

# Agriculture Water Quality Partnership Forum Meeting

## Meeting Minutes

Wednesday, March 1, 2023, 10:00 a.m. – NOON



## Meeting Summary

### Welcome and Introductions

*Michael Woods, Illinois Department of Agriculture, and Joan Cox, University of Illinois Extension*

Michael welcomed everyone to the Illinois Department of Agriculture. Joan Cox facilitated the meeting with the team from University of Illinois Extension assisting with meeting minutes, technology, and online support. Joan continued the welcome noting that the Extension Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy team is growing. She introduced Amanda Christenson and Emily Steele to the group. Amanda will be assisting with working group coordination and facilitation, as well as data organization for the biennial report. She comes to the team with many years of experience in program coordination for Extension throughout Central Illinois. Emily Steele has a background in journalism and communication with Extension. She will be helping with biennial report production and communication support for NLRs.

### Bureau of Land & Water Resources and Division of Natural Resources Updates

*Michael Woods & Brian Rennecker, IDOA*

Michael and Brian shared three updates.

- 1) IDOA received funding from the Climate Alliance to survey producers and Soil and Water Conservation District Staff on barriers to implementing BMPs that are climate-smart. They are looking for input on the survey from partner groups. The draft survey will be sent to the AWQPF for review and testing.
- 2) IDOA will be working with SWCDs to roll out Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities, a program bringing together partners to discuss the climate side of our activities and the challenges and impacts of climate in the ag industry. More information will be forthcoming.
- 3) Expanded funding was allocated to hire conservation planners throughout the state. IDOA has hired 21 out of 40 conservation planner positions. They are looking for a diverse group of candidates with many different backgrounds and skills. Members are invited to share the position announcements and questions can be directed to IDOA. They are working to fill all positions by the end of the year. Please note they do not want to take employees from SWCDs and need new folks to fill the positions, so they are not simply shuffling staff.

### Tillage Metrics Update

*Elliot Lagacy, Illinois Department of Agriculture*

Elliot noted that the last tillage transect survey report was done in 2018 and that there were challenges to completing that survey due to the pandemic and other safety concerns. He went on to introduce the OptIS Tillage tool as a potential replacement. Elliot demonstrated the interactive nature of the tillage data map for the group. He then opened the floor for discussion about whether we should use the tillage data from OptIS as a replacement for transect survey data in this upcoming biennial report. The consensus was that folks valued the transect survey, but if OptIS is the best option for tillage data then we should use it in the NLRs Biennial report instead of omitting tillage data altogether.

### USDA NRCS Database & Conservation Practice Nutrient Reductions

*Trevor Sample, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency*

Trevor reported on the January Hypoxia Task Force Coordinating Committee meeting. The Natural Resources Conservation Service presented information on the Mississippi River Basin Initiative and National Water Quality Initiative scorecards for FY 2021, which include outcomes and impacts from the nutrient reductions of the conservation practices implemented through these programs. Scorecards also include state funding levels and national nutrient and sediment loss reductions. Trevor shared the MRBI and NWQI 2021 Progress Reports. He hopes NRCS will provide nutrient reduction data for these programs specific to our state to utilize in future INLRS reporting. It is currently deemed internal data not ready for release. These nutrient reduction impacts data may be helpful for the Gulf Hypoxia Task Force states.

### **NLRS Biennial Report Status**

*Joan Cox, U of I Extension*

Joan outlined the measurements used in the report and highlighted some new additions to the upcoming report. She reminded the group that NLRS partner narratives are due today, March 1, 2023. Partners may submit a short 2-3 sentence summary of their programs that will be included in the main body of the report, and up to three pages in an online Partner Updates Appendix. The members discussed the Future Strategic Actions of CH 4 and the Looking Ahead section in CH 8. Erin Bauer, ISWS, asked about projects that were proposed but not funded, which may help align future partnerships for funding. Partners were invited to explore further discussion. Michael Woods suggested that the AWQPF members populate a table listing the grants applied for, partners, and amounts. Joan outlined the production timeline, noting that partners will be notified when it is time to review their sections. Policy Working Group members will receive draft sections for review on June 8th. All editing will finish by August 7th. Design work finishes Sept. 25<sup>th</sup>, and the online version is anticipated for Nov. 20th. The print versions should be ready by December 6th.

