

# Policy Working Group Meeting

## Meeting Minutes

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



## Meeting Summary

### **Welcome and Introductions** *Michael Woods, Illinois Department of Agriculture*

*Trevor Sample, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency*

Michael welcomed everyone to the Illinois Department of Agriculture. Joan Cox facilitated the meeting with Layne Knoche and Rachel Curry from University of Illinois Extension assisting with meeting minutes and technology. Heather Wilkins of IDOA provided site arrangements and logistical support for the event. Trevor provided an overview of the Steering Committee's composition and duties, of the steering agencies' roles, and of the partners' roles in achieving the outlined nutrient loss reduction goals.

### **Hypoxia Task Force Update** *Trevor Sample, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency*

Trevor provided an update from the Hypoxia Task Force meeting that was held in Washington D.C. in December 2022. At the meeting, there was a discussion on climate impact on nutrient loading, sub-basin committees, Land Grant University work, workgroup updates, and United States Geological Survey updates on water quality trends. Trevor also discussed the planned projects for Illinois that will be implemented with funds from the Gulf Hypoxia Program.

### **NLRS Biennial Report Status** *Joan Cox, University of Illinois Extension*

Joan provided a status update for the 2023 Biennial Report. She began by reflecting on the future research needs that had been expressed in the 2021 Biennial Report and remarked at the progress NLRS partners had made in filling those needs during the last two years. Research advances on these needs will be discussed in the 2023 Biennial Report, many in the Science Assessment Chapter 3, and others in the sector chapters. Joan discussed the report's logic model structure and reviewed chapter by chapter topics. She alluded to the changes that will occur the partner updates of non-government organizations. Each partner's initiatives will be summarized in the main body with a link to an online Appendix. Joan shared the projected timeline for Report completion.

### **Illinois Farm Bureau Nutrient Stewardship Grant Program Overview and 2023 Forecast**

*Raelynn Parmely, Illinois Farm Bureau*

Raelynn provided background information about the Illinois Farm Bureau's Nutrient Stewardship Grant Program and an overview of plans for 2023. The Nutrient Stewardship Grant Program is guided by four priorities: education and outreach, best management practice Research, farmer implementation support, and progress toward long-term NLRS goals. Each grant awarded is approved by a Board of Directors who also determine the annual funding amounts and which projects are funded across the state. Over the eight-year tenure of the program, Illinois Farm Bureau has committed \$1 million to fund 138 local projects across 74 of Illinois' counties. These projects also benefit from in-kind and financial matches from local County Farm Bureaus. The program will commit \$150,000 to fund seventeen awarded projects in 2023. This program is one way in which IFB supports the Illinois Nutrient Loss Reduction Strategy.

### **Partner Updates**

The following members provided updates: Kris Reynolds, American Farmland Trust; KJ Johnson, Illinois Fertilizer & Chemical Association; Shani Golovay, Nutrient Research & Education Council; Michelle Bloomquist, Illinois Department of Natural Resources; Megan Dwyer, Illinois Corn Growers Association; Liz Hobart, GROWMARK;

Brian Rennecker, Illinois Department of Agriculture; Michael Woods, Illinois Department of Agriculture; Rick Manner, Urbana and Champaign Sanitary District.

### **Open Discussion**

Megan Baskerville, The Nature Conservancy, discussed Navigation Ecosystems and Sustainable Rivers program. Rick Manner, Champaign-Urbana Sanitation District, spoke about the Illinois River Basin Study group. Michael Woods, IDOA, highlighted work with Wisconsin to try to replicate successes with farmer-led watershed groups and work with Iowa to learn more about their “batch and build” model for conservation practice implementation. IDOA will be hosting a legislative briefing and information table at the rotunda at the state capitol building on April 9, 2023, to educate new representatives on NLRs efforts. Megan Dwyer, ICGA, spoke about work with the Sand County Foundation.

