

Astor Boozer, Regional Conservationist - West, National Resources Conservation Service - Transcript

Chair Reed: Good afternoon everyone. Hope everybody is ready to go this afternoon. This morning was a great, great, great, great meeting this morning. We got a lot of information. [inaudible 03:05:22] some information that we need to work on for our recommendations as well. And with that I would like to have Miss Arnetta Cotton to moderate the second half of our public meeting. Ms. Cotton.

Arnetta Cotton: Thank you, Chair Reed. This afternoon it is my privilege and honor to introduce to everyone here attending Mr. Astor Boozer. He is the Regional Conservationist for the West from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Let's welcome him.

Astor Boozer: Thank you, ma'am, we appreciate that. As was announced, I am Astor Boozer, I'm the Regional Conservationist for West Region USDA and NRCS. I'm based in our Washington DC office but cover the western third of the nation. So I'm glad to be here to ask for the opportunity to share a few bits of information. I think we have an opportunity to ask some questions that I will try to answer. But also, I think, the point of really learning and finding out, the point is that we can do better when it comes to the agency, when it comes to our employees, comes to our funding. And how we can move the needle and have more engagement with landowners, especially our minority members, our Black farmers, Native American, Asian, and around the nation. So great opportunity. I'm definitely glad to be here. So you can just go to the next slide and I'll talk through a few things.

So just some general about the agency. I think most people have a fairly well understanding of Natural Resources Conservation Service. And I definitely try to avoid the acronyms, folks. I know there's some that I miss myself so I'll try to just say it as it is. So Natural Resources Conservation Service. So we have... Oh, and one thing I forgot to mention. I'm here on behalf of Chief Terry Cosby, the chief of the agency. He wanted to be here but he just wasn't able to. And from the leadership role, I'm directly under him. And with the event being here in the west region, he has the power to come out and visit with you guys. So bring I greetings from Chief Cosby. So thank you.

We have about 2300 offices nationwide and within those 2300 offices we cover all the landscape for the nation where our private landowners, our farmers, ranchers, reside around nation. We have a little over 10,000 employees, looking to bring on more as time allows and as the process gives those opportunities in the field.

Our main objective is providing technical assistance for landowners. Within that technical assistance and opportunities, we actually bring quite a few financial assistance programs to the table, for us to share and provide assistance to landowners that would like assistance.

We are a voluntary agency. We're not regulatory at all. We don't force people to do anything that they don't want to do, it's just voluntary. Science-based is also a key. We have the scientists within our deputy areas, within our offices, that help us move the needle by having clear science on the practices that we are trying to establish from the landscape. So that's one of the key, core, important parts for Natural Resources Conservation Service.

So I'll move to one of the questions that was a part of the discussion points I wanted to bring out. Our Environmental Quality Incentive Program, and some people say EQIP, Environmental Quality Incentive Program. So the question was, has NRCS or would NRCS, Natural Resources Conservation Service, consider implementing EQIP program differently with advanced payments for socially disadvantaged individuals? And so we have that ability right now. We've been doing that for some time. But yes, we can do advanced payments for our landowners that are in need of that type of opportunity to help move the needle for practice [inaudible 03:10:10] to install.

We're also looking at opportunities within our Conservation Stewardship Program, CSP, our Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, as well as the Regional Conservationist Partnership Program, the RCPP. So with those programs we are wanting to look at taking the opportunity to listen to our landowners, folks around the nation, see what are some of the steps that we can do to help give that additional opportunity for folks to sign up to a particular program.

Another question that was part of that overall discussion still ties back into the question of distinct funding pools for socially disadvantaged and how are we doing it or will be doing it? So we actually do that already. We have distinctive pools. We are requiring our state conservationists to do a minimum of 5%. Most of them do 10%, even 15% or more. And it goes to that question, point of, individuals or community of individuals that have some of the same issues really competing amongst themselves to where you're not competing with a thousand acre operation and you're a five acre operator. So we've listened, we moved the needle for that particular opportunity. So we have those [inaudible 03:11:42] that we utilize within our states and we try to meet that particular need by listening to the community. We have processes that we have local working groups. And also our state technical community, that we can try to gather information and utilize it the best possible.

