

CHESAPEAKE BAY FUNDERS NETWORK

Technical Assistance Capacity Assessment

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Purpose This project was intended to assess the current capacity, needs and opportunities for conservation partners to provide watershed project management and technical assistance necessary for meeting the states' watershed implementation plan targets for the agricultural sector for the Chesapeake Bay TMDL. In doing so, the project was focused on gaining insights into the context and delivery of technical assistance as well as the issues, opportunities, and challenges facing conservation practitioners and their organizations in the Chesapeake Bay region.

Background As financial assistance has increased for conservation practices in the Chesapeake region as part of the effort to meet the Bay TMDL anecdotal evidence has been cited about increasing challenges in providing the necessary technical assistance to use those financial resources effectively. The project was a first step in gaining a deeper understanding of the current situation and challenges in providing technical assistance to farmers and landowners in the region.

There were two basic premises underlying the project's approach: 1) Technical assistance is essential to the sound planning, delivery, implementation and maintenance of resource conservation practices and programs; and 2) a key factor in sound technical assistance is ensuring the capacity and support for local public and private organizations to work with farmers and landowners. For these reasons, this project was designed to engage conservation staff at the local level and the people who work with and support them. In addition to the substantial results from those discussions, having the perspectives and insights from people on the ground can then serve as a foundation for efforts to assess technical assistance further on a state or regional level.

Methods In consultation with CBFN members and staff from Virginia Tech, the project organizers decided on a methodology to conduct a series of roundtable discussions with conservation partners and stakeholders in representative, agricultural Bay geographies. For each geographic area, a group of 8 to 12 people with significant knowledge and experience in working with farmers and landowners (e.g. conservation district staff and boards, NRCS, NGOs, private consultants) were invited to participate in a roundtable-style format discussion. The methods for the meeting and the questions were reviewed with and advice received from Virginia Tech staff. Immediately prior to the meeting leadership in the county NRCS office and/or conservation district office were asked to provide basic information the number of contracts, practices and acres of conservation implemented annually and the number of producers typically reached annually.

The meetings were convened in local NRCS or conservation district offices and varied in number of participants from 8 to 15 people. (A breakout of the organizations represented in the roundtables is included as Appendix A.). The discussion was guided by a facilitator who relied on a set of questions and prompts (Appendix B) designed to assess the state of the current situation for technical assistance and outreach for assisting and facilitating adoption of agriculture conservation practices in specific locales, their needs, and purposes. As the meetings were carried out they deviated from the initial methodology in that 1) an explicit appreciative

inquiry seemed unnecessary given the openness and candor of the participants; and 2) the idea of using breakout groups for part of the meeting was discarded in order to avoid disrupting the flow of the discussion.

Project staff kept extensive notes from the discussions and compiled the notes into summaries that were then provided to key participants in the roundtable discussions to ensure their accuracy and completeness. Once the summaries were reviewed and revisions made, final versions of the summaries were completed along with a set of key points for each of the roundtables. Those summaries are included in Appendix C.

Observations

The discussion in each of the roundtables was open and candid. The presence of representatives from the state NRCS offices or from state government offices helped provide a better understanding of the context in which local issues were playing out. Participants were very glad for the opportunity to focus on technical assistance, an issue that they all thought was important, and were hopeful that their conversations would help inform a broad and productive discussion to address the key challenges they face. Just as important the discussion provided an opportunity for participants to think broadly about technical assistance and to have their ideas, experiences and challenges heard.

Each of the roundtables re-affirmed that technical assistance for the implementation of conservation practices is made possible by the technical competence of conservation staff and the working relationships they forge with farmers and landowners. There was an explicit recognition that the medium in which conservation actually takes place is the farm operation and the decision made by the farmer to sustain it. While many of the issues raised were programmatic, administrative, or technical in nature, the implicit motivation for the comments was providing the ability to support adoption of conservation practices on farms in the region.

The individual roundtable reports lay out in detail the specific statements from each meeting. These observations that follow highlight the main points identified through the roundtable discussions. They are not attributable to any particular region and many of the points came up in multiple discussions such as the need for training, the importance of interpersonal skills, and the issues of staff retention. Though many of the observations focus on challenges and problems, all of the roundtable discussions noted the importance and the value of the work they do and the progress that is being made in conservation with farmers in their regions.

Nature of technical assistance

- Technical assistance can be complex due to new more technical practices (e.g., precision farming), the need to apply multiple inter-related practices (eg., livestock exclusion systems), and the presence of diversified farming operations with multiple conservation needs.
- Effective technical assistance continues to rely on strong working relationships with farmers that are based on trust and the technical competence of the conservation professional. Even with new information technologies these working relationships are still fundamental.
- Having strong working relationships among providers from districts, NRCS and the private sector are equally important in providing TA and delivering assistance to farmers.
- These necessary working relationships require time to develop and produce results

- The shift of NRCS employees from the field to contract management and its effect on the ability to deliver adequate TA was noted as a loss to TA capacity in each roundtable.
- There is significant concern that the pressures and imperatives of program management have severely reduced the ability to do sound planning, support implementation, and ensure adequate follow-up assistance and maintenance of conservation practices.

People

- The new people entering conservation jobs, particularly in conservation districts, often have non-ag degrees (e.g., environmental sciences) and do not come from agricultural backgrounds. As a result they need a significant amount training and mentoring to become effective at providing technical assistance. There was widespread agreement that this training process required no less than three years.
- Given the importance of working relationships, Participants consistently reported that they are looking for people with good inter-personal skills as a primary qualification for employment.
- As entry level positions, new conservation technicians receive relatively low wages which tends to create a critical issue with retention. The typical path is that staff are hired and trained and then leave for jobs with better wages and benefits leaving a gap in TA capacity. The employer then restarts the process and absorbs the cost of hiring and providing 3 years of training.

Programs

- Conservation staff feel the pressure to allocate financial assistance to the detriment, in their view, of having time to do adequate planning and technical assistance. Federal programs tend to be rolled out with short turnaround times that mitigate against comprehensive planning and assistance.
- With federal conservation programs have come increasing administrative and accountability measures. Meeting those requirements is a net loss in staff time available to engage with farmers and provide technical assistance. The complexity and regular changes of those requirements makes the situation even more difficult and time consuming.
- Large increases in state cost share program dollars have strained the capacity of districts to deliver the necessary technical assistance, as funding for TA has not kept pace with the demands on districts to spend FA. The large increases along with the variability of state funding in Virginia from year to year make it very difficult for districts to ensure that they have the appropriate trained staff available to work with farmers and use the FA effectively.
- As is the case with public programs, private funding programs and grants are perceived as not adequately accounting for or supporting the technical assistance to increase conservation adoption. That perception plus the limited staff available to administer grants has increased the reluctance of districts to apply for and carry out private and public sector grants.