### **Meeting Minutes**

*In attendance:* Megan Baskerville, The Nature Conservancy; Erin Bauer, Illinois State Water Survey; Michelle Bloomquist, Illinois Department of Natural Resources; Tara Bosaw, Illinois Environmental Regulatory Group; Dennis Bowman, University of Illinois Extension; Dan Brill, City Water Light and Power; Amelia Cheek, Illinois Farm Bureau; Dylan Cook, American Farmland Trust; Albert Cox, Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago; Joan Cox, Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant; Rachel Curry, University of Illinois Extension; Megan Dwyer, Illinois Corn Growers Association; Shani Golovay, Nutrient Research and Education Council; Nicole Haverbach, University of Illinois Extension; Robert Hirschfeld, Prairie Rivers Network; Liz Hobart, GROWMARK; Kevin Johnson, Illinois Fertilizer & Chemical Association; Connor Kaeb, Growmark; Layne Knoche, University of Illinois Extension; Corey Lacey, Illinois Soybean Association; Todd LaFountain, Springfield City Water, Light, and Power; Lauren Lurkins, Illinois Farm Bureau; Richard Lyons, Illinois Association of Drainage Districts; Rick Manner, Urbana and Champaign Sanitary District; David McEllis, Environmental Law & Policy Center; Oluwaseun Ojo, Illinois Department of Agriculture; Russ Orill, Illinois Corn; Raelynn Parmely, Illinois Farm Bureau; Brian Rennecker, Illinois Department of Agriculture; Kris Reynolds, American Farmland Trust; Trevor Sample, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency; Emily Steele, University of Illinois Extension; Heather Wilkins, Illinois Department of Agriculture; Michael Woods, Illinois Department of Agriculture

### **Welcome and Introductions** *Trevor Sample, IEPA, and Michael Woods, IDOA*

Michael welcomed everyone to the Illinois Department of Agriculture. Joan Cox facilitated the meeting with Layne Knoche and Rachel Curry from University of Illinois Extension assisting with meeting minutes and technology. Trevor continued the welcome noting this was the first time in three years that the Policy Working Group had met in person. Trevor covered the steering committee’s updates and responsibilities, as well as the steering agencies’ programs and funded projects. He noted the NLRs websites for IEPA and the University of Illinois Extension, and he discussed the NLRs partners’ roles in achieving the outlined nutrient loss reduction goals.

### **Hypoxia Task Force Update** *Trevor Sample, IEPA*

At the December 2022 Hypoxia Task Force Meeting held in Washington D.C., the impact of climate on nutrient loading was discussed. The primary topics included sub-basin committees and Land Grant University work, workgroup updates, and United States Geological Survey updates on the water quality trends. USGS gave a presentation on the size of the hypoxic zone, on tracking metrics and progress for public reporting, and on water quality trends. USGS also created graphs to highlight total nitrogen and phosphorus entering the Gulf of Mexico along with flow normalized data. The flow normalized loads for total N entering the Gulf of Mexico are trending down below the interim reduction goal. Flow normalized loads for total P are also trending

down but are still near the baseline average (1980-1996 period), and not at the interim reduction goal level. We are seeing these same trends for total N and P in Illinois.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is providing funding for Hypoxia Task Force states to implement their state nutrient reduction strategies to decrease nutrient loss. The money coming into Illinois in year one will be used to continue to fund priority watershed outreach and watershed planning and the 2023 Biennial Report Update through University of Illinois Extension. The funding will also be used for the continuous nutrient monitoring network through USGS. Some of the funds will support the Fall Covers for Spring Savings program, which will provide an additional 40,000 acres to the program. Funding will also be used to replace the nitrate analyzer at the IDOA laboratory. The second year of funding will be used for USGS nutrient monitoring, Fall Covers for Spring Savings program, and a 4R agriculture retailer survey. In addition, a new grant program will be developed focused on implementing practices in NLRS priority watersheds, TMDLs, and watershed planning which overlaps with source water protection areas and disadvantaged communities.

Question (Lauren Lurkins): Who should be applying for the grants?

Answer (Trevor Sample): Any group or organization that is qualified to receive state grants, but they must be registered in the Government Accountability and Transparency Act (GATA) portal.

Question (Robert Hirschfeld): Could you provide more information about the use of the nitrate analyzer for IDOA?