So as we look at the next slide here, it's a little bit about some of the outreach and how was NRCS addressing the challenges, advancing equity. And so outreach being one of our issues that we are working with. So there's \$70 million, folks, right now. You just saw that part of the previous slide. \$70 million out right now for cooperative agreements. And what we are wanting to do is address local natural resources concerns or issues, promote conservation, career opportunities as well. Promoting the adaptation of climate smart conservation, encouraging conservation to small scale and urban opportunities.

The minimum amount for the opportunity with the agreement it's a \$100,000, maximum amount goes up to a million dollars. And those are all due back in to our equity and outreach branch April the 27th. So there's still time for folks to apply for those cooperative agreements to help address issues within your community, within the states and around the nation. So hopefully folks really take advantage of that. It's great opportunity. Previously, we just had around \$50 million that we handed out. A lot of people were engaged with that.

Also, as we're looking at what we've been doing with outreach, within our organization, Chief Cosby, after he became our chief, really wanted to focus on making sure that we put the extra effort in. So we have established at least, at minimum, one outreach coordinator in every state. There's some that have more. And we are actually pushing for having... We are picking up more staff, more employees, more funding that's coming our way. We're wanting to make sure that the message gets out to landowners. So we have outreach coordinators within all of our states. We're utilizing those individuals along with our public affairs specialists to make the connections, make the coordinated effort, to meet the groups that are needing the assistance and get the information out.

A friend of mine, Mr. Tillman, always tells me we got to go where people are to start with, and that's a key point. I think we share that around the national office when we are talking about opportunities for our minority farmers as these funds are made available. And I'll also say, and I think we would all agree, it takes time to build trust with someone. And the opportunity... So going out today, you can't build that trust with one day in meeting somebody. So we build it over time. So we've been working on that but we know that we haven't made all of the strikes that we need to make.

So we're really pushing that effort to make sure that we're building the trust with the landowners in the communities and having our staff out meeting with them is key and important. So that focus has been one Chief Cosby's pushing and is being supported by all of our state conservationists and our people at the field. So we hope that if we hear of opportunities where we need to reach out and have some visits, our state conservationists know the expectation that I would have for the 13 state leaders in the west region as well as 51 units that we have across the nation. So, want to continue to move that and support that opportunity.

Here we go to the next slide. Well no, let me stay right there and I'll just talk a little bit more right here. So here again, on the urban side, and I think that was what Mama Lynn mentioned a little bit about, the urban, a little while ago. So urban conservation, how you might want to look at it, small farms. From NRCS's perspective, we've been focusing and trying to help folks in the urban sector for years. We had, at one time, offices in a lot of urban locations. And as administrations change, new leadership change, things kind of fade a little bit. But now it's being reinvigorated. There's 15 states around the nation where you have a more of an urban office focus that we targeted with locations in Dallas

and some places in the southeast, California, we have a couple of spots [inaudible 03:16:58] and we're doing some urban [inaudible 03:17:00] so there's 17 across the nation.

But that whole focus, as we move that needle, we wanted to get back to that point of helping those landowners that are in that, whether it's urban sector, small farming community. You have some rural areas that you have this small, niche group of folks that are still trying to raise crops, produce and feed not only themselves but our community. So we're still focusing on that.

We say urban but we're not using the definition. We're not because when you define something you're going to leave somebody out. We want to reach everyone as much as we possibly can. So even though we may say it, you won't see a definition from us, for what urban is. We are looking at urban, small, some of that rural community that [inaudible 03:17:51] to where people are working, trying to grow crops, trying to make a living, trying to feed one another.

So within that, we're investing some 7.5 million within the innovative production, with competitive grants for this year. Already we are investing some 9.5 million for compost and food waste reduction within Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources Conservation Service. We are renewing the People's Garden movement that has been up and down over the last few years. So a resurgence within that scheme. And also some other investments through the Agriculture Marketing Service with their local marketing program, their LAMP program that they're funding. And there's also helping some children's nutrition program, that's more into that part of the public bag.

But one other item or two from Natural Resources Conservation is, it ties into equity as well, but the Equity Action Plan. We established a equity focal point office within the chief's office. We have an equity and a urban point of contact. Equity point of contact and a climate point of contact that we're developing within Chiefs Cosby's leadership, within the office of NRCS there.