Approvals

- The approval of plans, practices and construction by NRCS was regularly cited as a roadblock to conservation.
- The approval issue, which is largely for projects that require engineering, is manifested in different forms:

- There are not adequate staff in NRCS to complete the approvals in a timely fashion in some locations
- There are not adequate (or any) staff outside of NRCS who have been granted approval authority in those same locations.
- In the approval process plans are regularly rejected by NRCS. This situation suggests that the criteria for approval are poorly conveyed to or understood by non-NRCS staff so that plans submitted are not acceptable to NRCS to qualify for financial assistance
- The process discourages private companies to undertake engineering activities, due to the uncertainty and difficulty of approval, leaving work undone that could be accomplished with the private sector.
- The net effect of these approval issues is regular delays in approvals that translate into delays in implementation of practices, frustration among farmers, and projects being abandoned.

Transaction costs

- There is widespread sense that NRCS administrative and accountability requirements are occupying increasing amount of staff time and energy. That work reduces the time that NRCS field staff have for TA and working with farmers.
- In addition to the costs borne by NRCS staff, district and private staff find that increasing amounts of their time are being taken up by their interactions with NRCS programs. This work further diminishes the time available to conduct TA and interact with farmers.

Innovative Solutions

- One option that was suggested was the hiring of staff specifically designated to expedite the paperwork and coordinate interaction within NRCS and districts. This person would be skilled in the process and would enable conservation technicians to focus on fieldwork.
- It was also suggested that incentives be developed and provided to district staff that rewarded employees for staying in the job longer. This could be a way of reduced turnover that by reducing the need and cost of training new staff, could prove cost-effective in the long term.

Synthesis

In the midst of all the challenges that roundtable participants noted, there still is a great deal of good conservation being put on the ground in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. This progress is clearly the result of support provided by public agencies and private funders and dedicated conservation professionals who work closely with other conservation colleagues and who have gained the trust of the farmers with whom they work.

There is a strong sense that the system is at capacity, that in real terms the time and resources for technical assistance, planning, implementation and maintenance are being eroded, and that new demands for additional conservation will be hard to meet with the current support for TA. Since the process of conservation is driven and enabled by human skill and interaction, the human infrastructure to support conservation is an essential component to implementing practices and improving water quality. Understanding the situation and the challenges faced should initiate a serious public discussion about how to ensure that the critical human infrastructure for conservation is supported so that important water quality goals are met and benefits achieved.

APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANTS IN CHESAPEAKE TA ROUNDTABLES February – March 2016

	Shenandoah	Farmville*	Denton	Lancaster	TOTAL
Participants					
NRCS	5	2	1	2	10
District	2	3	1	3	9
Extension	1		1	1	3
State		2	1		3
Private	1	1	5	2	9
NGO	3	1		2	6
TOTALS	12	9	9	10	40

* Additional interviews with 2 District and NGO Staff were conducted after the roundtable

APPENDIX B

Description of methods for CBFN TA Capacity Assessment

Project purpose: Assess the current and projected capacity, needs and opportunities for agricultural conservation partners to provide the watershed project management and technical assistance necessary for meeting the states' watershed implementation plan targets for the agricultural sector for the Chesapeake Bay TMDL. The project seeks to increase the knowledge and awareness of program managers and policy makers of the project management needs, technical capacity issues and options for agricultural conservation partners in the Chesapeake Bay.

The first objective is to develop and implement an assessment tool for conducting candid, in-depth discussions with key conservation partners in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia to identify existing and anticipated needs and options for ensuring capacity to carry out agricultural conservation efforts. While the Bay TMDL may not be a top-of-mind topic for participants at the field level the technical assistance to design and implement conservation practices has a direct bearing on achieving the objectives of the WIP.

Methods: For each geographic area, a group of 10 to 15 people who have significant knowledge and experience in working with farmers and landowners (e.g. conservation district staff and boards, NRCS, NGOs, private consultants) will be convened in a roundtable-style format. A series questions will be posed to assess the state of the current situation for technical assistance and outreach¹ for assisting and facilitating adoption of agriculture conservation practices in specific locales, their needs, and purposes. Using an appreciative inquiry approach, in addition to asking participants about the current and future situation, needs and challenges, we will also ask them to talk about their further ideas for technical assistance and what they would like to accomplish.

The inquiry is intended to look at 1) the current situation for technical assistance in a specific area of the Chesapeake Bay; and 2) future needs and opportunities for technical assistance capacity within a specific locale. Each section of the inquiry includes questions about the TA capacity and needs of the organizations and of the people who work in the organizations. The initial quantitative questions in Section 1 will be shared with key participants before the discussion so that they can compile the information and share it at the beginning of the meeting.

The roundtable participants will be engaged in discussing each of the questions listed below. A series of prompts are included for each question that will be used as necessary to clarify the intent of the questions and/or stimulate discussion. We will use a modified nominal group approach to make sure everyone has full opportunity to contribute. We will use breakout groups to pose the last few questions as a way of encouraging open group discussion. A summary of the discussion will be prepared and shared with participants after the meeting.

¹ For the purposes of these discussions we will not distinguish technical assistance from outreach as strictly as is done in Farm Bill programs

Section 1

What is the current situation for technical assistance in this area?

Organizations

Pre Meeting Survey – to be sent to NRCS and conservation district(s)

Please describe the technical assistance your organization provides to farmers and landowners.

- How many farmers do you work with each year?
- Roughly how many acres?
- How many farms receive financial assistance as a result of your work or as a part of it?
- What amounts of financial assistance are provided annually?
- How many people in your organization are involved in providing TA?

1. What is unique about providing technical assistance in this area?
2. What type of technical assistance do you regularly provide? What are the typical practices?
3. How does your organization plan technical assistance and how does it coordinate with other public or private organizations in the region to provide technical assistance? How does the Bay TMDL affect your work?
4. How is the technical assistance you provide funded?
Source - Federal, county, state? Private? RCPP? Other?
Term and security – How is funding provided? How secure is the source?
Adequacy – Is the amount of support sufficient to meet the goals of your organization? the objectives of the Bay TMDL? the needs of farmers?

People

1. What is the profile of the people who provide technical assistance in your organization?
Farm background? Qualifications? Certifications? NRCS job approval?
2. What training, if any, did they receive once they were on the job?
3. Is staff retention an issue for your organization?
4. How do you recruit people to fill positions?
5. What matters most to be effective in providing technical assistance?
6. What would you like to do above and beyond what you are currently providing?
What's missing that would be beneficial?

Section 2

What do you see in needs and opportunities for technical assistance in the future (5-10 years)?

Organizations

1. What will your organization be doing to provide technical assistance in the future? How do you foresee needs and expectations changing? Will the same organizations be providing assistance? Will current roles of public and private organizations change?
2. Where will organizations derive support to provide technical assistance? Will it be adequate or will your organization need to diversify sources?
3. What changes do you foresee among farmers and landowners (age, land ownership and other factors) that will affect the way you provide technical assistance?
 - How will their needs change?
 - What changes do you foresee in technology or practices that will affect the way you provide technical assistance?
 - What other expectations will change for your organization do you foresee that will affect your ability to provide technical assistance?
 - Will the workload for your organization change or remain the same?
4. How will your organization need to respond to those changes? What will your organization need to respond effectively?