Answer (Michael Woods): The whole state will be analyzed. However, analysis will focus on well water. The analyzer will be running by the summer of 2023.

Trevor spoke about the Hypoxia Task Force quarterly newsletter. PWG members may send updates about upcoming large meetings or conferences to Trevor or Michael. This will help Illinois to be represented in the newsletter.

Later this year the Hypoxia Task Force will release a Point Source Report highlighting 2020 N and P loads in the HTF states.

The Hypoxia Task Force report to the U.S. Congress will be released in early 2023. It will provide a summary of states' goals, activities, and accomplishments.

Lauren Lurkins of the Illinois Farm Bureau had also attended the HTF meeting in December 2022. She shared that at the HTF meeting Illinois is perceived as a leader in many areas and Illinois' activities are now being reflected in other states.

### **NLRS Biennial Report Status** *Joan Cox, U of I Extension*

At the February 2022 meeting, the Steering Committee introduced the topic of streamlining the Biennial Report due to the growth of report content and production workload over the years. They solicited feedback and issued a partner survey of the PWG members over the summer. Questions were asked about the Biennial Report's uses, content, style and structure, and timing. Ten of 29 member organizations responded, representing non-government, industry, and local/state partners' perspectives. The responses have been used for guidance as Extension proceeds with the production of the 2023 Biennial Report.

The 2023 Biennial Report will cover the research needs expressed in Chapter 8 of the 2021 Biennial Report. Most of the topics will be in Chapter 3 Science Assessment. The topics will be covered because the research has

been happening since the need was identified. Other improvements to tracking methods will be discussed in CH 4 Agriculture and CH 6 Stormwater.

In Chapter 4 Agriculture, Updates to federal and state programs will also be included. The following research will be discussed: the NASS NLRS Survey, CropGrower Buffer Analysis, and IFCA's 4R Retailer Survey. Future strategic actions outlined by IDOA will be included.

For all sectors (ag, point source, and urban stormwater) the 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 March 1, 2023.

Chapter 5 will focus on the point source sector. Within the chapter, watershed groups will be highlighted, with up to three pages each in the online Appendix. Updates to state programs will also be included.

Chapter 6 Stormwater will also provide an update to state programs. New this year will be the Green Infrastructure Inventory section.

Chapter 7 will cover the working groups' accomplishments over the past two years and Chapter 8 will be updated adaptive management and future planning. This chapter will be written after the spring legislative session to allow for up-to-date information.

The Policy Working Group members will be notified by email that they can review chapters 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8 near June 8, 2023. Members will have two weeks to review and respond. Chapter 6 is written later due to data availability. The Urban Stormwater Working Group will be notified by email that they can review Chapter 6 starting July 13. Members will have one week to review and respond. Graphic design work takes place in phases July through September. Lead agency Directors will have the opportunity to review the entire draft report October 19-27<sup>th</sup>. The online version will be available November 20, 2023. The printed version of the report will be available the first week in December.

Question (Richard Lyons): What is CropGrower?

Answer (Joan Cox): This is an LLC that has been working with TNC and ICGA since 2017 to improve methods using satellite imagery to identify cover crop and in-field buffers. It is a statewide tracking method improvement. They have been steadily improving methodology and can now distinguish these practices with high confidence. This research was funded by TNC and ICGA.

Question (Albert Cox): In this Biennial Report, are partners being requested to submit new information in ways not used in the past?

Answer (Joan Cox): We have always had partner updates in the report, but this year we are allowing for more content. Special instructions are to provide a short summary of 2-3 sentences describing a program/project and partners (if applicable). Then, each partner can have up to three pages of additional space in an online Appendix.

Comment (Trevor Sample): We are trying to make the report more streamlined for the general public.