So utilizing our staff, outreach opportunities, really focusing, trying to get more conservation on the ground, get people in the door that haven't been in the door. And that's part of the funding that we have for hiring. So much of that, we are trying to track and make sure we are getting new people in the door, that whole push. We're looking at analytics, we're looking at the opportunities of making that connection here. We still have to focus on the outreach because we are not reaching people [inaudible 03:19:55] door. We're really working hard trying to make sure we get new people in the door. Folks that, for whatever reason, may have come in but never received any funding, never received a contract. We want to focus, make sure those individuals have an opportunity to have a chance to sign up, get into a program, we can provide them some technical and financial assistance with the programs that we have available.

All right, let's see. I think we can go to... Oh, let me talk a little bit about this here. And this here just still goes along with the equity, that one question of

[inaudible 03:20:32] so the AFAs, alternative funding arrangements, that we have. We utilize that with our tribes. We're looking to create that opportunity to do more with our tribes, providing them with financial and more technical, the opportunity where they can have financial [inaudible 03:20:54] technical, but still [inaudible 03:20:55] we've got some options working there.

Along with our staffing opportunities, the student ambassador program that we are utilizing out of [inaudible 03:21:09] universities where we have students that have worked either with us or through our operation or part of our program now, that are on campus, that are really supporting and amplifying NRCS and trying to bring more of our minority serving institutions and lead in reaching [inaudible 03:21:29] within those locations. And then students in those locations that we connect with, hopefully bring more minority students to the agency as well as our tribal students as well as our other minority groups at universities, so we can have those individuals in our offices. I think it still speaks very well when you walk into an office, if you see someone that looks like you, you feel more comfortable. I think we all truly realize that and understand that. We want to try to address those issues at best we can.

So let's go to the next slide and we'll talk a little bit about [inaudible 03:22:13] and bipartisan infrastructure. So \$918 million for admitted watershed programs administered by NRCS. The two major obstacles that we were facing were the underserved communities in participation for our watershed programs. We took the opportunity to really, here again, some additional outreach. Working with groups, we looked at how we could actually utilize a team approach, more of a strategy from an NRCS perspective, where we're able to exceed the recommendation or the charge from the precedents from Justice 40. And we initiated by allocating \$432 million, 47% of fiscal year '22 watershed program funds, to underserved communities. And so the opportunity to move that needle there was great.

I think about the destruction we just had in not only California but in the southeast, Mississippi. Those individuals in some of our programs, benefits will help when it comes to some of the obstruction removal, some things that they're dealing with, homes and things. FEMA, that has to do with a lot of their work. So from our perspective, how we can use our program, we're definitely... Our state conservationists that are leaders out there will be forming teams and working closely with other federal agencies that we try to address by the means of... by landowners there. And also-

Astor Boozer:

And also that the BIA of \$40 billion for our programs approximately 20 billion supported in our state as conservation as we utilize and with ARA, I think everyone understand the Influence and Production Act, being that everyone understands that the focal foreign values that those dollars are tied to climate smart type of practices and associated practices, so we're definitely focused on that. We have a list of practices that are available, and then we have a component actually that go along with that [inaudible 03:24:44] and the pushes are on that overall opportunity. That signup hearing is happening. I think we will

in location have the second sign up. Sometimes you miss a few forward. We want to take opportunities. We heard what some of the bad notices that you recently told us is that you missed us, so we want to go back and see who we can pick up or [inaudible 03:25:11], some location we may be able to extend.

But we heard it, and we are moving forward and doing the best we can to address that issue where people have an opportunity to sign up for those funds. So we'll continue to expand our capacity, target the additional funding, and talk about our capacity, our staffing. From an agency's perspective, we're looking to hire another 3000 or so [inaudible 03:25:41]. That's why we're really working hard to move that new, our ambassador program utilizing our [inaudible 03:25:49] grant institutions, our HBCUs, help us get the students, get them trained, get them into our offices as best we can. [inaudible 03:26:05] folks I think that captures quite a bit of what I wanted to share, and I think we were able to address two or three, maybe just a few questions that have been posed to us, but there may be some other questions from the audience right now. Maybe some other things I can try to [inaudible 03:26:25], but I'll stop there.

