

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

Hereford Natural Resource Conservation District (HNRCD)
San Pedro Natural Resource Conservation District (SPNRCD)
Whitewater Draw Natural Resource District (WWD NRCD)

Annual Public Input and Local Workgroup Meeting Minutes

with Whitewater Draw and San Pedro NRCDs. The meeting will take place at:

Tuesday, 8 June 2021 at the Cowbelle Hall, 337 10th Street, Douglas, Arizona

We want to acknowledge Sue Krentz for her generous donation of funds for the Cowbelle Hall rental fee. Thank you!

We also want to acknowledge the Davis Cattle Co LLC for today's lunch. Thank you!

1. Welcome and Introductions

WWD NRCD Chair Fred Davis called the meeting to order at 11:12 a.m. and introduced Chairs John Ladd and Sharon Reid from the Hereford and San Pedro NRCDs, respectively.

Hereford NRCD Board Present: John Ladd, Chair, Lucinda Earven, Vice-Chair and, Steve Boice, Supervisor, Jim Lindsey, Supervisor

San Pedro NRCD Board Present: Sharon Reid, Chair, Bob Barnes, Supervisor
San Pedro NRCD Board Absent: Shelby Thwaites, Supervisor, Jim Wisby, Supervisor

Whitewater Draw NRCD Board Present: Fred Davis, Chair, Frank Krentz, Vice-Chair, Ron Bemis, Supervisor, Aaron Cardona, Supervisor

Whitewater Draw NRCD Board Absent: Nathan Watkins, Supervisor

Others Present:

Joanne Roberts, HNRCD Clerk of the Board
Peggy Davis, WWD NRCD Clerk of the Board
Ivette Cunningham, HNRCD Board Advisor
Chuck Cunningham, HNRCD Board Advisor
Amber Morin, Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape
Don Decker, NRCS Douglas Field Office, District Conservationist
Amy Humphrey, NRCS, Willcox Office, Team 8 Supervisor
Tom Reis, NRCS Tucson Office, Team 7 Supervisor
Ralph Ware, NRCS Tucson Office (**by telephone**)
Jennifer Hart, NRCS Douglas Field Office, Soil Conservationist
Andrew Ogilve, NRCS Douglas Field Office, Soil Conservationist Technician
Emily Burke, Bureau of Land Management, Safford Office
Cameron Becker, Arizona Land and Water Trust
Philip Heilman, US Department of Agriculture- Agricultural Research Service
Patrick Hannigan, Cooperator WWD NRCD

2. Purpose of the Meeting

WWD NRCD Vice-Chair Frank Krentz welcomed everyone and identified the partnership between the three Districts hosting today's meeting along with our other partners. He continued to state the purpose of today's meeting. That is, to figure out what resource concerns are important to the individual Districts and to take that information back to their perspective Districts and work with their cooperators and collaborate on like - minded projects and to work with the NRCS Teams on resource concerns that overlap jurisdictions. Vice-Chair Krentz notes that the NRCS is our natural and biggest partner and Mr. Don Decker will lead today's discussion and keep us focused on today's work.

Vice-Chair Krentz continued to identify that the local NRCS Field Office prepares the working plans that gives sway to NRCS ranking at local level then upward through the state and national levels.

3. Introduction to NRCS's New Strategic Process

Mr. Don Decker provided two handouts (a list of resource concern categories (RCC) and survey questions) that will help guide today's discussion and keep the workgroup on task. He proceeded to review the list of 17 RCCs, the survey questions and the NRCS terminology used for the RCCs. Mr. Decker introduced Mr. Tom Reis who will be assisting him today.

Discussion ensued on how a systematic process assists to determine where money is directed for on the ground needs and how the NRCDs (aka Districts) needs guides the local NRCS Field office in focusing on primary concerns in specific areas for best use of funds. Mr. Decker noted that there have been different methods used over the years to make sure the local Districts have in-put and that those concerns are addressed and NRCS programs are relevant to what is needed.

Mr. Decker discussed and explained some of the NRCS programs such as the Conservation Implementation Strategy where Districts described priority concerns, developed problem statements and generated ways to solve the problems. Mr. Decker described what types of implementation strategies were developed and how it is now evolved into ranking pools when applying for Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds.