People

1. How will providing technical assistance be different in the future?
 - How will your job change? What training or support will you need?
2. Who (people) will be providing the assistance?
 - What skills will they need? Where will they come from? What training or support will they need? How will they get the training?
3. What would you like to accomplish in the future?
 - What's not been discussed that could be a part of the future?
 - What's possible in the future that hasn't been in the present?

Breakout group questions:

1. What would make you most effective in the future?
2. What new or existing options do you see for providing TA into the future?
3. What's the most important thing that we have to do to ensure that technical assistance will be effective in the future?

APPENDIX C

Chesapeake Bay Technical Assistance Roundtable: Caroline County

Wednesday, February 3, 2016
11:00am – 1:00pm ET

Introduction

Community members met with Lawrence Elworth, RESOLVE, and Kristen Saacke Blunk, HeadWaters, on Wednesday, February 3, 2016 for two hours to discuss Technical Assistance for watershed management projects in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Larry explained that the purpose of the roundtable was to better understand how technical assistance is currently operating on the ground and take a cross-section of information from throughout the watershed back to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Chesapeake Bay Funders Initiative to inform future efforts. The goal is to showcase the current limitations; strengths of various programs and areas ripe for improvement to ensure that financial assistance can be used and implemented efficiently and effectively. Karen further elaborated that the various participants of the Chesapeake Bay Funders Initiative, which is helping support this project, are interested in agriculture and supporting states in meeting their respective requirements for the Bay TMDL.

Assessment of Current Technical Assistance (TA) Efforts in Caroline County

Participants described technical assistance as regulatory direction or guidance for farmers through planning, review and directly working with NRCS employees to comply with new regulations and existing policies. Some examples of this include nutrient management plans, irrigation system implementation, stormwater management and other standard issues that come with developing new agriculture production sites and infrastructure, especially poultry farms in this area.

Participants identified that while there is a long-standing history of cooperation of the boots on the ground, there is great consternation around the politics of delivering conservation. For example, Maryland has been very aggressive about selling conservation and has been at the forefront in respect to cover crops and restoration. While these needs are not going away, there are growing and increasing demands and issues especially around the poultry industry and the need for dealing with the wastes generated on new farms that are being built at a high rate. Furthermore, the demands for permits for the new poultry infrastructure is consuming what limited TA is available on the ground and has presented huge barriers to efficiencies given the increasing scrutiny on the permitting process. The politics of delivery conservation have significantly thwarted the flexibility and ease with which the TA providers are able to serve the producers and it was noted that the politics were expected to continue to become more cumbersome, especially as it relates to the development of new poultry facilities.

NRCS's role is largely consumed by the tasks of accounting and distribution of the Farm Bill funds and has diminished its ability to actually help perform and implement the conservation

work. Participants suggested that NRCS has lost credibility locally because they are unable to follow through with the work due to the lack of human capacity combined with the bottleneck in reviews (see “Permitting” below for details). Some farmers seek outside assistance from the private sector while others just walk away, seeing the improvements as too cost prohibitive, time consuming, or both. The private sector partners are willing and available to do the work, regardless if the funding comes from the farmer or the government. But the perception of both the producer and the private sector partner is that there are too many hoops to jump through to be approved and contracted by NRCS to do the work.

It was interesting to note that private sector participants, especially, indicated that Delaware and New Jersey presented an easier climate to work and collaborate in around farm conservation technical assistance provision than Maryland.

Permitting

Participants agreed that permitting – combined with the lack of agency-based engineering positions – is the greatest constraint in moving projects forward. The state review agencies have not been able to issue the permits in a timely manner, significantly compromising the credibility and efficiency of the TA providers in the eyes of the producers/customers. While the participants recognized that the state agencies with permit review responsibilities are facing their own challenges given public review and comment period requirements, along with increasing public scrutiny of poultry farms, the economy of waiting for permits, especially for farmers who are having to pay the up-front costs associated with permits, has essentially plugged the workflow. Plans end up sitting on a desk for a year and while NRCS may be prepared to move forward with a contract, they cannot do so until the producer has the permit in hand. There was also much discussion on the need for “as-built” approvals as a mechanism for speeding up the process. The concern about the stalling of projects, the lack of uncertainty in the ability of the producer to get the permit, and the overall inability of the TA providers to help the farmer speed up the process all contributed to the overall sense of this problem diminishing the credibility of the TA providers, reducing farmers willingness to work, especially, with the public sector (NRCS, Soil Conservation District, and MD Department of Agriculture).

Funding

There were concerns shared that conservation money is held up in paperwork and approval delays because local leadership is unwilling move forward, causing applications and proposals to get stalled at local level. Participants suggested that the review and approval process needs to be restructured to allow greater local control over projects where intimate knowledge of the needs of the specific areas is higher. Other participants noted that Maryland is seeing some improvements in this realm as administrative staff has begun to put faith into their local support staff relative to the decisions that are being made at the local level.

As noted earlier, due to the risks associated with permitting and the need to get permits ahead of the work, participants suggested that farmers do not have the upfront money that is needed to pay for all the permitting fees especially given the lack of guarantee that their plans come to fruition. In effect, producers who do want to do the work are unable to pay off loans or recuperate initial costs for eligible conservation projects, making watershed management projects too financially risky to undertake.

Private sector participants indicated that while they were willing to do the work, that when public tax dollars were available for their clients through the public agencies, they would support their clients in pursuing public services to have access to these resources.

Another issue identified relative to the funding is that what is available is for the actual implementation and that funds to support engineering positions are non-existent.

Clarity of Specifications

Participants discussed extensively the challenges for poultry site design for new operations, one of the greatest current demands in the region. Overall, they agreed that there was a lack of clarity around specifications for poultry site design and that there is a high risk of not being able to meet or receive approval for the mandated stormwater requirements. Without certification for poultry plans, and little to no oversight of construction, a well-intended (designed) original plan may not be followed. Furthermore, the plans are being developed to appease regulation and overarching priorities that do not match the on the ground reality.

WIP Goals

The breadth of area covered under Maryland's WIP goals is so varied that there are issues that are important in one district and irrelevant in another. Participants expressed concern that plans do not get approved unless they fulfill the regulation goals, so plans may be written that have no relevance to the land they would actually be applied to. An example given of this scenario was about the need for the local NRCS to adopt Maryland WIP milestones into its ranking criteria for producers to be eligible for EQIP. But in some cases, the practice stated isn't even applicable or relevant within that particular district. Participants said that Caroline County and others on the Eastern shore are so far ahead of baselines in nutrient management, which have been established at a much larger regional level, than other areas in the region, diminishing their ability to garner resources to address the issues that are most relevant to them. The reality is there are other issues present at the district level that don't exist in other parts of the region (NY and PA, for example).