Rita: Thank you so much Mr. Boozer. I have a couple of things that I'd like to address. I do appreciate the fact that you seem to intentionally and deliberately avoid using the acronyms, and I appreciate you saying what they are because it's an entirely different language, so kudos for that. In these various counties, how they appropriate dollars per state is, if I understand it correctly, is gathered in the community meetings when they take a little survey to say this is our concentrated interest, or the need that we see that is priority in this particular county, and so then those dollars are allocated accordingly. However, many of our underserved communities, our black farmers, our minority farmers don't attend community meetings because they all tend to be the same. How do we actually address, or is there a method to actually address, how dollars are spent out, or dispersed, based on an individual's need rather than this survey that's given out in community meetings?

Astor Boozer: So I'll back up a little bit. The survey is something that I'll say I'm not engaged in it, but I'll say it this here way. So from a national perspective, we send funds out to a state based on some priorities from a national perspective, staffing issues, some of the resource concerns that we know are at that state level. But within the state the expectation is that they have local working groups and state technical committee meetings that have some good discussion and dialogue, provide information back on what those resource needs are, and it's a feedback system where that local group, whoever it might be, gets an opportunity or an idea of where they, [inaudible 03:28:37] for one thing, and when will be an opportunity because there could be, like I was saying earlier, the state conservations can carve out of the cities their funds for a particular location, a watershed, or whatever it might be, to try to address that need.

There's also... I mean, I think there's, based on what I'm understanding you say, there could be and possibly are some individuals that just were missed, and they need to have a conduit to get information to the leadership at their state level,

and that may be that connection with that state conservationist there in that state to say, "We haven't had an opportunity to ask any questions or be engaged in [inaudible 03:29:26]." I think it's our responsibility to make sure we get to everyone, and give them an opportunity to wave and say what it is that are their concerns. And if it's a watershed... And as we were saying earlier in our watershed program we were able to reach multiple locations of some of our minorities [inaudible 03:29:48].

Rita: Oh, so let me follow up. We're blessed that my husband just serves on the state technical committee, and that's a blessing but some individuals are told there are not dollars available because they've earmarked dollars for ponds, or for cross fencing, but their need is totally unique, like was it Mama Lynn that talked about the bees, or someone who talked about bees, and they said, "Well that's not a concern for us." If they are uniquely situated, for instance, we generally tend to go in Oklahoma Calceath operations, but we have 39 tribes, and we have individuals who want to get into bison, but it's not a priority. How do you with a genuine need, a conservation or [inaudible 03:30:34], how do we approach the NRCS in that situation?

Astor Boozer: I would say in that situation make sure we have a connection with our state conservations because, obviously, that information isn't getting up to that level I would say. And I would say that's we can do. And where we have those, we have to make sure that lead officer within that state has an idea of what a part of that state or commission that statement is saying if they're not being heard and information isn't given to them. We also try to say, I mean, the opportunity for us to use our program, we want to do that anytime where we can, but where we don't have that reach or that particular function in our mission, we definitely want to work with another federal agency or try to help that eligible agency get engaged with management because there so many times where our connection has helped some other agencies connect with them to where they bring additional resources to try to address that resource [inaudible 03:31:30]. In this situation, if they can get into that [inaudible 03:31:38] get some resolve to what that issue might be.

Rita: Thank you. I noticed that on the priorities you have the hiring, I think you said 3000 in the state of Oklahoma. Many of our counties have combined reduced the workforce and the people who are going out of the office to provide technical service. It's a long waiting period because they can only be in one place at one time. Is it adding additional personnel separating back out the counties, or is it adding additional personnel with the changes that have been made?

Astor Boozer: So today at this point I would say adding more staff with the changes that have been made with those offices and stuff. We've had those, I'll say ebbs and flows of where those footprints of an agency reducing scrap footage, reorganizing, bringing staff here, and using our vehicles, and everything to get where we need to be, has been a push. But we realize that we need to have the staff to get to all the people, and I think what we will find out because quite a few offices

reorganized, and quite a few states reorganized, but I think as our leaders are seeing that need, it's up to them, and we'll push our state conservation as to if they need to make adjustment where they have to have an office because we have to be concerned on the drive time for our land owners, and if that time is getting to be further than it's worth them coming into us, we'll be going out there to them, but we need to figure out the mechanism of how we can actually shorten that drive time. And a few... I didn't mean cut off.

