

October 2013-March 2014

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## *Message From R. Phou Vongkhamdy, State Conservationist*



During the October 2013 to March 2014 period, NRCS staff focused on work related to implementing conservation practices and ranking applications for the first ranking period deadline in FY 2014 which was December 20, 2013. On February 7, 2014, the Agricultural Act of 2014 was enacted which is commonly referred to as the 2014 Farm Bill. The passage of the 2014 Farm Bill impacted the second and third scheduled ranking periods where the final rules and implementation of the bill are currently being developed for FY 2014.

From October 2013 to March 2014, there were 421 conservation practices completed worth almost \$850,000. The Eastern Conservation District implemented 94 conservation practices worth almost \$200,000 with 67 under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). The Northern Conservation District implemented 200 conservation practices worth over \$275,000 with 102 under EQIP and 79 under the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). The Southern Conservation District completed 127 conservation practices worth over \$370,000 with 85 under EQIP. Prior to the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill, NRCS Rhode Island preapproved a total of 65 applications worth over \$530,000. There were an additional 114 applications pending approval after the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill.

Regarding outreach and communications, RI NRCS participated in a total of 16 events which included three forestry themed workshops, three general open houses and one forestry tour coordinated in cooperation with the Rhode Island Conservation Districts. NRCS also partnered with USDA's Rural Development (RC&D) and RI Resource and Conservation Development Area Council to conduct informational energy workshops titled "RI Farm Energy Program Grant Assistance Workshops." NRCS also participated in two recruiting events including the annual Government Career Fair and URI Summer and Internship Career Fair. NRCS provided sponsorships at the New England Farmers Union annual meeting in Newport, RI and the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Land and Water Summit held at URI. Lastly, NRCS had an exhibit booth at the RI Flower Show with 5,000 attendees and an exhibit booth along with a speaker at the Women in Agriculture conference attended by 200 people at URI.



R. PHOU VONGKHAMDY  
State Conservationist

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## Administration

*by Walter Marshall, Public Affairs Specialist*

Through the Pathways Intern Program, the three summer interns including Ghyllian Conley, Zachery Fisher, and Tim Brosnan continued to work in conservation planning with the field staff while continuing their academic studies at the University of Rhode Island.

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## Conservation Districts Updates Including Programs and Easements Funding

*by Michael Kenyon, Easement Program Manager*

Since FY 2014 did not begin with a new Farm Bill, there was a repeal of the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP), and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP). This resulted in no new obligations/applications in regards to those programs and limited activity to actions that were obligated in previous fiscal years. Since the beginning of FY 2014, the Programs Team has been working on reviewing existing open easement obligations and recently closed parcels as part of a quality review.

On February 7, 2014, the Agricultural Act of 2014 (2014 Farm Bill) was enacted and established the new Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). The 2014 Farm Bill made changes to some of the existing programs where the purposes and functions of FRPP, GRP, and WRP were combined into two components. One of these components is the Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) and the other is the Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE). The ALE component combines the purposes and functions of FRPP and GRP to protect working agricultural lands by providing financial assistance to eligible entities through the purchase of Agricultural Land Easements. The WRE component operates like WRP and provides financial assistance directly to private and Tribal landowner to restore, protect, and enhance wetlands through the purchase of Wetland Reserve Easements. The 2014 Farm Bill provides the agency 270 days to promulgate regulations needed to implement ACEP. Until then, the 2014 Farm Bill authorizes the temporary administration and implementation of ACEP in FY 2014 under existing FRPP, GRP, and WRP regulations to the extent possible without obligating any new funds prior to receiving guidance from the NRCS National Office.

The Programs Team continues to conduct quality reviews of its easements in addition to monitoring stewardship lands in accordance with the guidance in National Bulletin 440-14-8.

## Conservation Districts-Overview

by Walter Marshall, Public Affairs Specialist

Conservation Practices Implemented October 2013-March 2014			
District	Program	Number of Practices	Sum of Payments
Eastern	AMA	2	\$7,347
	CSP	20	\$8,738
	EQIP	67	\$162,580
	WHIP	5	\$18,263
<b>Eastern Total</b>		94	\$196,928
Northern	CSP	79	\$22,313
	EQIP	102	\$189,385
	WHIP	19	\$65,411
<b>Northern Total</b>		200	\$277,109
Southern	CSP	22	\$33,968
	EQIP	85	\$251,382
	WHIP	20	\$85,901
<b>Southern Total</b>		127	\$371,251
<b>Grand Total</b>		421	\$845,297

FY 2014 Applications Preapproved Prior to Implementation of 2014 Farm Bill			
District	Program	Number of Contracts	Estimated Contract Cost
Eastern	AMA	2	\$10,580
	EQIP	12	\$77,287
Northern	EQIP	24	\$90,161
Southern	EQIP	27	\$351,974
<b>Grand Total</b>		65	<b>\$530,002</b>

## Conservation District - Eastern District (Bristol and Newport Counties)

by Melissa Hayden, Eastern District Conservationist

NRCS and the Eastern RI Conservation District provided outreach to landowners in Bristol and Newport counties through an open house workshop that was held on February 5, 2014 at the Mount Hope. District and NRCS staff was available to discuss programs and answer questions from participants. Outreach activities were also completed to generate interest in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) which had an application window from January 8 to February 7, 2014.