### **Partner Updates**

The following members provided updates: KJ Johnson, Illinois Fertilizer & Chemical Association; Julie Armstrong Hewitt, Illinois Nutrient Research and Education Council; Raelynn Parmely, Illinois Farm Bureau; Jean Brokish, Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership; Kris Reynolds, American Farmland Trust; Justin Ramey, Illinois Department of Natural Resources Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program. Joan read an update from Wendy Mueller, U.S. Department of Agriculture – Farm Service Agency.

### **Open Discussion**

Michael Woods asked Kris Reynolds to give an active legislation update. Kris mentioned Senate Bill 1701, the Partners for Conservation reauthorization act using the same sponsor as last year. It aims to double the funding for programs and operations of conservation districts. They are looking at ways to best utilize cost-share programs and BMPs with the greatest impact on phosphorus and nitrogen reduction. He said that it feels like they are getting close to a consensus with the language in the bill. Folks can reach out to him or Grant Hammer at AISWCD if they have questions or want to voice support.

### **Meeting Minutes**

*In attendance: Ryan Arch, Illinois Land Improvement Contractors Association; Erin Bauer, Illinois State Water Survey; Shelby Best, American Farmland Trust; Dennis Bowman, University of Illinois Extension; Jean Brokish, Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership, American Farmland Trust; Eliana Brown, University of Illinois Extension; Amelia Cheek, Illinois Farm Bureau; Amanda Christenson, University of Illinois Extension; Dylan Cook, American Farmland Trust; Ken Copenhaver, CropGrower; Joan Cox, University of Illinois Extension; Rachel Curry, University of Illinois Extension; Chris Davis, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency; Megan Dwyer, Illinois Corn Growers*

*Association; Martha Gerig, Waterborne Environmental; Elias Getahun, Illinois State Water Survey; Nicole Haverback, University of Illinois Extension; Julie Hewitt, Nutrient Research and Education Council; Robert Hirschfeld, Prairie Rivers Network; Liz Hobart, GROWMARK; Lauren Lurkins, Illinois Farm Bureau; KJ Johnson, Illinois Fertilizer and Chemical Association; Jennifer Jones, Illinois Soybean Association; Conner Kaeb, GROWMARK; Layne Knoche, University of Illinois Extension; Elliot Lagacy, Illinois Department of Agriculture; Jacob Lux, Ducks Unlimited; Adrienne Marino, The Nature Conservancy; Lisa Muirheid Martin, Illinois CCA Program, Illinois Certified Crop Advisor Program; Oluwaseun Ojo, Illinois Department of Agriculture; Raelynn Parmely, Illinois Farm Bureau; Frank Rademacher, The Nature Conservancy; Justin Ramey, Illinois Department of Natural Resources; Brian Rennecker, Illinois Department of Agriculture; Kris Reynolds, American Farmland Trust; Trevor Sample, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency; Emily Steele, University of Illinois Extension; Guanglong Tian, Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago; Helen VanBeck, Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership, American Farmland Trust; Michael Woods, Illinois Department of Agriculture*

## **Welcome and Introductions**

*Michael Woods, IDOA, and Joan Cox, University of Illinois Extension*

Michael welcomed everyone to the Illinois Department of Agriculture. Joan Cox facilitated the meeting with her team from University of Illinois Extension assisting with meeting minutes and technology. Joan continued the welcome noting that the Extension Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy team is growing. She introduced Amanda Christenson and Emily Steele to the group. Amanda will be assisting with working group coordination and facilitation as well as data organization for the biennial report. She comes to the team with many years of experience in program coordination for Extension throughout Central Illinois. Emily Steele has a background in journalism and communication with Extension. She will be helping with biennial report production and NLRs communication support.