Rita: I'm really glad you mentioned, though, drive time because we requested some people from the NRCS to come and present at a community meeting, and drive time was significant, and they actually went to six different offices and because of the drive time, we're in rural Oklahoma, and because of the drive time they could not get one person to come out, and it was extremely disappointing.

Astor Boozer: So, we definitely have to consider that, and I think that's where when we see those particular needs, it's up to us to make the adjustment. We don't want to penalize our landowners for where they live and not being able to [inaudible 03:34:10] because of where our office is currently. So we definitely want to hear that, and we'll have an opportunity to talk with our leadership in Oklahoma here in the future on some of those issues and start...

Rita: One other question, for me at least, pollinator requirements, there's like a specific group of pollinator seeds that are required in the state of Oklahoma. Now we are blessed to have an organization that actually tracks pollinators for whatever the organization is called. They have training sessions, so forth and so on, but in the NRCS they say go to a particular milling place and get your pollinator seeds. Well when you tell them you're being sent by USDA NRCS, they give you two bags of pollinator seeds, and only one fourth of the seeds that are in these big bags are the seeds that coincide with what's on the required list, and the required listing of seeds, they're difficult to find, and they're not even applicable. We called on our organization. We called on the specialists in Oklahoma, and they say, "This is what is needed, and what works in our area," but it's completely different from what NRCS has on its list. The list was made in the nineties. How do we get it up updated?

Astor Boozer: I think having conversation like this here will help it along. [inaudible 03:35:37] There's, a couple of things that are so true folks. The way we did it a hundred years ago is not the way that we have to do it now. And I think we realize, and we learn. That's what that science is about. We've got to continue to keep our science updating, and where are those new opportunities, the species of bird, or bee, or whatever it is, whether they use the migration routes and stuff. And so it's up to us along with our partners because, as you say, there are other specialists that really look at that.

We need to make sure that the recommendations we are putting out there are what people expect, and what other specialists would expect. Now, I will say that the price of some of those seeds can get pretty expensive.



Rita: Yes.

Astor Boozer: I've looked at that myself.

Rita: Yes.

Astor Boozer: And so that's where we will actually try to have several different mixes to where a landowner computer from based on the seed and the price that we seed. But we still want to have that quality product on the ground that meets the requirements of [inaudible 03:36:44], but that speaks into-

Rita: I totally agree. We have several urban agriculturists who are not interested in the garden, they're not interested in flowers, per se. They really want to do something that's beneficial, and they want pollinators, and I just want to get on the same page, so that we can. Does anyone else have any questions?

Speaker 24: We just finished talking about the County Committees. Let's talk about work in this group. Let's get in that conversation because I think that's a big conversation we've been having amongst our committee group since we have the same systematic problem that the county groups have. The work we've had the same systematic problems that the county has. Have you guys been talking about it internally, or are we going to do my suggestion, and what is the internal talk about?

Astor Boozer: So yes we have, and so the local working groups are made up of the local conservation district board, and so as you said, there's same scenarios within it. So we've been pushing our state conservations along with our leadership at the local level, and also our partners in the district, providence, or [inaudible 03:37:57] really look at equity inclusion, and some of them have adopted some of the conversation when it comes to the equity inclusion side of the house.

So we need to continue to push that and continue to help trying to move their need because, again, that local committee, when you have engagement and diversity on the board, you have people that will ask questions that are not that normal question that you have every day. So we've been asking you to talk our field folks there, and utilize a lot of their time as they know people in the community to try to pass that message of individuals that have an interest in they're allowed to come into a board meeting. You don't have to be a member show to a board meeting, or get some engagement folks to come to a meeting. And then opportunities for them to be an assistant member or even a board member. But here again, that's where it is. We working on it. We're trying to do what we can from our perspective because we don't control or supervise them with those. We definitely have been trying to work on providing recommendations to our partners that we work with day in and day out in the same offices and trying to get conservation [inaudible 03:39:20].

Speaker 24: I think for a lot of people, actually, number one, it's like once a year, and it's-

Astor Boozer: [inaudible 03:39:26].

