rule was part of a larger “Miscellaneous Conservation Provisions” rule. AFWA’s comments focused on streamlining and providing flexibility for reporting and reimbursement processes, designating dedicated VPA-HIP staff within NRCS, extending the award period to at least 5 years, and providing states with the flexibility to use award funds on technical assistance/habitat restoration, and financial assistance/access agreements.*
* *In early March 2020, NRCS announced the VPA-HIP awards for the Farm Bill cycle. Of the $50 million appropriated to the program, NRCS will obligate $49 million to 27 awards, 26 of which were won by state fish and wildlife agencies.*
* *TRCP, with support from REI, is producing reports that tie VPA-HIP expenditures to acres of increased public access.*
* *Several states discussed using VPA-HIP to provide access to landlocked public lands.*
* *States discussed whether they received their full funding request, and if not, how it would impact their projects. Two states noted that their award didn’t match their proposed funding level, and that the difference between actual and proposed funding corresponds to certain line items.*

9:00 Partner Agency Updates

* FSA
  + *Beverly Preston, CRP Program Manager, provided an update on the Conservation Reserve Program. At the time of the meeting, the 54th General Signup had just concluded, but the results had not been released.* 
    - *This was the first general signup to include SAFE practices. Of the 3,839,488 acres offered, 3,418,597,or 89%, were accepted. 512,958 acres were offered under SAFE projects, of which 487,573, or 95%, were accepted. The EBI cutoff was 210. The national average annual rental rate per acre for enrolling this acreage is $55 per acre. Prior to the signup results, 21.95 million acres were enrolled in CRP. 5.36 million acres will expire in 2020, while the cap moves from 24 to 24.5 million acres. Looking forward to the end of FY20, CRP enrollment will be at 20 million + whatever is enrolled through the ongoing continuous, grasslands, SHIPP signups and upcoming CLEAR30 signup. At the end of FY20, it is likely that the gap between enrollments and the acreage cap will be wider than it was between at the end of FY19. In FY21 and FY 22, 3 and 4 million acres will expire, while the cap grows to 25 and 25.5 million acres, respectively.*
    - *In addition to the general signup, FSA is conducting a continuous signup throughout FY20, a grasslands signup (3/16/20-5/15/20), a SHIPP signup (3/30/20-8/21/20), and a CLEAR30 signup (7/6/20-8/21/20).*
  + *NRCS will work with producers to finalize conservation plans by September 11, 2020, after which FSA collects producers signatures, enters contracts into the system, and seeks county committee approval.*
  + *Tony Grossman asked about the use of AGI waivers for the Livestock Indemnity Program. Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission previously requested for waivers to be used to help with panther depredation issues with cattle. FSA is generally more lenient in granting AGI waivers for conservation programs than it is with commodity programs.*
* NRCS
  + *Danielle Flynn, NRCS National Biologist, offered to conduct a webinar on CART, either at the state or national level. State agencies’ staff can direct questions to NRCS state level program managers, who participate in weekly CART meetings.*
  + *NRCS state offices now have the authority to announce program availability for EQIP, CSP, and ACEP, and these dates will vary by state.*
  + *NRCS has not developed guidance or procedures for AGI waivers in cases of “special environmental significance.”*
  + *At the time of the meeting, NRCS was accepting public comments on the ACEP and RCPP. NRCS will be publishing a correction to the RCPP interim rule, which will extend the comment period.*
  + *Flynn directed the state agencies to watch the series of webinars focusing on ACEP implementation that NRCS recorded with American Farmland Trust and Land Trust Alliance.*
* USFWS
  + *Dave Walker, Farm Conservation Program Coordinator, provided an update for the USFW. The FY20 budget for the Partners and Coastal Programs received a ~$5million increase in appropriations. The President’s FY20 budget maintains these levels for the most part.*
  + *On the personnel front, Aurelia Skipwith was confirmed as USFWS Director, and Kate McGregor as Deputy Secretary of Interior.*
  + *The Secretary has prioritized access for hunting and fishing and wintering and migration habitat for big game. Secretarial Order 3362, in particular, will be implemented with an eye to enhancing habitat on private lands.*
  + *USFWS has a new prescribed fire policy for non-USFWS lands, which provides clarity to staff on liability issues as we as their roles and responsibilities. The policy will encourage staff to include prescribed fire in projects.*
  + *After the Lesser Prairie Chicken was delisted, a petition for listing came in. USFWS has until May 2021 to update the species status assessment and make a decision on the listing proposal. In fall 2019, USFWS completed a conference report on LPC. The report added regulatory predictability to encourage landowner conservation in the LPC Initiative.*
  + *USFWS is collecting information on conservation actions (from USDA programs, states, USFWS, private individuals, etc.) as it prepares its listing decision. USFWS is participating in the Keystone Monarch Collaborative and Farmers for Monarchs, where it’s encouraging the use of Habitally to track conservation actions.*
  + *USFWS is also in the very early stages of an ESA Section 7 consultation with USDA FSA to provide regulatory predictability options for CRP in ten central states.*
  + *USFWS is also anticipating the imminent approval of a CCAA for rights of way management for monarchs and pollinators.*
  + *USFWS is creating a pollinator advisory team, which has evolved from the original conservation structure. \*
  + *USFWS will continue to offer WLFW regulatory predictability for 8 national species, and will accept new projects as requested at the state level. Recently approved projects include mussels in Texas and pollinators in the Northeast.*
  + *BLM is working on a National Seed Strategy for restoration and enhancement activities. They contracted with NASS to assess plant production needs and survey stakeholders on plant production needs.*
  + *Bill White asked how the murder of the forest guardians in the monarchs’ Mexican wintering grounds will impact USFWS and monarch conservation efforts. Walker said he’d follow up with the USFWS international program staff. The eastern monarch wintering count, which was released shortly after the meeting, showed a 53.22 percent decrease in hibernation habitat. The western population count also showed a decline.*
* USFS
  + *There were no USFS staff in attendance.*