## **Bureau of Land & Water Resources and Division of Natural Resources Updates**

*Michael Woods & Brian Rennecker, Illinois Department of Agriculture*

The Bureau of Land and Water Resources distributes funds through the Partners for Conservation Program to Illinois' 97 soil and water conservation districts. Funds are used for programs aimed at reducing soil loss and protecting water quality. Michael reported that they had 129 applications between Jan 15, 2022, and Jan 15, 2023. The Bureau has added \$160,000 to the fund. There is a new partnership between the IDOA and Ducks Unlimited. They introduced a new Agriculture Conservation Specialist, Jacob Lux from Ducks Unlimited, stating this was his first day.

They received funding from the Climate Alliance to survey producers and Soil and Water Conservation District staff on barriers to implementing BMPs that are climate-smart. They are looking for input on the draft survey from partners. They have delayed the survey until summer 2023. They had planned to utilize their current intern with the Illinois Science Policy Fellowship to complete this task. However, this is a year when the ag census occurs, and they do not wish to detract from either survey. They will get another Science Policy Fellow to work on the survey this summer and the year to follow. The survey will be sent to the AWQPF for review and testing. Members should be on the lookout for that test survey. Similar surveys have been done in Indiana; however, they hope this survey will help us better understand the Illinois-specific barriers to adaptation.

Funding for Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities will be delivered through USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation in two pools. The 70 projects announced on September 14 are from the first funding pool, which

included proposals seeking funds ranging from \$5 million to \$100 million. The 71 projects announced on December 12, 2022, are from the second funding pool, which included proposals seeking funds from \$250,000 to under \$5 million. IDOA was recently approved to establish a climate smart initiative. They will be working with SWCDs to roll out the Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities, an initiative that brings together partners to discuss the climate side of our activities and the challenges and impacts of climate in the ag industry. More information will be forthcoming.

Expanded funding was allocated to hire conservation planners throughout the state. Part of the initiative is to hire more staff. Newly joined staff includes program coordinator, Kristen Heaton, and an assistant program coordinator, Allie Lashmett. They shared a document with the group showing staff hiring progress throughout the state. This document is included in the presentations pdf for this meeting. They have hired 21 out of 40 conservation planner positions. They aim to have a diverse group of candidates with many backgrounds and skills. Members are invited to share the position announcements and questions can be directed to IDOA. They are working to fill all positions by the end of the year. Please note they do not want to take employees from SWCDs and need new folks to fill the positions, so they are not simply shuffling staff.

## Tillage Metrics Update

### *Elliot Lagacy, Illinois Department of Agriculture*

Elliot noted that the last tillage transect survey report was done in 2018 and that there were challenges to completing that survey. He went on to introduce the OpTIS Tillage tool as a potential replacement. Conservation Technology Information Center has partnered with Regrow and The Nature Conservancy on the development, testing, and application of the Operational Tillage Information System (OpTIS), an automated system to map tillage, residue cover, winter cover, and soil health practices using remote sensing data. OpTIS-based data are currently available for the years 2005 through 2021. Elliot demonstrated the interactive nature of the tillage map for the group. He pointed out that some of the downward trends on the OpTIS tool reflect the downward trends of the transect survey, although the methodology is different. They list all their validation processes to help make their data better. He also pointed out the Winter Cover maps. However, he primarily focused on the usefulness of the tillage data for the NLRs Biennial Report. He then opened the floor for questions and comments about whether we should use the tillage data from OpTIS as a replacement for transect survey data in this upcoming biennial report.

## Q & A

Question (KJ Johnson): What are other states doing on cover crops?