Staffing

The greatest challenge experienced by the TA providers has been that of staffing and balance in skillsets. One participant pointed out that "the necessary cooperation between independent consultants and State programs exists; the current issue is that the pieces are not being integrated – the lack of human power makes it difficult to get the money out of the bank and actually on the ground in connection with technical assistance projects." Currently, staffing priorities are focused on hiring and retaining planners. What is needed, in reality, are technical assistance employees, specifically the engineers, engineering technicians, and those who can get out on the ground and design and implement the practices. There are huge deficits in staffing right now across all agencies. The Soil Conservation District lost nine technical staff in the past 10 years, and has had zero replaced. For concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO) certification, there are currently only three surveyors for the entire state of Maryland and 600 poultry permits awaiting approval. University of Maryland still doesn't have a soil specialist and Extension has been significantly diminished in its capacity to support producers in this area especially in respect to the deployment and sustenance of new technologies that the participants identified as being absolutely critical for future conservation efforts.

The lack of engineers and access to engineers who have job approval authority is an enormous stressor relative to getting both NRCS practices on the ground and even more so, the state-sponsored practices that rely on the federal agency engineers for practice delivery. The current system was described as being significantly broken and, with the loss of tenured engineers who are being replaced (and in some cases, not replaced at all) by new, early career engineers, the design and engineering efficiencies have been greatly compromised at the very time that the need is highest. Participants recognized that it is difficult to keep people, once they are working for the public sector, in the public sector, and when they lose them, the positions are not filled. This was especially and most poignantly the case for engineers. The salary for planners versus engineering technicians and surveyors was discussed, with concern that the latter two were not paid competitively. State agency (MDA specifically) salaries may especially disincentivize the ability to attract and retain competent and productive conservation professionals. Salary for public agency engineers is especially problematic. The backlog in project delivery that is caused by the staffing constraints has significantly impacted the credibility of the conservation provider community, decreasing the willingness of the customer/farmer to work, especially, with the public sector partners, other than to identify the availability of funding opportunities through them.

Priorities for Improving TA Capacity into the Future

Participants strongly recognized that the access to and implementation of new and evolving technologies and having technical assistance capacity for supporting this would be paramount into the future. Skillsets that are absolutely critical for future TA providers included: good communications skills and ability to relate to farmers (empathy for the culture), combined with strong technical skills (noting that on-the-job training for this attribute would still be most critical), and increased understanding and access to technological tools for deployment on the Eastern Shore (e.g. GIS, ditch technologies, remote sensing, etc.)

Furthermore, the redefining of NRCS, its role, and whether it is to move forward into what used to be the FSA role OR step back and become more firmly planted in its agency's original mission – as the conservation technical assistance provider, must be established. Participants said very clearly, “NRCS, you can't do both. Either be the contract manager or the TA provider”.

The review and approval process, as it relates to practices and especially permits MUST be improved. Participants felt that to be effective, control and priority development needs to be returned to local level. Furthermore, there needs to be more common sense in how funds are allocated and how eligibility of a program is assessed. Current limitations on where funds can be used irrespective of need, prohibits progress and meaningful impact.

Some participants recommended that an auditing process could be a good new approach. Rather than awaiting a rigorous and often-redundant review process for project and consultation services, a random auditing program could check in on consultants and projects over the years to ensure they are in fact complying with the rules and regulations. This would allow work to occur more quickly and maintain an incentive for consultants to follow code and farmers to maintain their businesses to ensure compliance. Another participant suggested the concept of placing a bond on the contract to ensure it gets built according to plan, if plan is not followed, the contractor will be required to fix it. However, other participants pointed out the limitation to this approach is that the cost to fix errors will likely be higher than the bond, and questioned what incentives would be possible to make it work.

Participants agreed that increased utilization of the private sector would be necessary for getting the work done in the future and suggested that mechanisms for carving out funds to make available for use the private sector would be necessary – while minimizing or eliminating the government’s tendency to micromanage as a proxy for accountability. Participants suggested that if an audit process was in place, that all sectors would be empowered to conduct their work and assist with issues that are too large for district conservation staff to address alone, and would provide adequate incentive to comply with expectations and regulations. There was also a sense that the improved use and deployment of the private sector would ensure that advanced equipment and technology would be used and that work would be completed in a more efficient manner.

One participant suggested that NRCS could develop a list of projects that consultants could bid, suggesting it would be a quick way to start crossing projects off the list, actually addressing problems and helping NRCS regain some credibility. Concern was raised that a bidding process might result in lowering the quality work if it gets awarded to the lowest bidder rather than the most qualified consultant. Others suggested finding a process to distribute projects but maintain a flat rate or that there might be a hybrid approach that could work.

An area that garners strong interest was described as a “two-pronged approach” whereby NRCS would simultaneously work to bring on new, early career engineers and find a mechanism for bringing on private sector engineers to start project work immediately. A certification could be created to ensure contractors comply with government regulations and random audits would be conducted to ensure contractors remain compliant.

Caroline County, MD Roundtable Key Points

- A focus was not so much on conservation planning but more on the process by which projects were designed and work was approved - this is because water control structures and work related to poultry houses tend to be design, engineering and construction focused
- The process of rationalizing the design, engineering and approval process is the key need.
- There seems to be a reasonable number of people in the private sector who can provide TA but the problems on the public side are a lack of trained staff, lack of trained engineers to evaluate and approve plans and construction plus a related lack of clear criteria for review and approval.
- The consequences of these shortcomings are substantial delays for farmers who are willing to undertake conservation actions, increased time (cost) for private and public sector staff attempting to work with farmers, and significant backlogs of work that needs to be done.
- As a result, the cost per unit of conservation work is increased and disincentives to undertaking conservation are created - and less conservation is accomplished.
- Solutions include raising the quality of the training, increasing the number and expertise of engineers and establishing clearer and more certain criteria by which work is reviewed, approved and accomplished.

**Chesapeake TA
Augusta and Rockingham County Meeting Summary**

**February 18th, 2016 9:00 – 11:00am
Harrisonburg, VA**

Introduction

Public and private sector conservation professionals met on February 18th from 9:00 – 11:00am for a roundtable discussion on technical assistance for conservation efforts in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Larry Elworth explained that the purpose of the roundtable was to better understand how technical assistance is currently operating on the ground and take a cross-section of information from throughout the Bay region back to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Chesapeake Bay Funders Network to inform future efforts. The goal is to understand the current situation, the current strengths and limitations, and to identify the needs, challenges, and options for providing technical assistance to ensure that financial assistance can be used and implemented efficiently and effectively in the future.

Assessment of Current Technical Assistance (TA) Efforts in Augusta and Rockingham Counties

Participants explained that current TA conducted in the area includes mapping farms, making planting recommendations, creating and implementing nutrient management plans, stream crossing designs, as well as engineering and more. They noted that the variety of different sizes and types of farm operations as well as a varying array of practices, made providing TA. The more complexity adds to the time needed for TA which was limited due to staffing and financial restrictions. They noted that TA in the Valley tends to be labor intensive and time consuming due to the varied landscape, the diverse nature of the farm operations on which they work, and the broad set of practices being adopted. To address resource concerns, a farm will need different plans implemented, from nutrient management to grazing, and multiple physical practices such as fencing, watering systems, and stream crossings.

