

NASCA LWG Webinar
May 28, 2014

Maine in General

- Maine has a very diversified farming community, with about 8200 farms farming 400,000 acres of cropland. – Lot of forestry – state is 90% forested.
 - Largest crop is potatoes, with 380 farms on 55,000 acres - \$540M
 - 287 dairy farms – 32K cows; \$135M = value
 - Livestock and Poultry - ~\$60M
 - Eggs - ~\$60M
 - Wild Blueberries - ~\$51M – 60,000 acres
 - Greenhouse and Nursery - ~\$58M
 - Fruits and Vegetables - ~\$48M
- Maine is having an increase in small farms growing vegetables or value added products
 - Making cheeses – goats, sheep, etc. even water buffalo
 - Farmers' Markets, CSAs, Sr. Farm Share
- Most farms in the U.S. are small operations, with 69% of all farms reporting < \$10,000 in sales of ag products.

What's Working Well with the Local Work Groups

- Helps to provide input and direction from folks who are working the land for prioritizing the local needs for conservation programs.
- **6 Statewide Funding Pools:** CAPS; Organic; Energy; high tunnel; water conservation/use; forestry.
- Organic and energy initiatives mandated in Maine
- **Unique Local Funding Pool:** animal waste/NM; cropland; pasture; blueberry; small farm soil health.
 - These are established at the **field office** level, so that similar local applications compete with each other, and not with other areas of the state.
 - The blueberry and small farm soil health pools are unique to my district's area.

- Local pools of money (within a district) means that local folks, i.e., at the District level, can control where some of that money can go, and how much gets allocated for certain types of practices
- LWG is a mechanism for passing on recommendations to the STC
- Appears more flexible now than in the past
- Bottom line here is that local folks have some control over practices that get funding, what the pool of money will be for a particular practice, at least theoretically.

What's Not Working Well

Not surprisingly:

- Insufficient funds coming to NRCS for doing all of the projects that should be done.
 - Told what we are getting will fund barely 32% of the need, and no question that's a high figure
- Insufficient technical assistance for projects – either Farm Bill projects or otherwise
- Not enough TSPs – too many hoops to jump through to get certified
- Long lead time for getting projects funded and, therefore, implemented – Need to sign up by July or August of this year to get funded for next year – makes for a long lead time for getting things done.
- Insufficient farmer/stakeholder participation in the process
 - Not much continuity if meet only one time per year
 - And then likely won't have the same players the following year
- Some landowners just don't like working with the government
 - Philosophical reasons
 - Too much paperwork
- Some say LWG is overly influenced by NRCS folks – may be the case in some areas

As most of you know:

- NRCS and FSA and other agencies have been consolidating offices.
- For example, Maine has 16 soil and water conservation districts: Two districts consist of two counties, and one, large district up north –

Aroostook –where most of the potatoes, broccoli are grown – consists of three districts, because of that counties large size – we call it “The County”.

- We have a 2-county district – Knox and Lincoln
- As a result of NRCS pulling out of Knox County, the district was split
 - Knox went with Waldo County to the North, a large county with lots of farms
 - Lincoln went with Kennebec to the West, a large county with lots of farms
- Is the original district of Knox and Lincoln counties receiving as good funding now as it would have if the splits hadn’t happened? Not sure
- Awards may get biased to a particular county for local political reasons or certain biases? – Difficult to assess.
- And I’m not saying that consolidations are necessarily good or bad for farming and conservation work. If the cost of keeping an office open in relation to the output of services, certainly it should be evaluated.
- Is something to keep in mind and be wary of as these consolidations and changes occur around the country.

Recommendations for Improvement

A question to ask ourselves:

- Do we need to do more strategic planning for determining conservation needs, and where, when, and how do we do it?
 - LWGs as they currently exist are not a good place to be doing long-term strategic planning
 - In-depth resource assessments are not the focal point of LWG meetings
 - Likely would be of benefit to have SWCDs do more assessment work, and would if we had the funds and could afford more staff to do it.
- Enhancing funding is a difficult task, but perhaps to get more funding.....
- Need aggressive marketing of conservation programs and farming – by whom?
 - SWCDs themselves
 - Farm Bureau

- Watershed groups/Land Trusts
- Cooperative Extension
- Problem is, we now have competition from a lot of these groups doing similar programs in some cases.
- They are fighting for their own programs and survival.
- Make an effort to get more producers involved in the process for getting funding and for establishing funding priorities – squeaky wheel gets the grease
- More education of kids in the schools
 - Educates them about the importance and value of conservation and farming
 - Conservation Fair
 - Envirothon
 - Poster/Essay contests
 - Workshops
 - They will educate their parents
- Is no one answer or magic panacea
- Most of what needs to be done requires money, time and talent.
- We have the talent, the knowledge and the ambition.
- Finding the money and the time will be difficult to achieve.