## **Illinois Farm Bureau Nutrient Stewardship Grant Program Overview and 2023 Forecast**

*Raelynn Parmely, IFB*

The IFB is a member-led organization and works with members, county Farm Bureaus, and a Board of Directors on outreach that focuses on four priorities to frame the work being done. A priority of the Nutrient Stewardship Grant Program is education and outreach to farmers, landowners, and the general public. This is done through

in-person and virtual events including field days and watershed meetings, membership Q & A, sharing of information, and resource development. The second priority is supporting research of best management practices to reduce nutrient loss from agricultural fields. IFB provides financial commitments and letters of support, produces fact sheets, and brings farmers and researchers together to support this priority. The third priority is supporting farmer implementation across the state of Illinois by supporting implementation projects and edge-of-field practice partnerships. The final priority is demonstrating progress toward meeting the long-term goals of the NLRs. This is accomplished by reporting at the state and county levels.

The Nutrient Stewardship Grant Program began in 2015, with the first grants being implemented in 2016. Supporting local, farmer-member-driven projects through the grant program drives change and reflects local information, needs, and priorities. It is the farmers that drive the success of the program. Since the start of the grant program, \$1 million has been used to fund 138 projects across 74 counties, which is approximately 75% of the state. The program has aided an extensive partnership network. Funded projects have included conservation practices installation and demo sites, outreach resource development, field days, and watershed meetings. The program met with unique challenges and unexpected successes in 2020 due to the pandemic. That year a landing page for field day resources was developed to provide information and opportunities for collaboration. This grant program also allows for lasting impact by providing funding for returning or multi-year projects, by engaging county Farm Bureaus and members, and by supporting local projects focused on local interests. The program has resulted in high levels of interest and engagement.

In 2023, the eighth year of the project, \$150,000 is allocated for the Nutrient Stewardship Grant Program. Twenty-three county Farm Bureaus will be working on seventeen different projects. The projects will include field days, watershed planning meetings, research projects, practice implementation and demonstration sites, and outreach resource development. A list of the funded projects can be found at [FarmWeekNow.com](http://FarmWeekNow.com).

Comment (Richard Lyons): There is never really any follow-up. Has any follow-up been done to determine if the participants are using information from the programs or if the program is still being used?

Answer (Raelynn Parmely): For multi-year projects, it is not always clear. Each project is unique and individualized, for example, a watershed meeting. There has been discussion about doing a survey following a program, but it would have to be made for each unique program and there isn't the capacity currently to do this.

Comment (Lauren Lurkins): We can't assume the Board of Directors will fund the projects every year. Some of the information goes through to the County Farm Bureau through internal reports. We surveyed in the past and we could possibly bring that back, but there is a need for staff and resources to be able to do that.

## Partner Updates

*Kris Reynolds, American Farmland Trust*

- American Farmland Trust partnered with Fish and Wildlife, ADM, and USDA-NRCS on an Illinois Cover Crop Initiative that enrolled 100,000 acres.
- Illinois Sustainable Ag Partnership has created a cover crop incentive directory that includes fifteen public and private programs and indicates which programs are stackable.
- AFT is working with Indiana University to survey Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa cover crop programs to track progress. Focus groups will be convened later in 2023.
- A 2022 Illinois Senate Bill 3471 on funding conservation efforts will not be moving forward. There is a discussion to reuse some components from the Bill and to incorporate them into the existing SWCD Act and to renew Partners for Conservation for the next 10 years. There is hope of increasing funding.

*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 datapoints. 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.

*Shani Golovay, Nutrient Research & Education Council*

- In 2023 NREC has invested in research on streambank and legacy P, updates to the MRTN, and the investigation of the role of winter wheat as a cover crop. A request for research proposals will be initiated next month.
- The Annual NREC conference will be held on February 9, 2023, at the I-Hotel in Champaign beginning at 9:30 a.m. and concluding after the poster presentations that start at 4:30 p.m. Poster presentations will showcase nutrient research in Illinois, regardless of the funding source.

*Michelle Bloomquist, Illinois Department of Natural Resources*

- Illinois DNR provided an update on the CREP. This easement program has re-opened on June 15, 2022 after being closed for several years. It received 17 applications. Also, an Ag Lease Program which focuses on building soil health on state owned ag lands will continue to grow as leases are renewed. There will eventually be 6,500-9,000 acres enrolled in the program.

