

Vermilion Headwaters Watershed Steering Committee Meeting
11/15/2016, Forrest, IL
Meeting notes

In attendance: Jen Filipiak, Eric McTaggart, Becky Taylor, Terry Bachtold, Jim Isermann, Sue Tull, Jody Hughes, Marcus Maier, Gerry Weller, Chuck Hanley, John E Wilken, Catie Gregg, Patrick Slack, James Fulton, Roger Metz

The meeting started with introductions and funding updates from Jen and Eric. AFT was able to secure a second year of education and outreach funding from the Walton Family Foundation. MRBI is entering year 2 and CSP funding is now available for the MRBI watershed. For FY17 \$300,000 is available under EQIP and \$500,000 is available for CSP. In FY16, MRBI funding mostly supported cover crops, waterways and a couple structures (toe walls). We didn't use up all of the funding, so if there had been another project it probably would have been funded. If you farm in the watershed your chances of getting financial assistance is very good, certainly better than in the general fund. Livestock projects will probably get funded in General EQIP, but farmers can hedge their bets and apply to both at the same time. General and MRBI CSP application cutoff is February 3, 2016. General EQIP application cutoff 1 is November 18, 2016 and the second one is scheduled for January 20, 2017. There is no published cutoff for EQIP MRBI applications. NRCS always takes applications for all programs. The application cutoff dates are used to determine which applications will be in consideration first for funding.

Eric discussed a new NRCS/AgSolver partnership. He is recruiting interested farmers to use this service to evaluate fields in terms of profitability at a very fine scale. Portions of fields not consistently profitable may be good places for conservation programs. Contact Eric for more information. More info on AgSolver and the Profit Zone Manager is at: agsolver.com

The group then discussed ideas for education and outreach in 2017:

1. Newsletter
 - a. 2x per year
 - b. Use it for updates w/NRCS and watershed news
 - c. Profiles/success stories (Terry, John Wilken??)
 - d. Try to use simple messages, easy application. Consider pushing the economic message – NRCS programs more than cover the full cost of implementing cover crops, so farmers made money off the program – there are farmers in the watershed that can do the seeding for you. While being aware that if a farmer does cover crops just for the money, they may not invest the time to do it right and therefore quit when the funding runs out. Push a simple program to get started – cereal rye ahead of beans.
 - e. Why are we reluctant to begin – this information needs to get out beyond a newsletter – visit with farmers at coffee shops, coops, etc. Reducing tillage was a stumbling block when talking to others about conservation practices.
2. Coffee shops
 - a. Group was supportive of visiting coffee shops. Catie and Becky will be doing this over the winter and need farmers to partner with them.
 - b. Side note – the Livingston County board came up with the idea of working with fertilizer outlets and having them host something for people that buy

fertilizer for them where we could then talk to the producers at the same time about different conservation practices.

3. Cooperator's networks
 - a. Find pilot group of farmers to test out questions farmers have about different conservation practices. E.g. simple field trials – strips or plots. Jim Isermann can help with set up.
 - b. Committee members agreed that over time, profitability comes with improved organic matter, especially in drought years. This is something that we can start collecting data on through a cooperators program.
4. We want to continue to offer a Summer Tour and field days – ideas on topics, what do you want to see?
 - a. Liked the framework for a Summer Tour being a tour of 3-4 farms, followed by a meal and ONE inspirational/plenary speaker. Keep in mind that the expense of a nice charter bus is probably worth it because we are attracting non-operating landowners to the tour as well. Comfort matters.
 - b. What do you want to see in the field?
 - i. Different ways of seeding: can equipment be showcased/demo'd?
 - ii. What works and doesn't: what are the most common cover crop management mistakes and how can you avoid them? (i.e. things that can go wrong that are under the farmer's control)
 - iii. Possible spring tour before crops are killed off? This is an opportunity to show that beneath the soil surface a lot is going on even if very little growth is observed above ground.
 - iv. Noted that pictures are very effective – e.g. on Indian Creek tour, Jim showed pictures of his program during all stages. If farmers have enough advanced noticed, they can take pictures in anticipation of using them at a field day.
 - v. Got good feedback on the field day at the Thorndyke farm – soil pits are appreciated as well as the educational value of the speakers.
 - vi. Make an effort to set outreach events well in advance so they can be advertised all year.
 - vii. Contact Dan Perkins at Jasper County (IN) SWCD – he did a nice field day called “Farming for the Future” with several stations set up at one farm demonstrating equipment, cover crops species, soil pits, etc.
5. Indian Creek update
 - a. Compilation video of watershed over last 6 years
 - b. Watershed guide to help others trying to establish or work in a watershed
 - i. A and B available early 2017 hopefully
 - c. FieldPrint calculator project is continuing for this year, stay tuned for more information.