Answer (Elliot Lagacy): *[Pulled up the data on the website and was able to compare Illinois with Indiana.]*

Discussion:

- (Trevor Sample) We want feedback from the group. We can either leave off tillage metrics or use this online tool for Chapter 4. Are you comfortable using this data source for tillage? Please discuss. We want your input.
- (Kris Reynolds) I have been a longtime advocate for the transect survey. I always saw a lot of value in that survey to track changes and the main change is that we can't get the county-level trend data through OpTIS. Also, there are some discrepancies between what this shows and the NASS survey in terms of cover crops, so there are some challenges on the cover crops side.
- (Trevor Sample) We would focus on only using the tillage data. There is value in reports at the county-level, but in past we presented data at the state level in the biennial report.

- (Joan Cox) *Asked the group about concerns and thoughts, especially in terms of county-level trend data.*
- (Trevor Semple) I think there might be a county view.
- (Kris Reynolds) Doing another transect survey would give new technical assistance staff a good opportunity to view and experience practices unique to the farms and producers within their own counties, and it has an enormous value for the counties.
- (Jean Brokish) Tillage data is important, and I think it is important to include the best data we have. While I agree that on-the-ground data is valuable, I think we should not skip updating tillage as and NLRs metric. If this is the best data source that we have, then we should use it.
- (Erin Bauer) Including this in the report highlights the slim amount of information that is available. Also, this tool adds breadth to the report. We can do more surveys later.
- (Trevor Sample) Do we want to report 2019-20-21 or just 2020-21 in the NLRs Report? 2021 is the most current data available, and the last updated tillage data in the NLRs was from the tillage transect survey which ended in 2018.
- (Michael Woods) We do not want to create confusion. I wonder which years OptIS data covers and suggests we go back to 2011 to show the trend line from our base line.
- (Joan Cox) If we do that, we need to make sure we report the timespan span of the old transect dataset to that of the new OptIS dataset for comparison.
- (Joan Cox) Everyone will have access to the website links in the presentation pdf. Members can reach out to the Steering Committee if they have further questions or comments about this data source.

Question (Michael Woods): Do we know any other states that ended their tillage transects survey?

Answer (Elliot Lagacy): Indiana is looking at doing both an on-the-ground tillage transect survey and also using OptIS as a validation tool for the on-the-ground survey. They are investing a large amount of money and work on the ground. OptIS may take over for the transect survey. They go out to find participants to help gather that information and compare it to satellite data. They have had discussions with Regrow.

## **USDA NRCS Database & Conservation Practice Nutrient Reductions**

*Trevor Sample, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency*

Trevor reported on the January Hypoxia Task Force Coordinating Committee, a group that has been meeting monthly for years. The Natural Resources Conservation Service presented information on the Mississippi River Basin Initiative and National Water Quality Initiative scorecards for FY 2021, which included outcomes and impacts from the conservation practices implemented through these programs. Scorecards also included state funding levels and national nutrient and sediment loss reductions. Trevor shared the Mississippi River Basin Initiative 2021 Progress Report and the Focus Area Map. He pointed out that NRCS Financial Assistance has converted 2,685 acres with 13 contracts and \$697,901 invested in Illinois. He shared that the Mississippi Basin-wide scorecards demonstrate that 2023 national goals have been met in the reduction of sediment loss, phosphorus loss, and nitrogen loss. In the fiscal year 2021 NWQI financial assistance for Active and Completed Contracts, over 500 contracts amounted to a total of 95,168 acres, totaling \$28,339,233 nationally. We have always included NRCS conservation practices in past NLRs Biennial Reports. We have always wanted NRCS programs reduction numbers, like we have from state cost-share programs. NWQI Nationwide Scorecard gave an overall summary FY 2012-21 that shows 81% of the sediment loss goal was met, 95% reduction in phosphorous loss goal, 80% reduction in nitrogen loss goal, and 106% of the goal of stream segment and lake

recommended de-listings were met. He hopes we can get nutrient and sediment load reduction data for these programs specific to Illinois. It was deemed internal data not ready for release yet by NRCS. These nutrient reduction impacts data may be forthcoming and may be helpful for the Gulf Hypoxia Task Force states. These data could also be combined with state cost-share program nutrient loss and sediment loss reduction data for a fuller picture of edge-of-field reductions from conservation practices.