Ongoing contracting work included completion of Conservation Stewardship Program payments and progress on 2014 contract reviews. Planning and ranking was also completed for new applications which were received for the first ranking period which ended December 20, 2013. Applications preapproved prior to the implementation of the 2014 Farm Bill included 12 Environmental Quality Incentives Program applications worth over an estimated \$75,000 and 2 Agricultural Management Assistance Program applications worth over an estimated \$10,000. In addition, there were approximately 20 additional applications received but not yet ranked due to the implications of the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill.

The Eastern Conservation District staff worked diligently to implement conservation practices during the October 2013-March 2014 period. A total of 94 conservation practices were implemented worth almost \$200,000. There were 67 EQIP practices completed worth over \$160,000, 20 CSP practices completed worth over \$8,700, 5 WHIP practices completed worth over \$18,000, and 2 AMA practices completed worth over \$7,000. Some of the most popular practices completed included: the implementation of brush management for invasive species control; fencing for prescribed grazing; pest management; high tunnels; restoration and management of declining habitats; and two wells. Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans, Forest Management Plans, and Nutrient Management Plans were also completed in the October-March time frame.

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## Conservation District - Northern District (Providence County)

*by Justin Tuthill, Northern District Conservationist*

The Northern RI Conservation District in cooperation with NRCS organized an open house style workshop in early December at the Jesse Smith Library in Harrisville to showcase NRCS programs to prospective applicants where approximately 15 people attended. NRCS staff also participated in the 2014 winter farm energy workshop sponsored by RI RC&D at the North Scituate Public Library on February 25, 2014.

Prior to the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill, Providence County NRCS had approved 24 round 1 applications for the FY 2014 EQIP program totaling over \$90,000. Currently Providence County NRCS has 60 applications pending for the 2nd and 3rd rounds of the 2014 EQIP program although rankings are delayed till final rules are implemented for the 2014 Farm Bill.

Providence County NRCS continued work on an agreement with the Northern RI Conservation District that employs an Ag Technician to assist with program implementation, planning, and practice implementation. This agreement has been extremely useful with regards to the planning and implementation of Forest Conservation Activity Plans through the EQIP program.

The Northern Rhode Island Conservation District staff focused on implementing 200 conservation practices worth over \$275,000 during the October 2013-March 2014 period. There were 102 EQIP practices completed worth almost \$190,000, 19 WHIP practices completed worth over \$65,000 and 79 CSP implemented worth over \$22,000. Some of the most popular practices implemented included Forest Stand Improvement, Brush Management, and Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans.

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## Conservation District - Southern District (Kent and Washington Counties)

by John Richard, Southern District Conservationist

Our partners and producers focused efforts on addressing forested areas since October 2013 where we have completed roughly 82 acres of Timber Stand Improvement totaling approximately \$50,000. We have been working diligently to complete the projects that are for constructing habitat for the candidate species New England cottontail rabbit where roughly 82 acres of Early Successional Habitat were created totaling approximately \$105,000. We also completed an oyster restoration project working with a local aquaculture grower to build a living reef of spat on shell.

During the October 2013-March 2014 period, the Southern District completed and certified 127 conservation practices totaling more than \$370,000. There were 85 EQIP practices completed worth over \$250,000, 20 WHIP practices implemented worth over \$85,000 and, and 22 CSP practices completed worth over \$33,000. Some of the more popular practices implemented included Restoration and Management of Declining Habitats, Fencing, Timber Stand Improvement, and Pasture Planting.

Prior to the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill, the Southern Conservation District approved 27 EQIP contracts worth over \$350,000 during the Round 1 ranking period which ended December 20, 2013. Currently there are 36 applications pending for the 2nd and 3rd rounds of the 2014 EQIP program. The staff is waiting for finalized rules resulting from the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill before completing any application rankings.

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## Outreach, Communications, and Recruitment

by Walter Marshall, Public Affairs Specialist

During the October 2013-March 2014 period, NRCS actively participated in a total of 16 outreach events. Such events included three individually themed woodland owner workshops where three NRCS staff members conducted individual presentations. Gary Casabona, State Biologist, presented on conservation practices available to increase diversity for pollinators and create habitat suitable for the growth of the New England cottontail rabbit. Jim Turenne, Assistant State Soil Scientist discussed forest soils on roads, trails and landings and included information on the availability of digitally mapped soils. Chris Modisette, State Resource Conservationist, informed attendees about forest management including the importance and benefits of thinning and regeneration.



Gary Casabona, State Biologist, speaks to attendees at the South County Rod and Gun Club open house.



Stewart Taffe, Soil Conservationist, explains NRCS program information to an attendee at the NRCS Conservation District open house in West Greenwich, RI.