In addition to those complexities, participants pointed out that it is rare to see a farm project in which only one funding program is involved. This often means that more than one organization, public or private, is involved in carrying out the work, each with its own transaction costs associated with providing assistance and sometimes different technical requirements. As a result the time and effort necessary to provide technical assistance goes well beyond the specific activities in planning and implementing practices.

Added to that are vagaries of providing TA to farmers who may delay or withdraw entirely from projects. Participants additionally pointed out the importance of considering the expense to income ratio for farmers; even with cost-share programs, implementation is often costly and farmers, especially older, small farms do not have the necessary equity to justify the project costs. This can result in having sunk costs of TA without conservation practices – while that may be unavoidable in some cases, the situation does further strain the ability of conservationists to get practices on the ground and FA spent.

Funding

Funding for NRCS, Conservation District and other organizations comes from different sources: NRCS funds come from EQIP and other program allocations, CREP allocations for TA, CTA and staff positions; Districts receive state funding or grants, including EPA 319; private organizations and consultants from contracts, TSP, or grants. The level of NRCS funds has increased until recently providing the opportunity to support a substantial amount of conservation in the Valley. Districts primarily rely on state funding for their staff and depend on legislative priorities. Participants pointed out that, especially at the District level, they do not often pursue grants because they do not have the staff to carry out the agenda prescribed by the grantors and they end up spending more time administering and reporting on the projects than actually implementing them, decreasing the ability to actually conduct valuable TA. While private or public grants (e.g., CIG through NRCS) can provide welcome resources, if funds are not available at the same time to support the necessary TA, the additional funds can strain capacity and complicate already existing program commitments.

As the administrative and transaction tasks in carrying out programs have increased, time available for TA has decreased. Participants felt that previously there was a better balance between administrative and technical assistance time and resources to ensure the work could actually be conducted. They also observed that a better recognition of how much time the implementation of practices actually takes would make clear the actual needs for TA time and resources. For example, a full 6-7 days is required to completely implement an SL6 (Stream Exclusion w/ Grazing Land Management).

Engineering Plan Approval

A significant limitation currently facing conservation efforts in the Valley is that there is only one engineer certified to sign off on all projects. State engineering staff do not have the authority to sign off on engineering projects and at the local level, only District Conservation staff hired before October 2013 have the authority to design plans for NRCS. This results in a significant backlog in projects, as they cannot be implemented until they have been reviewed and approved. Retirements by NRCS engineering staff, the slow pace of filling existing vacancies and the limited number of qualified engineers are apparently contributing to this bottleneck. The bottom line is that in the Valley this has become a significant challenge in delivering TA for conservation.

Implementation Challenges

Participants noted that there can be a disconnect between project ideas, implementation and follow through when outside grant funds become available. In securing the grant funding, planners may assume the work will be completed by NRCS or the Conservation Districts, despite the reality that they already have their own work load they are trying to work through. Participants emphasized that when additional funds are brought into the area, attention needed to be paid to ensuring that there are also adequate resources to support the demands for the necessary additional technical assistance. Another problem with the current TA situation is that there is a lack of follow through once a project has been implemented. Participants expressed the need to maintain relationships with farmers and regularly check in with them to make sure the

project is still functioning, see if other needs have risen, and ensure that everything stays up-to-date so that when it comes time to certify them, they actually can. This, again, has become difficult due to the lack of staff to maintain these relationships and follow up on projects over the years.

Employees

Unlike in the past, few of the more recently hired NRCS and District employees have farming backgrounds. Participants attributed this to the current economy, where it has again become profitable to return to farming after school for new graduates with farming backgrounds. As a result, recent new hires are predominantly coming from environmental areas of study and often did not even grow up on or near a farm. Participants explained that this was not necessarily a bad thing, but it did often mean that the new hires require additional training to understand how to communicate with farmers. When seeking new employees, participants stated that they focus more on finding individuals with strong interpersonal communication and other soft skills, because the technical skills can be taught on the job, but if the employee cannot engage and build relationships with the farmers, conservation work will not be successful.

One struggle they continue to face, which harkens back to their employment concern, is a lack of retention. Many new hires come in and receive 2-3 years of training. Just as they are beginning to get the hang of things, they leave the Districts for better paying jobs in the private sector or NRCS. This means a lot of time and resources are lost and new employees must go through the same training period. These efforts inhibit the progress of conservation projects as senior staff must spend more time training new staff and there are fewer hands to implement the projects. In order to avoid this rollercoaster, the agency needs to invest in the “human infrastructure” of the organization.

The Future of TA

Many of the federal employees expressed a concern that more and more of the TA work is going to be outsourced to the private and non-USDA sector so that they will be left with predominantly contract management work, which is not why they got into this line of work in the first place. This is additionally a concern because the private contractors, while effective at project implementation, see it as a one time job and are generally focused on meeting the requirements and nothing more. This means, follow through and continued development of farming best practices in the name of conservation will not occur. They did emphasize that there is certainly a role for private contractors; they are great at getting the word out and implementing projects at a faster pace, but both parties need to exist and be efficient in order for conservation efforts to be effective and sustainable.

While participants have seen an increase in funding for conservation programs and initiatives recently, the increased complexity for allocating those funds and actually using them is limiting project implementation. Participants again echoed the need to hire more engineers to approve plans, or give current TA and other staff approval authority. Since the future of funding is unknown, participants emphasized the importance of focusing on long term staffing needs. Measures need to be taken to ensure that the necessary TA capacity exists and remains strong regardless of fluctuating program funding, now or in the future.

NRCS and Districts are service oriented, not for profit, thus the messaging needs to be different than that of a private consultant. The organizations need to stay current with practices and incentivize implementation of them to encourage participation. They need to determine what makes participating attractive; what makes farmers want to participate; and emphasize those aspects of the programs. Additionally, to justify continued support and funding, participants agreed they need to do a better job of documenting the ecological services that these projects would provide; explain how money will be saved by avoiding problems down the road if they implement these projects now. Investors need to see tangible monetary savings to truly be interested. Another tool that was mentioned for supporting conservation efforts was consumer interest in environmental consequences, as they are becoming increasingly interested in purchasing locally sourced and organic foods.

Furthermore, while technology is certainly growing and changing, many of the farmers in the area still rely on traditional practices and consider the new technologies irrelevant to their farms. This will likely shift moving forward as more farmers come from younger generations, and NRCS staff will have to adapt accordingly, but participants expressed there is no use forcing technologies on farmers that are currently uninterested. It is more effective to work with them on a platform they are comfortable with.

The Future of Conservation TA

Participants once again emphasized the importance of adequate staffing. Part of this includes the need for better wages that reflect the wide array of work a technical assistant provides. This will improve retention, which will in turn improve efficiency and program implementation rates and successes. They also suggested having a contract specialist that serves every field office to allow conservation staff to get back into the field and conduct the on the ground work with the farmers that they are meant to do and excel at. That would increase the ability to provide all of the necessary TA in a timely way, would provide for the follow-up to ensure maintenance of practices, and provide opportunities to identify additional conservation measures that could be adopted. Doing so would help balance the need for strong working relationships with the need to complete administrative tasks and would increase the adoption of effective conservation.