#### Q & A

Question (Michael Woods): Can we reach out to other Hypoxia Task Force states and collectively reach out to NRCS to show interest in these data?

Answer (Trevor Sample): I plan to reach out, but it is up to NRCS to release it when they are ready to make the data shareable.

### **NLRS Biennial Report Status**

*Joan Cox, U of I Extension*

Joan outlined the measurements the NLRS uses in the report and highlighted some new additions to the upcoming report. She pointed out that we are continuing to incorporate resource measures which include staff and funding resources, outreach measures, and land and facilities measures. In Chapter 4 Agriculture, Updates to federal and state programs continue. New this year in the NRCS section is a Working Lands, Water, and Wildlife Partnership narrative, the IDOA section may include OpTIS vs Transect Survey data depending on the discussion today, and Gulf Hypoxia Funds for cover crop acreage. CropGrower Buffer Analysis will be added after the NASS and IFCA surveys narratives. NLRS partners can submit a short 2-3 sentence summary of their programs that will be a part of the main body of the report. Then they will also have up to three pages in an online Partner Updates Appendix. The deadline for submission of these narratives is today, March 1, 2023. Future Strategic actions include discussion around IDOA's Regional Conservation Partnership Programs including Climate Smart Partnerships and the Kankakee-Iroquois Bi-State Partnership. Another IDOA initiative, Ducks Unlimited Partnership will also be highlighted. Chapter 8 will be updated with adaptive management and future planning. This chapter will be written after the spring legislative session to allow for up-to-date information. This chapter will include information on Agricultural Implementation Progress and a look ahead to future action items. Erin Bauer, ISWS, asked about including information on AWQPF member grant proposals that were requested but not funded, which may help align future partnerships for funding. Joan encouraged discussion of this idea. Michael Woods suggested that the AWQPF members populate a table listing the grants applied for, partners, and amounts. Joan outlined the production timeline, noting that members will be notified when it is time for their organization's narrative review. Policy Working Group reviews will take place June 8th. All editing will finish by August 7th. Design work finishes Sept. 25<sup>th</sup>, and the online version is anticipated for Nov. 20th. The print versions should be ready by December 6th.

#### Q & A

Question (Erin Bauer): Can you go back to the question about reporting additional funding? Do we have a list of proposals that were not funded? How would we do this?

Answer (Joan Cox): Erin proposed an idea to track and report new opportunities that may not receive funding for one reason or another and to include who is leading the proposal. This could be written into the future strategic actions.

## Discussion:

- (Trevor Sample) It would be up to the partners to submit these. We could say these are ideas that did not get support. We need to wait to see what the legislation does to see if we need to include this information.
- (Joan Cox) We would rely on partners to report these.
- (Erin Bauer) This might be a good place to add good ideas that did not get funded so those ideas can be followed up upon.
- (Kris Reynolds) Suggests parameters, such as these are approved and of a certain caliber.
- (Joan Cox) If anyone wants to add more specifics that folks want to be included, please send suggestions to the NLRs Gmail account. Do we want to include the proposing organizations' name and who leads up the proposal?
- (Michael Woods) It might be nice to see the dollars suggested so folks might be able to collaborate on proposals that get dropped. Name of the agency, the title of the proposal, and funding levels. It might be a good table and show our legislative community that there are needs. He likes the idea.
- (Joan Cox) If a partner would like to put that together, then we collectively decide what we want to do that. Let's continue the discussion.

## Partner Updates

*Joan read an update given by Wendy Mueller, U.S. Department of Agriculture – Farm Service Agency, who could not be present today.*

- She had a conflict today and couldn't make it to this meeting, but she wants to share a report for FSA that their General Conservation Reserve Program Signup will be held February 27th – April 7th.

