

MASWCD – DNR Meeting Notes 5-26-2011

MASWCD – Steve Radcliff, Kenny Lovelace, Peggy Lemons MSWCDEA – Chris Terry, Debbie Niederer Jackson SWCD – Melvin Dickmeyer DNR – Bryan Hopkins, Bill Wilson

The group started discussion at 1:00 p.m. Bryan Hopkins announced that Mike Wells is retiring and the Soil & Water Program will now report to Deputy Director Davis Minton. He stated that Mr. Minton knows the program and Bryan feels it will be useful having him as Deputy Director. Bryan stated that the public appetite for any governmental program is probably the lowest it has ever been. There has been general cut-back and de-funding for many programs. He says the Governor's office has emphasized that we need to be careful about being open and transparent with our program. He stated he had to take some steps forward, but he feels some of them have been positive. Timesheets – Bryan stated that due to the legislative involvement in the need for the timesheet program, he received legislative requests for information on how much each district spent in cost-share, how much it costs to keep each office open, and the number of landowners each district worked with during the year. He stated the obvious response to the answers for districts where these numbers were low is that cost share is not all that we do. However, it became confusing to the Legislature because they were hearing concerns about districts not wanting the time accounting program. Bryan stated evidently some districts felt the time accounting would be the first step to a workload analysis. He stated that he hears concerns from the districts about the push forward from DNR on the time accounting program. He said yes, there is a need to be open and transparent with the funding which is why they are pushing forward. He said the legislators can do a simple SAM II inquiry on the funding for the soil and water program which shows revenues dropping and expenses increasing. Their response was to ask why and he feels that this is the reason they pushed for the budget rescission last year. He stated that they explained to those legislators who asked how they planned for the use of the reserve fund in times like this, however, he does not think all those who were interested in seeing this information asked for an explanation. Bryan stated it is clear there needs to be some discussion on the sensitivities in the districts on proposed changes. He stated there has already been some erosion in the perception of the value of the local boards due to the in-house bickering. There are folks talking about re-structuring and consolidation. Not only in Missouri but across the nation. The soil and water program in Nevada is gone. He said it appears the needs assessment was seen as meddling, intrusion, getting in the way of the local boards. A lot of frustration came with the inability to move the cost-share funding among categories. Due to this the program staff worked to have the midyear adjustment to help on this frustration. Bryan said how do we deal with change and how do we make sure the boards feel respected. He said the public battle is hurting the program. We can't fight on everything. He said we need to make sure the boards understand they are critical. Kenny stated the supervisors feel like DNR has taken over. He said the supervisors know their county and know what's best for their county. Bryan said some of the frustration with the cost-share has to do with going from a paper-based system to MOSWIMS. He stated in the past problems with cost-share contracts and payments were not caught until the payment claim came in and then it was too late to do much about it, it was not the landowner's fault and the landowner deserved to be paid. Now problems can be caught up front and corrected before the landowner completes the practice. Debbie and Peggy asked why the Commission policy is different than NRCS standard and specs. Bryan says that previously at each Commission meeting when districts came with an issue, the Commission would make a