*Megan Dwyer, Illinois Corn Growers Association*

- Illinois Corn Growers Association is continuing to work with the Illinois Soybean Association to grow the PCM program, adding two new specialists, and expanding the program into other states.
- ICGA's cover crop initiative program enrolled 120K acres, 29,000 of which were new acres.
- ICGA has partnered with ISA on a water testing program that issues test strips to those that request them.
- ICGA has piloted a new app to help determine risk of herbicide carryover and timing of cover crop planting.
- ICGA brought the Leopold Conservation Award to Illinois.
- PACE is a new crop insurance program that is now available to all of Illinois through ICGA. This insurance helps farmers mitigate the risk of applying a split application of N fertilizer.
- "We are the 96" campaign will highlight farmers across the state and provide public messaging that 96% of Illinois farms are family owned. There is also a focus on sustainability efforts. A commercial for the campaign will be played during the Super Bowl.

*Liz Hobart, GROWMARK*

- GROWMARK has participated in the Ag Retailer survey through funding and partnership support. It provides a lot of value in how in-field practices are measured.

*Brian Rennecker, Illinois Department of Agriculture*

- IDOA's Fall Cover for Spring Savings program was successful again this year. It enrolled 100,000 acres within 5.5 hours of opening the signup. Additional funds from IEPA, and additional Gulf Hypoxia Task Force allowed for the sign up of an additional 60,000 acres. A total of 829 contracts were awarded and not all sign up requests could be fulfilled, demonstrating a continued need to expand the program.

*Michael Woods, Illinois Department of Agriculture*

- IDOA has a Climate Smart Partnership RCPP grant of \$1 million for cover crop and tillage practices technical assistance and implementation.
- With \$9 million leveraged NRCS funds, IDOA is in the process of hiring 40 new conservation planners that will be located throughout Illinois to assist with CRP work and other conservation initiatives. Hiring, training, and housing many new employees in a short period of time has been challenging, especially when competing against industry positions.
- IDOA is partnering with Indiana on a bi-state RCPP grant for the Kankakee/Iroquois area.

*Rick Manner, Urbana and Champaign Sanitary District*

- The Illinois River Watershed Study Group was initiated this past year with seed funds from IEPA and coordination support for U of I Extension. Many of the NLRs PWG members participated.

## **Open Discussion**

- Megan Baskerville, The Nature Conservancy, brought up that during the lame-duck Congressional session, the Navigation Ecosystems and Sustainable Rivers program was funded. She wondered if that might provide an opportunity to discuss and cooperate with the Army Corps of Engineers on possible nutrient removal at the locks and dams that are being invested through the program. Brian Rennecker, IDOA, suggested bringing an Army Corps of Engineers representative to the next meeting. Lauren Lurkins, IFB, pointed out that a USGS project across the basin could also help.
- Rick Manner, Champaign-Urbana Sanitation District, spoke about the Illinois River Basin Study group and suggested it could be beneficial to the NLRs moving forward. There is a need to stay updated on the work that is being conducted within the study group. Phosphorus sources in river sediments and biota (legacy P) is of key interest to this group. He also brought up the watershed groups in the Chicagoland area and the watershed groups coming together throughout the state that require a NARP. UCSD is working on two NARPs. A requirement of a NARP is to include stakeholders, which has proven to be a challenge for water treatment facilities.
- Michael Woods, IDOA, talked about Illinois taking the lead on conservation and nutrient loss because Illinois is in the middle of everything. He highlighted two projects moving forward. The first is working with Wisconsin and surrounding states to try to replicate Wisconsin's success with farmer-led watershed groups. The second project is working with Iowa to learn more about their "batch and build" model for conservation practice implementation to try to recreate what they did with woodchip bioreactors with saturated buffers. Michael also talked about the release of the state water plan. IDOA will be hosting a legislative briefing and information table at the rotunda at the state capitol building on April 9, 2023, to educate new representatives on NLRs efforts. More details will be coming.
- Megan Dwyer, ICGA, spoke to the group about work that they are doing in conjunction with the Sand County Foundation and others to bring a conservation farmer award to Illinois.