Chair Ladd inquired as to who is on the ranking committee. Mr. Decker replied there is no committee. Mr. Decker uses a check list for each project area of interest against where the money is coming from. Priority and applicability are derived from the various funding pools. It is a Yes or No point system. The ranking starts at the Local Field Office and moves upward through a State and National process. He further provided an example using Team 7's Southern Cochise County Rangeland Restoration funding pool based on the District's priority for brush control. Applications that included brush management were given points based on that priority concern. Mr. Decker further explained that he ran most applications through each of the different funding pools to determine all available funds. He also discussed some of the technology that has assisted in determining eligibility for some of the funding pools such as the geographic information systems tool to determine boundaries within the specified Sentinel Landscape "mitten."

Chair Davis asked if the ranking questions are generated by the State technical ranking committee. Ms. Amy Humphrey responded to Chair Davis. She explained the three - tier question/ranking process; Local, State, and National.

Mr. Decker informed the group that the Douglas District is currently going through the process now and there are 31 applications in the Douglas Office with 21 planned to be funded. They are working on contracts now.

Staying on task with today's goals, Mr. Decker stated that by answering the questions from the handout helps the NRCS District Office with details from each District's Supervisors. The details represent District Cooperators, stakeholders, and partners they work with or have a potential to work with where goals are common between them. It helps to look for and secure additional funding sources other than EQIP. He states there were eight funding pools this year and noted the 2021 cost lists and rates. A brief discussion continued regarding available funds other than EQIP. In general, funding sources from US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Arizona Game and Fish (AGFD) are virtually non-existent now and most likely will get worse. The NRCDs are looking to NRCS as the funding source. Some statements were made regarding past sources such as Cochise County, Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ), and Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) and some of the challenges in applying for grants, permitting processes, and landowners who are knowledgeable in grant writing.

As Mr. Decker proceeded to begin discussions by each question on the handout, he informs the group the questions on the handout follow a formula that he is responsible to address in the annual report that will be submitted in July. This same format has also been used by the Districts to get responses from Cooperators and those not familiar with the Districts and their role.

Question 1. What are the resource concerns for your farm, ranch, property or working area?

A summary of resource concerns (in no order of priority) based on the discussion are as follows;

- hydrologic functioning,
- flooding water management,
- brush management (spike treatments, and chemical mesquite treatments),
- engineering designs and personnel to draft designs,
- cultural resources,
- State Historic Preservation Office processes, timeliness, cross jurisdictional coordination,
- lack of usable data in decision making or for producing grant proposals,
- threatened, endangered, and sensitive species (aka listed species),
- residual effects of smelters and chemical composition of soil,
- fire "management",
- enforcement,
- communication,
- delayed services from technical and planning NRCS staff, and
- erosion.

In brief, there are issues with getting Conservation Plans in a timely manner in some areas and this has caused delay or loss of ability to apply for EQIP funds. While some members of the NRCDs were aware of the ability to write project specific plans for new land owners as they are working on a complete Conservation Plan for their entire property, others were unaware. The primary concern for NRCS staff should be to develop a property Conservation Plan after they visit and evaluate a property but in the past have shown flexibility by working directly with ranch owners on writing plans and contracts for specific projects.

NRCS is currently adding an archeologist to the staff and is working with the Arizona Association of Conservation Districts (AACD) to generate cultural resource contracts through grants to assist in cultural clearances and permitting processes as well as to clear the back log of cultural resource work.

NRCS (Douglas District Office) has been receiving requests to help with flooding coming from off an individual's property and understands a systematic approach is needed to deal with flood problems. NRCS does have a cost-share watershed protection and flood prevention program (implemented under Public Law 83-566) that an individual can submit through Keisha Tatum's office which will trigger an evaluation by the local NRCS field office. If approved, an eligible Sponsor, such as a County, accepts the money from NRCS and oversees the implementation of the project. NRCS pays 100% costs for environmental and resource needs assessments and engineering designs. Eleven counties in Arizona have been a sponsor for projects using this program including Cochise County.

The questions were posed, "What are we trying to get to with the resource concern conversation?" Are we addressing what we see as concerns or issues that happen when a contract is in place but cannot get it done because of time delays in getting the engineering designs?" It is both. NRCS is coordinating and prioritizing engineering assistance between three offices. Prioritizing will help but emergencies will come up and prioritization will change. However, NRCS engineers are not doing the designs and landowners/District staff should continue to go through private contractors. Further discussion on the need for a larger list of approved contractors but there is limited to no competition in this area. Some of the reasons for that is because of Arizona's licensing and permit requirements and taxes that all increase the cost and technical expertise needed. Specifically, WWD Chair Davis stated, "Arizona charges tax on chemical spray which makes a huge difference in the per acre cost". NRCS does authorize some of its planners to conduct low level engineer designs, such as cattle pipeline, if they have prior job approval authority.