Participants expressed that it would be good for NRCS to revisit its goals and mission and make these very clear. There also needs to be a more holistic and inclusive approach, where NGOs like NFWF partner with the consumer and health sector and the conservation sector to create solutions together, across numerous platforms.

Shenandoah Roundtable Key Points

- TA is provided by NRCS, conservation districts, private consultants and CBF – there are good working relationships among the people involved in conservation in the Valley
- TA can be variable given the diversity of operations in the area
- TA can be complex due to the multiple practices on individual operations and the differing requirements of using various state and federal programs
- Current estimates in state and federal programs do not accurately account for the actual amount of time needed in providing TA for many practices
- The cost of providing TA goes far beyond the time involved in planning and implementation – the transaction costs of navigating and meeting administrative requirements reduces time available for TA
- Support for TA comes from state and federal programs - while grants bring additional resources to the Valley assumptions are often made that districts will provide the TA without additional support
- Districts are reluctant to pursue grant funding, even with support for TA due to the time and resources involved in coordinating and administering those grants.
- Engineering approval is a limiting factor in the Valley due to loss of NRCS staff and lack of NRCS approval for any state engineer
- New employees in NRCS and Districts are increasingly from non-ag backgrounds and have non-ag degrees (e.g., environmental sciences)
- Staff are chosen based on their strong interpersonal skills even if they do not have ag backgrounds
- Staff with non-ag backgrounds require 2-3 years of training in technical disciplines and in becoming familiar with agriculture, as well as
- Retention is a significant issue as District staff regularly move on to more lucrative jobs, such that the District must invest again in hiring and training
- NRCS staff are concerned that the time spent in contract management has significantly reduced the time available for TA
- In looking at short and long term staffing needs it is important to recognize how important relationships are in working with farmers
- Even with new technologies available to work with farmers there is still substantial demand for traditional practices and TA
- Adequate skilled long term staffing is the most important need for TA in the future, along with the need for better wages, staffing to handle administrative work

**Chesapeake TA
Lancaster County Roundtable**

**February 24th, 2016 8:00 – 10:30am
Lancaster, PA**

Introduction

Public and private sector conservation professionals met for two and a half hours on February 24, 2016 for a roundtable discussion on technical assistance for conservation efforts in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Kristen Saacke Blunk explained that the purpose of the roundtable was to better understand how technical assistance is currently operating on the ground and to take a cross-section of information from throughout the Bay region back to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Chesapeake Bay Funders Network to inform future efforts. The goal is to understand the current status, strengths and limitations of the programs, and to identify the needs, challenges, and options for providing technical assistance to ensure that financial assistance can be used and implemented efficiently and effectively in the future.

Assessment of Current Technical Assistance (TA) Efforts in Lancaster County

NRCS and Conservation District staff explained that their TA included all work performed on a conservation project, from planning to implementation to follow through with the farmers over the years after the initial project has been completed. This includes helping them with BMPs, whether as part of a cost share or fully funded by the farmer, to complete construction checks, assist in the permitting process, and implement the project. Their goal is to be a one stop shop for farmers seeking assistance. The District averages an estimated 60-70 conservation plans they are able to write in a year, completes around 100 BMPs, reviews 80 nutrient plans, and conducts other on the ground efforts including, in this past year installing 10-15 pits, two thousand feet of terrace and five stream crossings. Some staff are also devoted full time to EQIP projects. NRCS manages around 120 contracts at any given time and receives 100-120 new applications annually. They also manage a significant amount of the area's EQIP money.

Outside of government efforts, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation focuses most of their TA work in Lancaster County on CREP projects; Team Ag provides agronomy and engineering services as well as environmental services such as nutrient management, meeting CAFO requirements and other conservation efforts. TeamAg estimates they provide around 40,000 billable hours of TA in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed in a year. Red Barn focuses their TA on the permitting process and the engineering needs. Their projects often involve new construction, working with NPDES permits and programs, working with townships on projects such as stormwater and developing management plans, or building new dairy facilities. The Lancaster Farmland Trust sees their role as liaisons between farmers and TA providers, assisting farmers in finding funding for their projects.

Despite the amount of work being conducted, participants expressed that there is a lot more work to be done in the area. Current funding limitations for planning and implementation staff is one of the challenges holding them up from conducting additional projects. Since funding for NRCS is determined on an annual basis, it is difficult to commit to a full time staff.

Participants expressed the need for greater communication among the various organizations providing TA in the area to ensure a greater level of consistency and increase efficiency. One participant suggested that having an accessible platform to share resources and create a more comprehensive understanding of TA efforts and needs in the area would be invaluable to future work. There is not currently a good archive of BMPs and current conservation projects that have been implemented because each organization has its own reporting system. As conservation regulations become stricter, participants imagine that plans will be required of all farmers in the future and that their records will likely be required to be made public. This means the need for TA is only going to increase.

Administrative and Implementation Challenges

Participants explained that the current administrative approach at NRCS is operating like a fire drill. Money arrives suddenly and there is panic to spend it quickly. This shifts the focus away from developing relationships with the farmers and truly understanding what they need to projects being implemented that may not be the most efficient or important issue to address in the area. These projects are often the biggest decision a farmer may make in their life and the monetary and time commitment is often large. NRCS (and conservation district/consultant) staff need to be available to assist them through this planning stage and follow through in the implementation and maintenance.

Implementation is the real value of NRCS and participants would like to see a return to this as the focus of the organization rather than the administrative role it has taken on recently. This requires more funding to be allocated for TA staff and a restructuring of the agency's priorities. Additionally, they are not currently seeing follow up occur after a project is completed. Evaluation of a systems functioning is a key part of the planning process and it is no longer occurring. This can result in farmers being ineligible when reenrollment comes around because their projects have not been maintained or updated as necessary.

While RCCP provides an opportunity for TSPs to work on projects together, it still has significant limitations. The selection and planning process for the area to implement the project can take a long time; funding often is not provided until a plan is solidified, which can up to two years into a project; and it can be difficult to convince farmers and producers to get involved if they cannot see immediate value for them. Some of these challenges were attributed to perceived disconnect between those creating the programs and the local TSP organizations that actually understand the on the ground reality. The resulting bottleneck is inhibiting NRCS's capacity to provide TA and operate in the most efficient capacity.

