

Meeting Notes: Working Lands Watershed Restoration Program – Stakeholder Meeting

Date: September 28, 2017
Location: MPCA Room 2-A/2-B

Attendees

George Boody, Land Stewardship Project; Amanda Bilek, MN Corn Growers; Tanner Bruse, Pheasants Forever; Jason Garms, DNR; William Lazarus, UM Applied Economics; Lucy Levers, UM Water Resources Center; Michelle Medina, MFU; Trevor Russell, FMR; Shawn Schottler, St. Croix Research Station; Kent Solberg, Sustainable Farming Association – MN; Erin Niehoff, Greg Bohrer, Meleah Houseknecht, Environmental Initiative; Chuck Regan, Ted Fuller, MPCA; Suzanne Rhees, David Weirens, John Voz, BWSR

Meeting Notes

Project Updates:

- Interim Report (October 15) Outline – the outline was sent out prior to the meeting
- Farm Bill Priorities – Environmental Initiative project
- Upcoming session at State Planning Conference on “Living Cover for Protection of Drinking Water, Lakes, and Streams,” 9-28-17

Landowner Survey Update:

As of this date, we've received 213 completed surveys so far for a response rate of 8%. Next wave of mailings to be sent out in the next week. Conflicts with harvest season may result in delayed responses or lower response rate.

Perennial and Cover Crop Comparisons

- Note that Kernza provides good forage as well as grain. Current market demand is for organic production, so weed control against competing grasses can be a challenge.
- George – Perennial pasture for grazing should be a viable option. Some land that came out of CRP is going back into prairie. Prairie was always grazing land – management is key. Also consider the Iowa Prairie STRIPS program – 10% of land in “strips” can yield 90% runoff reduction. Prairie vegetation could be harvested or grown for seed.
- Add references to spreadsheet for corn stover use, as a basis for comparison.

Spreadsheet Decision Tool Update: Comments

Jason - Should we compare average CPI for corn/soy in each watershed to the average CPI for the county or counties? Bill – Y, this is feasible.

George – Important to communicate importance of government payments in making up losses on current commodities as part of risk management – discourages changing to new crops.

Shawn – He grows Christmas trees, which produce great habitat benefits, but the market is lacking. As a producer, there's no assurance that there's a market for what's produced. Alfalfa hay is a good example – demand is lacking. The prices in the spreadsheet are based on the assumption that a market exists. This project should focus on establishing markets.

Michelle – Recognize the huge barrier of crop insurance and getting new farmers onto the land.

Recognize that there are more opportunities on “all acres” compared to marginal (LCC3+) lands.

Dairy grazing – per Kelly Anderson at MDA, dairy grazing is challenging because of the relatively small acreage within walking distance of the barn (at two acres per cow), plus challenges in bringing water to them. She suggests consulting with other dairy grazing experts in MN (part of Dairy Grazing Apprenticeship program).

Trevor – Why plant corn if soy is more profitable? If you select the best possible crop choice and compare it to the alternatives, you could fund a program like this for \$4-6 million.

Recommend holding a dedicated session just on the spreadsheet.

Modeling discussion:

George – LSP has some info on modeling grazing scenarios.

Trevor – does the model assume exclusion vs. non-exclusion of cows (from waterways)? George – controlled conservation access can produce better results than total exclusion.

Trevor – You can't retire all marginal lands because they're too small and localized – won't work with equipment – can you model within 200' of receiving waters and calculate a percentage of marginal land – could do through a GIS exercise combined with HSPF.

Environmental Initiative Project:

Greg and Meleah discussed this short-term project. The goals of the project are:

1. Develop and evaluate information relating to federal farm programs as they affect the establishment and maintenance of perennial and cover crops.
2. Identify and develop shared conservation policy priorities for the 2018 Farm Bill among Minnesota's non-profits, state agencies, and the agricultural industry, especially policies related to the Working Lands Watershed Restoration Program concept. Coordinate the development of platforms and strategies to voice shared priorities.

Comments:

Amanda – Note that Corn Growers were already involved in farm bill policy-setting. Urges caution re aligning policies and priorities – they are currently engaged in setting priorities, so hesitant to firm them up in a report that would go to state legislature. Highlight the Conservation Title as an area of common interest.

Greg – The intent isn't alignment of interests, but rather to represent the range of positions or overlap between them; also not intended as part of report to state legislature.

Tanner – There's a general consensus on increasing CRP cap, but different acreages recommended among different groups.

Next Meetings

- November 16, 2017 at MPCA
- Additional meetings will be scheduled to focus on most promising biomass end uses and details of the spreadsheet and modeling methods.