WWD and Hereford NRCDs have emphasized brush management which has positively affected the local ranking levels. NRCS sees that will continue to be a high priority resource concern. Brush management is not independent of cattle management and careful management of the grass-rangeland as well as infrastructure for cattle management. Further discussion on the cycle of ranch project development beginning with some type of water infrastructure, which leads to fencing, and then brush management. Ultimately there is infrastructure deterioration over time and may affect many ranchers at the same time.

Discussion about chemical treatment for brush control. Chair Ladd stated currently, only spike treatments are occurring and due to some formulation changes in the Sendero chemical used to treat mesquites, mesquite treatment projects have diminished. Additionally, there is a 1 to 1.5 year wait for SHPO clearance if you revert to mechanical

treatments. NRCS Field Office can conduct and report on cultural surveys on 100-acres or less on private lands. They normally contract these services out to a private contractor. NRCS is pursuing an indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contract for cultural services. Brief discussion on the cost-benefit when cultural resource are involved when deciding to do a project and what management actions (e.g. putting in fence poles, blading) and/or what partners are involved (e.g. County) triggers the need for cultural surveys and section 6 of National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA). All NRCS proposed actions triggers a “general” NEPA and that is responsibility of NRCS. They cannot delegate the USFWS consultation process.

Some areas are concerned with residual effects of the sulfur from smelter operations on soils and vegetation composition. Questions as to whether there is any data from Phelps Dodge or anyone else on this subject. NRCS soil survey information is on-line but these surveys are general and do not detail the chemical make up of the soils. There is limited data on some vegetation plots looking at the correlation of sulfur to a vegetation community in smelter affected areas. However, there would need to be a detailed ecological survey versus general vegetation and soil monitoring plots.

Question 2. Are you working on a project (s) or putting funding towards a project(s) to address resource concern(s)?

This not only includes private landowners but also agencies than manage land. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has a systematic process to work with landowners for proposed projects that will include their (BLM) managed lands. They have a White House mandate and objective to support range restoration across the nation. They can help with getting NEPA and other clearances completed as well as potential source for funds could be available.

General discussion on NRCDs relationships and familiarity with their local agencies staff and their funding mechanisms to insure Cooperator’s interests are understood by them (agencies and partner organizations).

Comments were made concerning the repetitive cycle of reviewing and voicing the same concerns at these meetings. The District’s do not have funds and projects need to be defined as part of this process and monies secured from NRCS.

Further comments were made that NRCS does not have the ability or manpower to address the small parcel landowner issues in the watersheds and short of technical advice from NRCS, there is not much they can do to help the small landowner with successful EQIP applications. EQIP is really geared for large agricultural – ranching scale entities. Who other than NRCS is there to help the small non-producing land owners with these resource issues? NRCS visits the properties but there are issues that come up including, but not limited to, dealing with out - of- state owners, owners’ familiarity with soils and follow through by the owner. NRCS can make suggestions on reasonable actions based on soil and vegetation community among other attributes. After an NRCS visit, the small acreage landowner may choose not to pursue EQIP grant, but it gets the information out to them but without a large effect on small acreage property. This work group was left with the question, “How do we help these property owners?”

A brief discussion on the recently passed Arizona state legislation that gives NRCDs more authority over resources in their Districts, on paper. It does give more strength for Districts to be at the decision table but Districts usually do not have the vocal power or time to advance larger issues when it comes down to funding. Additionally, Districts do not have support to push legislation and can only do what each District can do locally.

Question 3. Provide any recommendations for new or revised conservation practices needed, including adjustments to payment rates and caps along with innovative new ideas or technologies for delivering conservation.

Mr. Cameron Becker stated the Arizona Land and Water Trust (ALWT) through the Sentinel Landscape secured funds several years ago for a Regional Conservation Partnership Program which included the HNRCD and it was successful. They (ALWT) secured an additional \$4 million dollars and Mr. Becker is working out now how to expand the area in which the funds can be used as well as what the funds can be used for such as paying for archaeological surveys. He stated the monies awarded to ALWT are not from the same funds or part of NRCS EQIP money but the monies can be used to address the same concerns that EQIP addresses. Chair Ladd asked if any projects were assigned on the San Pedro National Conservation Area. Mr. Becker replied negatively.