Employees

Unlike in the past, few of the more recently hired NRCS and District employees have agriculture backgrounds. While initially the expectation was an agriculture background, they found that many of the new hires could not effectively handle going out to the farm and speaking with the farmers about conservation and compliance expectations. While they still look for agriculture backgrounds, they are more interested other qualifications such as computer skills and interpersonal skills. Participants highlighted the importance of interpersonal skills especially. It is crucial for TSPs to be able to develop and maintain relationships with the farmers and have a teamwork mentality. If they have a strong head on their shoulders, they can be taught how to do the work regardless of their academic background. However, this training time is expensive and can take up to three years, which is another limitation, as these new hires often leave for private

sector jobs once they have been trained as the pay is much better. As a result, NRCS (and the conservation district) has to start the hiring and training process over again and senior staff spend their energy on these efforts rather than getting out in to the field to actually conduct TA. One member suggested that initial training to become a TSP should occur in university programs or through online training before they are hired – it should be one of the qualification requirements for the job. Recently, they have been experiencing difficulty finding any qualified applicants to fill these roles

The Future of Conservation TA

Participants agreed that the TA need is very great and the current model of operations (emerging with the Reboot), in which Conservation District acts as a regulatory body, NRCS provides consultation and the private consultants and organizations are actually carrying out the work, is not the most efficient approach. NRCS needs to return to its original purpose of providing on the ground technical assistance and the administration of funds either needs to be relocated elsewhere, or additional staff need to be brought in to ensure TSP staff are able to actually get out to the farms to do the on the ground work.

Communication is of paramount importance in the success of conservation efforts. This includes communication among the various organizations providing TA, but especially the communication with the farmers in an individual capacity. Since NRCS programs are all voluntary, projects are driven by the needs and interests of farmers; educating people about the importance of and value in conservation efforts needs to be expanded to increase implementation as well. Farmers will be more willing and interested in engaging in projects if they view compliance and conservation efforts as a lucrative commodity.

Participants again highlighted the importance of greater collaboration between the various organizations present at the table. All are interested in implementing conservation projects and they would be more effective if they pooled resources and skills to accomplish this. Furthermore, the various sources of funding currently required to complete projects complicates the process and leaves farmers confused. It would be greatly beneficial to have flexible funding that could be integrated into a single project that addresses the multiple needs a farmer might have, rather than having multiple projects happening on a farm at the same time, often overlapping each other and therefore wasting time and resources.

As compliance monitoring becomes more consistent and strict, the need for TA will only increase. This needs to be matched with additional funding as well as TSP staff to help farmers implement the various projects required under conservation regulations and expectations. Additionally, NRCS feels pressure to focus on projects that meet WIP goals but do not always meet the most pressing needs of a particular area or group of farmers. There needs to be more flexibility and local level control to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of conservation efforts.

Maintaining a competent and well-compensated staff to carry out these projects is crucial and NRCS and Districts need to consider these implications. Some of the barriers outlined above to recruiting talented TSPs, such as low government salaries in the face of large student debt and significant amount of on the job training, could be addressed by incorporating training into college programs and loan deferment incentives for employees.

Lancaster County Roundtable Key Points

Our TA Teams

- It takes 3 years to get our new staffers up to speed, is expensive, and we need them to stay.
- Their degrees/training are less important than their human/people skills,
- Having GIS interest/experience is increasingly important.
- Universities/colleges should be ensuring that they meet the standards necessary for getting accreditation for planning (NM, conservation). This is not currently happening at the major universities.
- We need to provide options for debt relief to make it possible to bring on higher tech (engineers) in early career for the engineering and design. We don't have adequate access to these skillsets. Early career engineers are coming out with \$50K debt, but we can't pay them enough to make it worth their time to commit beyond the 3-year start up time.

Meeting the TMDL

MS4 communities are feeling the pressure to meet their permits and view the agriculture contributions as being vital (essential) to their ability to do so.

- In PA the pressure to meet the TMDL is as great for the urban sector with MS4 as it is for the ag sector –so why not look for synergies/synchrony?
- We are stuck in a planning cycle. Do not have enough bandwidth to implement all that is necessary NOR provide adequate follow-up to ensure it's working/properly implemented.

Delivering TA

- NRCS program announcements are a fire-drill and we can't turn things around as quickly as their announcements require/expect.
- We are so focused on getting the plans delivered that we have no bandwidth for implementing and especially not for following up. Re-enrollment in programs is difficult/impossible because the interim management/maintenance for re-enrolling isn't occurring at a high enough level to ensure eligibility.
- Landowner is the key determiner on "who" serves them – which TA model/provider they choose – fed, county, or private.

Need into the future

- A single, IT/web-based platform that private-, federal-, and county partners can access to see where producer is in process – in order to better align and deliver TA.
 - Lack of single archive and current plans/projects impedes each partner. There appears to be general consensus that FOIA will become less relevant given the sense that the information is already readily available.
- Three-point approach with each partner having specific roles is NOT working.... Currently (and projected into the immediate future given PA's Reboot):
 - NRCS – Contractual
 - Conservation Districts - Regulatory
 - Private sector and NGOs (e.g. Farmland Trust) – Delivering plans and implementation.
- Problem is that we need NRCS and Districts on board for delivery of TA for plan and implementation in addition to private sector and NGO, and this is not the direction PA is going.

**Chesapeake TA Roundtable
Southside VA
Meeting Summary
March 18th, 2016 9:00 – 11:00am
Farmville, VA**

Introduction

Public and private sector conservation professionals met on March 18th from 9:00 – 11:00am for a roundtable discussion on technical assistance for conservation efforts in the Chesapeake Bay watershed.

Larry Elworth explained that the purpose of the roundtable was to better understand how technical assistance is currently operating on the ground and take a cross-section of information from throughout the Bay region back to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Chesapeake Bay Funders Network to inform future efforts. The goal is to understand the current situation, the current strengths and limitations, and to identify the needs, challenges, and options for providing technical assistance to ensure that financial assistance can be used and implemented efficiently and effectively in the future.

Agriculture and Conservation in the Area

Participants explained that on average, the Southside area of Virginia is primarily made up of medium sized farms, averaging a gross income of less than a quarter million dollars annually, with a number of beef operations, a few dairies of roughly 100-500 cows, poultry houses with about 100,000 birds per operation and some grain production. Much of the area traditionally supported tobacco. The region also has a few small ruminant operations and organic or local produce farmers. Many of the farmers must supplement their income off the farm.

There has been significant conservation work in the area to plant pasture on old crop fields, increase cover cropping, livestock exclusion and tree planting. There are 10 soil and water conservation districts in Southside VA and those compose about 18-20 counties and some of this area is in the Southern Rivers watershed. Regardless of watershed, the issues are the same. Conservation work, with state cost share funding supported through the Piedmont Soil and Water Conservation District over the past two years, has involved almost \$1.3 million with 9,900 acres of cover crops planted and roughly 163,000 feet of streambank exclusion. Participants pointed out that these efforts are driven largely by economics; farmers are motivated to engage in the projects because there is monetary opportunity for them from the cost share programs.

Current Technical Capacity Capabilities and Limitations

Participants explained that the District and NRCS have a large backlog of producers needing assistance. A large portion of the work NRCS conducts in the area is conservation planning, including developing resource management system (RMS) level plans, which is not something the District is engaged in.