Speaker 24: Yes, I know for us, and it's not very... I guess for all of us it's communication back to the community when these [inaudible 03:39:35], and the convenience of having information in one meeting is kind of different. So we were saying, "Is that system the best system on getting information from producers?" What is a better system than the working groups? Because the working groups is a one time you come in the room, everyone bring their own opinions in, and that's pretty much where the hierarchy comes within that county, and it's not reaching... Our hierarchies aren't getting there because we're not in the room because we don't know what is taking place. We just don't have information. A lot of people don't even know the working group even exist. They're like, "What's the working group?" So I think for us, and we've been talking about it, is it needed number one, and is the system working currently, the way it's working, is it once a year working or is there a better system to get information up to hierarchy to prioritize what that counter means?

Astor Boozer: So, there's probably a better way of doing it, I would say. I mean, working groups have been around years. The information part, the getting the information out about our meetings, those working groups should be advertised as much as our state technical committee groups. So we have our leadership thing. We have the state, and our public affairs, and they're trying to make sure they're getting all that proper information out as well. And so the local working groups, they're supposed to advertise and make sure folks have plenty of time to where they can show up for a meeting and opportunity to voice their opinion and have discussions. But yeah, there's probably some insight that we can all learn from what is happening, and what is going on at the local [inaudible 03:41:36].

Rita: The public relations, the individual for the state, Did someone else... Is someone else? The public relations individual for the state then is responsible, or the working group is responsible?

Astor Boozer: So when group is eligible at their spot, that local district board is on the chair of that working group. Our field staff play a key role in assisting, trying to make sure that we bring our information that pertains to NRCS to that local working group at that point, but the board at that local entity should be getting that information out. Now all of our local field officers, we can help publicize and get it out to whether it's a school, a church organization, or whatever, so we assist.

Rita: In our area, they post it on the window, post it in front of the NRCS office, and put it in the paper. I haven't got a paper in a decade.

Astor Boozer: Make sure they're doing it on the social media.

Rita: Yeah.

Astor Boozer: That's been a real push as well, and I think what we've been learning from, especially with our ambassadors and stuff, the younger generation had been telling us this is what you need to capture our attention. So, we're definitely hearing it, and we're listening to it, and I think that may be another option that should be utilized. So I'll say from my perspective at the national office and talking with some of the district leaders, those are some of the thoughts and ideas that we have shared with [inaudible 03:43:11] when it comes to communication. How are we getting information out? Who are we connecting to as we get that information out? We want to particularly address that, and make the best opportunity available. [inaudible 03:43:24].

Speaker 24: Can you just explain, again, who's part of that?

Astor Boozer: So the local district board, the NRCS staff, again, it could be other entities in that county that have an opportunity that are possibly doing work, bringing funds, your county commissioners could be, I mean, your board commission, then you have your county folks as well that bring some funds to the county.

There may be agencies within the county providing dollars to the district, so it's a group of folks there that we expect to have an opportunity to ask questions, see where they can bring dollars to the table or resources to the table for the working sheet.

Speaker 24: So who names the people?

Astor Boozer: That's normally, and I know we have a... I'll say there is... I'll say a statute, but that's not what I want to say. But there's a legal term that really ties that into the whole process. [inaudible 03:44:32] members as being [inaudible 03:44:36], they have that responsibility of reaching out and putting those forward as well.

Rita: [inaudible 03:44:44] And where I am they're, if I'm correct, the conservation board is elected?

Astor Boozer: Yes, some are elected. In some places there may be a few appointed, but most them are elected. And there are five... There's normally five, I'll say areas within the county [inaudible 03:45:07] election wise.

Rita: Once again, and I don't mean to be always complaining, we're grateful. We really are. But I ran for the District Conservation Board, and the person who won against me is not a farmer in any way, shape, form or fashion, and I'm thinking "What is the interest here?" It's, you know-

Astor Boozer: Yeah.

Rita: ... It just gets to be really political.

Astor Boozer: Yeah. And I spent time as a district conservationist, and I've seen different board members, different backgrounds, but all were connected to the agriculture in some form.

Rita: Okay.

Are there any other questions, observations, comments?

Yes. We only have minute.

Speaker 24: Not allowed to have them [inaudible 03:46:10].

Rita: Oh no, not from the public. Not from public. And so I'm talking about from the table, from the... Yes sir. Just a sec. We only have one minute. If not, we want to thank you [inaudible 03:46:23]. Thank you so very much for that.