Discussion on adjusted cost list and the inconsistencies between current costs and the NRCS cost list. The government needs a negotiating point to cover dramatic costs increases when projects are implemented. This is a Regional cost list. NRCS would need some documentation to show the cost increases (as they no longer require receipts) to guide the discussion on cost increases. Mr. Decker is to provide the Districts with a copy of this fiscal year's cost list and members with documentation on project cost increases are to provide it to Mr. Decker.

Question 4. Propose ranking questions to ensure that applications with the greatest environmental impact receive funding to address local resource concerns.

The ranking questions that the District influences are the local ranking questions. Mr. Decker gave an example of Team 7's Rangeland Restoration funding pool ranking criteria. The District prioritized brush management. Mr. Decker then went through a series of Yes or no questions dealing with, but not limited to, wildlife, listed species, grazing rotation, invasive or noxious weeds to show where the points could be allocated for a total ranking of 150 points. Further discussion on other funding pools and how they can be applied according to practices (e.g. cottonwood and willow tree pole planting, shallow water containment structures) that improve wildlife and listed species and their habitat.

Lunch Break at 12 p.m. Meeting Reconvened at 1:43 p.m.

Question 5. Is there any other interest that the District should focus on to achieve higher levels of conservation?

Mr. Decker noted that this is time to provide any additional information and requests by the Districts.

Hydrologic work; Mini-watershed based actions to mitigate for flooding, low water crossings, water pooling, and unpaved-natural roads.

Working with NRCS to help capitalize on the recent legislation to bring additional power to the Districts.

Question 6. Are you aware of any other partners that the District could potentially leverage funds from?

Potential funding partners for leveraging funds were reiterated such as ADEQ, ADWR, and Forest Service. HNRCD Vice-Chair Earven noted the potential for funds through the ADWR Water Protection Fund and WWD NRCD Vice-Chair Krentz stated the AACD currently helps NRCDs throughout the state to apply for these funds including HNRCD. Chair Reid also noted ADWR is contributing to the Resource Assessment effort. Ms. Amber Morin reminded the Districts that a list of funding sources is generated through the Sentinel Landscape and is regularly updated and provided to members. It is now 65 pages and should help in leveraging partnerships within the FHSL.

Some additional conversation on the cost-share amounts for grants and the burden it places on the private landowner especially when it is cash share versus in-kind share requirements. The change in cost share to 50%-50% was established to show landowner commitment but it is very difficult for the landowner in many situations. Some of the programs are also requiring cash matching contribution versus in-kind.

Mr. Decker and Mr. Reis spoke to how the money for the District's covered under NRCS Team 7 has drastically reduced over the years. For this cycle, there was only \$900,000.00 between three Districts compared to four million several years ago. Mr. Decker emphasized that 82% of his applicants eligible for money other than EQIP funds, thus far, were being funded under the Congressional monies appropriated for the Sentinel Landscape program. The work load is still there but the funds are not as large as they have been in the past. It is critical to draw in other funds to accomplish the work.

Discussions continued with regards to funding irrigated related projects and air quality grants. It was noted that Cochise County is one a few counties in Arizona that is eligible for the air quality grants. Mr. Decker noted that 67% of the applications he submitted are funded under this funding pool. Dust control on the farms is the basis for these funds but are now becoming applications for traditional irrigated practices versus what is considered unusual dust control irrigation system projects. The practices being put forth in the applications are more efficient.

Mr. Decker will generate a report for each of the three Districts participating in today's meeting. There will be overlap on some issues but there are unique issues for each of the Districts such as the SPRNCA for the HNRCD. He stated he believes he has enough information from this workshop but if the District's want to send any additional comments or refinement in details to him in next week, he can add the information to the report including the documentation on cost increases.