9:30 MAFWA Monarch Conservation Update – Ed Boggess and Claire Beck, MAFWA

* *Claire Beck provided the MAFWA Monarch Conservation Update.*
* *NFWF recently announced funding opportunities for monarch and pollinators. Funding is available for habitat work and technical assistance for private landowners. Landowners applying to technical assistance have to demonstrate that they are coordinating with the state NRCS office.*
* *Some in the agricultural community want to be included in the right of way CCAA, or to receive prelisting assurances through an agriculture specific CCAA. Beck noted that the right of way CCAA does not include adjacent lands.*
* *As part of the Midwest Landscape Initiative, MAFWA is trying to offer a comprehensive landscapes and pollinator goals. Some states have milkweed stem goals, whereas other have acreage goals. MAFWA is working with the University of Arkansas GIS specialists, especially in drier climates where it’s hard to understand what’s occurring on the ground. The regional goal is to have 1.3 billion stems, and recent research shows that we are closer to the goal than expected.*
* *The states discussed the popularity of CP42 in CRP, as well as monarch practices within CSP.*

9:40 Discussion of Resolution in Support of Private Lands Conservation – Bill White, MO; John Morgan, KY; Steve Riley, TX

* *Bill White and John Morgan provided a recap of the week’s Private Lands Symposium.*
* *The group turned to discussing a proposed resolution to support private lands. The resolution will be considered at the 2020 Annual Meeting.*
* *The group discussed the potential establishment of a Private Lands Committee, whose charge would be to promote technical assistance delivery and help states stand up their own private lands programs and allow states to share experiences on targeting TA efforts that span existing committee jurisdictions. Committee members would include wildlife chiefs, deputies, and other positions of that ilk. The group discussed how the proposed committee would differ from and overlap with existing committees, such as the ACC and Bird Conservation Committee. The group agreed that it may be good to draft and send out the proposed committee charge.*