In cooperation with the Southern RI Conservation District, NRCS held an open house and forestry tour at the South County Rod and Gun Club in West Greenwich on October 19, 2013 where attendees learned about successful forestry practices implemented through NRCS funding. Three general workshops were coordinated with the RI Conservation Districts. The events were targeted to the farming and forestry communities to learn about technical and financial assistance available for conservation efforts. The events were held at Mount Hope Farm's

Farmers' Market in Bristol, RI on February 5, 2014, Jesse Smith Memorial Library in Harrisville, RI on December 3, 2013, and the Louttit Library in West Greenwich, RI on February 12, 2014. The Harrisville and West Greenwich events were particularly well attended by prospective farmers and forest landowners.

NRCS partnered with the USDA Rural Development and RI Resource Conservation and Development Area Council (RC&D) to conduct three RI Farm Energy Program Grant Assistance Workshops. Attendees learned how to save money and energy through a combination of funding, incentives, and grants from the presenting organizations.

NRCS participated in two recruiting events which included the annual Government Career Fair held at Rhode Island College where students from 8 local colleges and universities learned about careers in public service. The other recruiting event was the URI 2014 Summer and Internship Career Fair where students learned about NRCS career opportunities and summer internships.

The New England Farmers Union held its annual meeting in Newport, Rhode Island December 6-7, 2013 with the theme "Celebrating our Agricultural Diversity: People, Practices and Products." Approximately 175 people attended from throughout New England. NRCS sponsored the event which included an exhibit booth and Chris Modisette presented several interesting facts on the rapid growth of agriculture in Rhode Island since 2002.

NRCS had an exhibit booth at the Rhode



Chris Modisette, State Resource Conservationist, speaks to 200 attendees at the New England Farmers Union annual conference in Newport, RI on Dec. 6, 2013.

Island Flower Show where staff informed a general audience on the importance of conservation efforts in Rhode Island to improve the quality of life for all residents through clean air and water and an abundance of locally grown fruits, vegetables, and meats. The event attracted approximately 5,000 attendees over a four-day period from February 20-23, 2014.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Land and Water Summit was held March 8, 2013 with well over 300 attendees who work in the field of conservation. NRCS sponsored the event with an exhibit table and Joe Bachand, Program Manager, presented information on the EQIP program and the new Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (formerly Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program-FRPP) in a workshop titled “Finding Funding for Land Conservation and Stewardship. The summit, themed “Working Together to Protect our Communities,” provided many networking opportunities and informational workshops with the theme



Approximately 200 people attended the Women in Ag Conference held at URI where they listened to information sessions and were able to network with the agriculture community

The Women in Agriculture Conference was held March 11, 2014 at the URI Center for Biotechnology and Life Sciences Building with over 200 attendees who participated in a combination of information sessions, hands-on craft workshops, and networking opportunities with over 40 vendors. Bruni Velez, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, presented information on changes in NRCS programs resulting from the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill.



Attendees at the Women in Ag Conference get creative as they practice hands-on felting techniques.

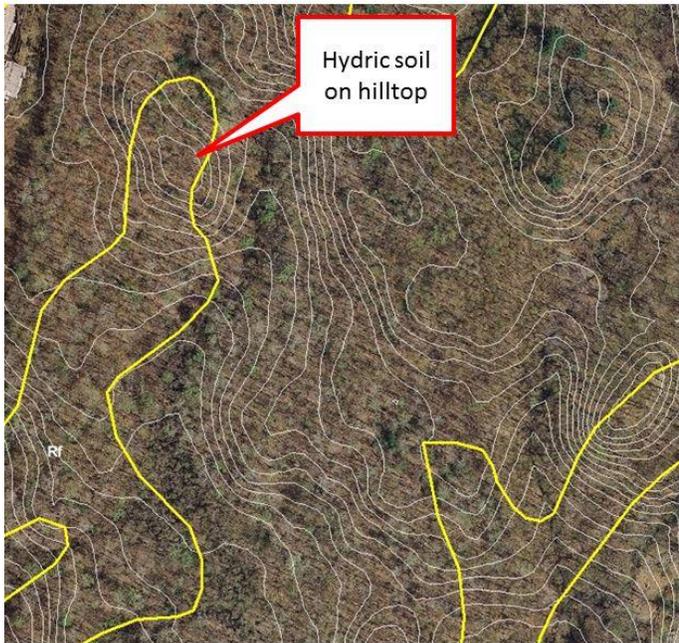
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## Soils Program

by Jim Turenne, Assistant State Soil Scientist

New version of the Rhode Island Soil Survey now available:

### 2012 Soils



### 2013 Soils



A new version of the RI Soil Survey SSURGO maps was released in January 2014. This new soils version contains numerous improvements, updated soil mapping for the entire RI coastal zone (dunes, marshes, and beaches), error fixes, and adjustments to the hydrology along major rivers and streams. Aiding in the updated mapping were the use of recently released statewide LiDar elevation data and derived products such as *2 foot elevation contours, wetness index, and slope maps*.

For more comprehensive information on the updates, visit:

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detail/ri/soils/?cid=stelprdb1242786>

To view the new soils data, visit the Web Soil Survey at:

<http://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov/App/WebSoilSurvey.aspx>

A version will be posted on the RIGIS site in the near future.