4. Review Priority Resource Concerns

Mr. Decker refers to the list of RCC handout when asked if he requires a list to be returned by individual Districts. He responded positively. HNRCD Supervisor Jim Lindsey, shared his initial prioritized list for the HNRCD with the group. Additional and general discussion on, but not limited to, water loss and depletion and state of the art water control or monitoring, source water depletion, livestock production limitation, water source and

distribution concerns for range and small landowners versus municipalities and subdivision developments, water banking compensations, invasive and noxious weed programs, treatment methods for specific species, as well as USFWS proposed new regulations and how it effects the way NRCS and NRCDs are doing business. NRCS must follow what the USFWS defines as habitat and propose mitigation(s) for species. Some were aware of the proposed White House administrations' (Executive Order 13990) to improve and strengthen implementation of the Endangered Species Act while others were not.

Mr. Decker explained of Team 7's applicants that applied for funding under the water funding pool that 0% were approved. He proceeded to list the five local ranking questions for this year. Discussion continued the process of developing and submitting local ranking questions such as being "blind" to how much land/acres the project will benefit. However, in the EQIP funds, there is no specific line budget item to address small acreage landowners and that would be beneficial for the Hereford and San Pedro NRCDs. Mr. Reis stated that a main issue they have is that contractors are unwilling to work with 1, 2 or 5 - acre projects when they are so busy with large scale projects. Another issue is the amount of funds that are available and spreading what is available across the three Districts can be difficult to allocate to small acreage projects.

Mr. Decker reviewed the eight funding pools (categories) used for the Douglas Field Office applications. He proceeded to state that his office has a total of 31 applicants and to date, 68% of those applications are funded. A brief discussion on where the funding for the various programs are generated from and whether NRCS is diverting EQIP money to RCCP. Mr. Reis emphasized that these are separate funds appropriated by Congress.

5. Determine Desired Outcomes

Greater participation by agencies, contractors, NGOs- individually with private landowners. Interface between landowners and fire suppression responders from State-Federal – County-Local fire departments. Make ranking questions more equitable and add payment caps so that all the money does not go to one or two individuals. Recognition of AACDs direct benefit and value to the Districts.

6. Adjourn:

Chair Davis adjourned the meeting at 2:47 p.m. with no objections.

Approved by the Board _____ 06-17-2021 _____
(Date)

Signed _____
(John Ladd, HNRCD Chair)

Approved by the Board _____
(Date)

Signed _____
(Sharon Reid, SP NRCD Chair)

Approved by the Board _____
(Date)

Signed _____
(Fred Davis, WWD NRCD Chair)

ACRONYMS

AACD	Arizona Association of Conservation Districts
ADEQ	Arizona Department of Environmental Quality
Ag	Agriculture
AIM	Assessment, Inventory and Monitoring Strategy (BLM program)
ALWT	Arizona Land and Water Trust
ACGA	Arizona Cattle Growers Association
ASLD	Arizona State Land Department
AGFD	Arizona Game and Fish Department
BLM	Bureau of Land Management
CCRN	Cochise Conservation and Recharge Network
CIS	Conservation Implementation Strategy
CRM	Coordinated Resource Management
CSP	Conservation Stewardship Program
CTE	Career and Technical Education
EA	Environmental Assessment
EIS	Environmental Impact Statement
EQIP	Environmental Quality Incentives Program
ESA	Endangered Species Act
FFA	Future Farmers of America
FHSL	Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape
FLPMA	Federal Land Planning and Management Act
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
FY	Fiscal Year
NC	Nature Conservancy
HPC	Habitat Partnership Committees
HNRCD	Hereford Natural Resource Conservation District
IDIQ	Indefinite Delivery/Indefinite Quantity
LHE	Land Health Evaluation
LRP	Landowner Relations and Habitat Enhancement Program
Mitten	Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape Boundary
MOA	Memorandum of Agreement
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NACD	National Association of Conservation Districts
NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
NRCWAY	Natural Resource Conservation Workshop for Arizona Youth
RCPP	Regional Conservation Partnership Program
RMP	Resource Management Plan
SARC	Small Acreage Resource Concerns
SHPO	State Historical Preservation Office
SLRP	Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape Restoration Partnership
SP NRC	San Pedro Natural Resource Conservation District
SPRNCA	San Pedro River National Conservation Area
SRM	Society for Range Management
TBD	To Be Determined
THS	Tombstone High School
U of A	University of Arizona
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USFS	United States Forest Service
USPP	Upper San Pedro Partnership

USPO United States Post Office
VPA Voluntary Public Access
WOTUS Waters of the United States
WPF Water Protection Fund
WWD NRCD White-Water Draw Natural Resource Conservation District

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