10:00 Break

10:15 Frontiers in Agriculture

* Science-Based Trials of Rowcrops Integrated with Prairie Strips (STRIPS) – Dr. Lisa Schulte Moore, Iowa State University
  + *In her presentation, Dr. Schulte Moore recounted the conception of the STRIPS project on a wildlife refuge in 2003, its expansion to commercial operations, and its translation from science to policy in the 2018 Farm Bill and CP43 Prairie Strips CRP practice. FSA provided funding CRP monitoring, not research, funding.*
  + *The project produced multifaceted data, looking at prairie strips’ benefits from the perspectives of habitat, hydrology, and soil health. The project examined 44 measures and generated 900,000 data points on the impacts of placement, cover type, and % cover on water quality and quantity, vertebrate wildlife, yield impacts, pollinators and monarch, soil health and carbon dynamics, and partial budgets.*
  + *The research was championed by stakeholders, including farmers and farm organizations, which helped it gain credibility as a practical solution. Prairie strip trial expanded to 63 farms, covering 630 acres on 5,500 acres of farmland.*
  + *The group asked a variety of questions on* 
    - *prairie strips as a source of IPM biocontrol;* 
      * *The research found evidence of beneficial insects, but didn’t see evidence of biocontrol. One reason is that even control fields are surrounded by a matrix of grasslands.*
    - *bird nesting success;* 
      * *Prairie strips provided for successful bird nesting for dickcissel and red wing blackbirds.*
    - *occupancy and use of mammals, pheasants, and waterfowl;* 
      * *STRIPS researchers used cover boards to survey small mammals and herps. The occupancy rate is extremely low in agricultural landscapes, and prairie strips do not provide have higher occupancy rates than other conservation features.*
      * *There is ongoing research tracking GPS-collared pheasants on three farms.*
    - *pollinator diversity;* 
      * *STRIPS researchers noticed that bee diversity is positively correlated with cover diversity. Honeybee hive weight and lipid stores are also greater on farms with prairie strips.*
    - *maintenance and management;*
      * *The strips are tightly controlled at the Neal Smith Wildlife Refuge site – 33 species mix, with mowing to help establish the stand and haying in the fall. One year, researchers successfully implemented prescribed fire.*
      * *On commercial fields, researchers recommended more diverse mixes, and told producers that first season mowing was critical. Researchers learned that letter livestock graze during establishment resulted in greater weed pressure.*
    - *economic incentives to encourage farmer participation in STRIPS research*
      * *The Walton Family Foundation helped offset some seed costs, at a rate of $40 per acre. STRIPS did not provide any rental payments. IN some cases, STRIPS researchers worked with NRCS offices to cobble together funds from EQIP/CSP.*
    - *impact on yield*
      * *Researchers have documented a 1:1 yield, but did not see difference in profitability. This research wasn’t done at a commercial scale, so researchers are unsure how representative the data are. Moreover, researchers are primarily relying on publicly available data and crop models. The researchers did some profitability modelling using precision software*
    - *Economic value of N and P reductions;*
      * *STRIPS researchers are doing a willingness to pay survey in NE.*
    - *Whether seed mixes will be published*
      * *STRIPS doesn’t have a specific seed mix for use on commercial operations, but has worked with the Tallgrass Prairie Center*
      * *MDC tries to use a ~30 species mix with more than one species in each function group, seeded at 40 seed/ft2.*
    - *STRIPS’ role in the IA Nutrient Reduction Strategy*
      * *Since the test sites were tiled, the STRIPS data doesn’t provide nitrogen data.*
* Conservation and Crop Insurance Collaborative; North American Grasslands Conservation Act policy proposal – Aviva Glaser, National Wildlife Federation
  + *The AGree Coalition consists of commodity groups, farmers, researchers, and environmental nonprofits. Its two Farm Bill priorities were to remove the disincentive in crop insurance policy to plant cover crops; and to pass the Ag Data Act, which would track conservation practice data and make it available for researchers. The group was successful on the first count, as RMA now classifies cover crops as good farming practices, and has set forth guidelines for their termination.*
  + *The Ag Data Act didn’t make it entirely into the Farm Bill, but was partially incorporated. USDA is required to identify the data sets it already has available that related to conservation practices and the effects on farm and ranch profitability, and to prepare a report for Congress detailing the data sets it has available, how those datasets can be provided to university researchers with appropriate safeguards for data privacy, and what authorizations are needed from Congress to maximize the potential for research benefits. This report has already been transmitted to Congress.*
  + *Glaser then outlined NFWF’s national policy proposal on grassland conservation.*
    - *The proposed legislation, mirroring NAWCA, would create a North American Grassland Conservation Plan which includes key regional grassland conservation plans for at least four grassland regions that the Grassland Conservation Council identifies and a grant program to conserve North American grasslands through easements, restoration, management, and other activities.*

11:40 Recovering America’s Wildlife Act (RAWA) Update – Sean Saville, AFWA

11:50 Other Business

* *Saving Species on Private Lands: Unlocking Incentives to Conserve Wildlife and Their Habitats* – Chris Segal
* *Mark Witecha asked about grazing land conservation initiatives going on in other states. In WI, there is a grassroots push for an initiative to provide grass-based producers to access technical assistance and direct them to farm bill programs. NRCS previously funded local coalitions of grass-based producers, but the funding was cut. Vice Chair Robling asked if other states were interested in collaborating, noting SD’s likely interest.*
* *NBCI noted that it would announce the availability of its Director’s position in the coming weeks.*

12:00 PM Adjourn

*The meeting adjourned at 10:56 AM with no action items to bring forth to the Business Meeting.*