Whereas before, NRCS was able to go out and visit farms and encourage them to apply for programs, the onus now rests on the farmer to come into the office and ask for help, which requires a base knowledge that something even can or should be done to improve their conservation practices. The availability of private technical service providers (TSPs) varies across Southside- in Prince Edward there are no private TSPs while in Bedford the Peaks of

Otter SWCD has access to private some private assistance. Combined with staffing pressures, it is challenging to conduct the TA necessary to meet the demands of the Bay TMDL. That said, the agriculture sector in the region continues to make progress in conservation practice implementation.

For the conservation districts, the availability of state funding has provided increased opportunities to support conservation practices on farmers operations while at the same time created significant challenges in providing the necessary TA and support to carry out on-farm activities. The amount of funding for water quality conservation practices can fluctuate dramatically and somewhat unpredictably from year to year, based on the level of the state budget and surplus. This makes it difficult to plan for and ensure that adequate staffing is available to conduct TA and assist farmers. As a consequence private organizations are seeing farmers dropping out of programs for which they initially applied due to the substantial delays due to limited TA availability.

While a measure of TA support from the state has accompanied the additional cost share funding, the form and amount of the additional allocation is not appropriate for the short or long term needs to ensure sufficient, stable support, including the necessary staffing to get quality conservation accomplished. For counties in the Southside region, where financial assistance (FA) has increased by as much as 600% and workloads have increased proportionally, support for staffing has not kept up with the demand for work on the ground. In addition, increased state and federal FA and TA have imposed significant administrative work and costs without proportionate increases in funding and resources to carry it out. As a result the ability of districts has been severely strained. A significant increase in funding is anticipated for FY17, but, while the situation for TA has improved somewhat, the districts will still be significantly challenged in accomplishing their work due to staffing limitations. Although outside grant funds are sometimes available, they rarely are designed to provide for additional TA support.

While the districts are still primarily filling their traditional role and implementing state cost-share, NRCS has found its role significantly changed in the recent years, which participants attributed largely to the Farm Bill. Their priorities are being refocused on organics, high tunnels, precision agriculture, carbon sequestration and other newer practices. Learning the necessary knowledge in these areas takes a lot of resources from within NRCS, further constraining their ability to provide TA to farmers. Participants further expressed frustration that much of their work is now focused on accountability measures rather than contact with farmers and implementation work. The limited time for one-on-one contact with farmers impedes the ability to work with those who are set in their ways and may be slow to change practices. The increased level of paper work that must be completed also serves to discourage farmer participation, particularly among those most reluctant to change practices regardless of the level of resource concerns on their farms. In addition, the expectations coming from the federal level do not always match local on-farm conditions, which may also limit conservation program participation. The Farm Bill also moved funds around that had previously been available to NRCS for TA through the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Initiative.

Staff

NRCS and the District have built strong relationships working together over the years, however as new staff come onboard, they often do not have that history which can complicate partnership forming and joint efforts.

While they are still seeing rural backgrounds among their new hires, fewer and fewer are coming from farming backgrounds specifically and tend to have degrees in environmental science and other related fields. As a result, many of them cannot immediately interact effectively with farmers and thus require significant amounts of on the job training. NRCS provides training sessions, which District staff are invited to attend and DCR provides some training as well. However, all this training takes time and resources, including the time of senior staff in coaching new staff, which reduces their ability to conduct farm visits and the necessary on the ground TA.

Furthermore, it is becoming harder to find qualified and willing employees as there is minimal job security in the fluctuating annual budget environment. As many students are regularly finishing school with substantial debt, they are looking for more secure employment with higher salaries and better benefits. Those that do accept that risk, often end up leaving in a few year for better paying jobs, just as their training is rather complete and they are starting to gain the trust of the farmers. Participants expressed that it would be great to have a system that rewarded people for sticking around to conduct TA.

Future of Agriculture and TA in the Area

While the overall quantity of farm land is unlikely to decrease, participants expect that there will be fewer, larger farms operating in the future. Participants agreed that there needs to be a returned focus to the importance of planning and developing well-designed conservation projects rather than the current focus on getting the allocated money spent as quickly as possible. They need more time to spend on the ground working with farmers, properly train staff to assess local needs, listen to farmers' concerns, and help them prioritize and then implement sustainable projects rather than just provide "Band-Aid" solutions. If staff can help farmers understand the benefits to them of conservation plans, they will be more motivated to implement and maintain them.

With the timeline of the Chesapeake TMDL, including 2017 and 2025 milestones, participants anticipate an upcoming evaluation and push of a new initiative to meet the corresponding goals. This may result in more money, but unless it is allocated in a balanced manner, and resources for TA are increased appropriately, it will be difficult to effectively use the money and achieve the true conservation potential. This necessary allocation balance includes the need for enough funds to address an entire farm when creating a resource management plan, rather than just one aspect or section of the farm, if there is any potential of it being effective and sustainable. Participants reiterated the importance of having stable funding on the operations side to create long term staffing plan to carry out future works regardless of financial assistance for cost share.

Southside, VA Roundtable Key Points

- Piedmont Virginia is characterized by medium sized farms; many of the farmers must supplement their income off the farm.
- NRCS was able to go out and visit farms and encourage them to apply for programs, the onus now rests on the farmer to come into the office and ask for help, which requires a base knowledge that something even can or should be done to improve conservation practices.
- Piedmont does not have a strong constituency of private TSPs to provide TA. In other parts of the region private contractors are available to implements practices, such as SL-6 projects.
- Combined with staffing pressures, it is challenging to conduct the TA necessary to meet the demands of the Bay TMDL.
- For the conservation districts, the availability of state funding has provided increased opportunities to support conservation practices on farmers operations and created significant challenges in providing the necessary TA and support for on-farm activities.
- While a measure of TA support from the state has accompanied the additional cost share funding the form and amount of the additional allocation is not appropriate to the short term needs nor to the long term needs to ensure sufficient stable support for the necessary staffing to get quality conservation accomplished.
- Private organizations are seeing farmers dropping out of programs for which they initially applied due to the substantial delays caused by limited TA availability.
- The recent dramatic increases in state cost share have created severe strains on districts as timing and funds are simply not suited to hiring and training sufficient staff and there has been inadequate support to cover the administrative burden borne by districts
- Among new hires, few come from farming backgrounds and typically have degrees in environmental science and other related fields. Thus, many of them cannot immediately interact effectively with farmers and thus require significant amounts of on the job training.
- Training takes time and resources, including the time of senior staff in working with new staff which reduces the ability of senior staff to conduct farm visits and on the ground TA.
- Wage levels and fluctuating levels of support that lad to job insecurity make it difficult to retain staff. Staff often end up leaving in a few years, when their training is complete and they are just starting to gain the trust of the farmers, to get better paying jobs. Participants noted a system that rewarded people for sticking around to conduct TA would be helpful.
- Participants agreed that there needs to be a returned focus to the importance of planning and well-designed conservation projects - they need more time to spend on the ground working with farmers, properly train staff to assess local needs, listen to farmers' concerns, help them prioritize and then implement sustainable projects.