*KJ Johnson, Illinois Fertilizer & Chemical Association*

- IFCA is working with IFB and Iowa State University on an Ag Retailer Survey that will track nutrient management at 150 locations in Illinois voluntarily with 10 questions per location, resulting in 1500 data points. They have 10 farmer fields from each location, and they know that some locations may be missed. They are more than halfway done with the survey. Their goal is to have that done by April 1. They hope to have information ready for the State Fair or Farm Progress Show. Data should be available in fall 2023. The plan is to continue the survey in the upcoming years. IEPA will provide support for this data collection effort in 2024.
- Michael asked if they would like an event for the release of the survey results, and he suggested Ag Day and a few other events where this could be showcased. KJ said he would be in contact when the information is ready to release.

*Julie Armstrong Hewitt, Illinois Nutrient Research and Education Council*

- NREC's research request for proposals opens this week and is posted on [IllinoisNREC.org](https://www.illinoisnrec.org). May 15<sup>th</sup> is the deadline. We are also going to have an education and outreach request for proposals going out this week. If you are interested, check it out online or let me know if you have any questions. is the deadline. We are also going to have an education and outreach request for proposals going out this week. If you are interested, check it out online or let me know if you have any questions.

*Raelynn Parmely, Illinois Farm Bureau*

- IFB has progress on stewardship field days with one in Washington County on April 5 and one in Knox County on April 12, both on cover crops. Find additional information is on the website, or you may ask her if you have any questions.
- Ongoing documentary campaign: Centered around the Ganschow family in Bureau County, the hourlong documentary, titled “Sustaining Our Future: A Farm Family Story”, illustrates how three generations of farmers have approached sustainability. It also highlights the role of scientific research in the process and includes perspectives from the Louisiana Farm Bureau on the hypoxic zone in the Gulf of Mexico. They welcome any ideas on how to continue to share. They are just over 25k views on their new documentary.

*Jean Brokish, Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership*

- I represent the Illinois Sustainable Agriculture Partnership for this report. I want to point out the cover crop directory. This resource lists public and private funding available for farmers in Illinois. <https://ilsustainableag.org/resource/isaps-cover-crop-incentives-directory/>
- ISAP is also thinking about other tools or resources for farmers.

*Kris Reynolds, American Farmland Trust*

- The Illinois Cover Crop Initiative program provides payments to farmers for incorporating cover crops, no-tillage, and/or emissions scoring into their operations. This flexible program allows farmers to enroll acres where practices have previously been used and to choose from 1-, 2-, 3-, or 4-year contracts. Carbon assets generated from participation in this program are being claimed by ADM. This program is stackable with the winter cover farm program. It is one of the few programs for farmers who have done cover crops in the past. A partnership among University of Illinois, Purdue, and Iowa State is surveying farmers about cover crop incentive participation and hosting a focus group of 10 farmers in Bloomington. We are hoping to have those data in the summer.

*Justin Ramey, Illinois Department of Natural Resources Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program*

- The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) is a part of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the country's largest private-land conservation program. Administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA), CREP leverages federal and non-federal funds to target specific State, regional, or nationally significant conservation concerns.
- CREP is now available in all counties of Illinois.

## Open Discussion

- Michael Woods: Kris, can you give an active legislation update?
- Kris Reynolds: Senate Bill 1701, the Partners for Conservation Reauthorization Act, if approved, would secure funding for a 10-year time frame. It also aims to double the funding for programs and operations of SWCDs from 14 to 28 million. It would fund PFC, SSRP, Fall Covers, SWCD’s Operations and also encourage Soil Health and NLRs as priorities for BMP cost-share funding. It feels like they are getting close to a consensus on the language in the bill.
- Michael Woods: Can folks reach out to you with questions?
- Kris Reynolds: Yes, they can reach out to me or Grant Hammer at AISWCD.
- Joan asked if there was anything further to discuss. Hearing nothing, she thanked everyone for coming.
- This meeting adjourned at 11:37.