change to accommodate that district and essentially they were changing their policy at each Commission meeting. He said that is why he has put the practice reviews in place and that they need to hear from the districts on situations where the Commission policy have ventured too far from NRCS specs. The vendor form and signature issues were discussed. Peggy asked if there was not something that could be done to have site eligibility before districts had to go through the process of verifying the name on the deed to the land, getting the vendor form and making sure the name on it somehow matched with the name on the deed and then entering the name on the contract to match both the deed and vendor form. Some landowners are reluctant to complete vendor forms until they know their site has been approved, but if you enter the name in MOSWIMS for the site eligibility and then the vendor form comes in differently, then change orders have to be done to make things match, and sometimes new vendor forms. Bryan said there was not anything he could do about the requirements from OA (Office of Administration), but would look into if there was some way the process could be streamlined for the site eligibility. Peggy also stated that training on signatures might be a good idea, at least a form showing how signatures were needed when the deed was in a trust name, had a power of attorney listed, or in the name of 4 or 5 individuals. Steve Radcliff stated he felt districts needed to know how much cost share they will have for the year in July. He said there are only 2 good months in the fall and 2 in the spring for getting construction done. Additional cost share funds coming late in the year really didn't help. Bryan stated that the advance allocation should help this, but there is risk in appropriating more than is appropriated. Bryan asked for a timeline showing when the districts needed to get the cost-share funds and when the best times were for construction work, etc., and any other significant factors. Bryan stated that the soil and water program will always have some sort of reserve fund. Melvin Dickmeyer stated that his county is trying to use the time accounting program but that it is not working and they can't seem to get any assistance on it. He also stated that he felt that district employees needed some kind of cost-of-living increase; you can't expect employees to continue to work for the same amount they were receiving 5 or so years ago. A lot of counties have no local funds or ability to supplement the funds from DNR to help give district employees any better salary. He also said that they received funding from their county for information/education work, however, they did not have staff time to do these programs any longer since their info/ed person retired and they were not allowed to replace him. Bryan discussed tax payer and legislator attitude to districts that spend no cost share or very little but have higher costs for staff even though the staff may be doing more outreach or marketing and education. Bryan said the next work group meeting will focus on outreach and marketing. He said all other agencies have cut back their budgets (MDC, NRCS, etc.) and a lot of people do not understand why our budget does not get cut back as well. He said the auditors will never go along with a system of giving districts a percent of the cost-share funds their district spends and the local board figuring out salaries. He said on the whole staffing question they don't have the metrics yet to have any answers. He said Sandy had a good idea with bringing back the annual report to show the number of people contacted through education programs, newsletters, etc., and measuring other district activities. Debbie asked if there was some way we could develop steps or ranges for the district employee salaries. Bryan said when the job descriptions were put in place the positions were started at 9% above the bottom of the pay range. He also said that with state employees step increases are not automatic but that the triggering points for step increases are different than in the federal system. Bryan said that when the state employees get a cost-of-living increase he would certainly think district employees would get one also. He said he would actively lobby for that. Melvin asked about Mr. Henke's report, what happened to it.

Bryan stated he had mentioned prior to Mr. Henke starting the interviews that he was not sure what the report was supposed to show and what they were looking for in the program. He said that Mr. Henke's report reflected his agricultural background. He said it was given to him verbally and was very much about the districts feelings on the loss of local control, the frustration in the districts, them feeling like they had been stepped on. He did also say that the report was not in line with the driving force that hired him to do the report and that he was not sure what had happened to Mr. Henke's report. Bryan also stated that there had been another review about 1 year 9 months ago which had turned in a scathing analysis. Steve Radcliff asked about the MOU being worked on, there were things in the proposed revision that he felt did not need to be there such as the statements on the districts renting equipment or selling items, that this was already covered in the state statutes. Bryan stated that the revision is not final yet, there is no need to hurry on the revision. He did state that there had been some audit issues which may reflect why rental and sales need to be included in the MOU. Information out this week to districts that have MRBI projects stated there will be SWAT funding to hire additional personnel. The SWAT (soil and water action team) will be distributing \$345,000 through NRCS with a 25% match through DNR soil and water to hire technical help for the MTBI projects. The letters the districts received stated that the 25% match was for travel, retirement and health insurance for these employees. Peggy asked about the status of these employees, it was stated they will be district employees, technicians available to become tech IIs. She asked about the health insurance for them. Currently district employees not paid by the sales tax funds are not eligible for the health insurance. Bill Wilson stated that they had set up the funding for this MRBI SWAT funding so that the employees would be able to be on the same policy through Missouri Consolidated with the other district employees. Peggy stated they will have issues because of the districts that have employees who are not eligible for the health insurance now due to be funded by other sources of funds. Bryan said it was a good point and they needed to look into it. When questioned about the cross-training, Bryan stated it is not about cutting every district to one employee, it was about working with districts to help them better their assistance to the public. Debbie said not all districts are set up like Newton and McDonald and the landowners will not be favorable of not having a person in the office. She said that districts are feeling they will be forced to do this. Peggy stated that with the time accounting program tracking what the employees are doing and who for and now with the talk about cross training, the district are feeling like this is forcing them to cut back on their employees. Due to this the information on the time sheets will more than likely not be accurate because district employees are afraid to put down how many hours they are working on NRCS or CSP work, etc., fearing that their pay will be cut by that number of hours. Bryan stated that was not the case, that if the districts are not truthful on their time sheets it will only hurt the district. If they put too many hours down as working for others such as NRCS, MDC, etc., then the legislators may look at it as to why they need the number of employees they have since they are not spending as much time on cost-share. If they put all their time as working on cost-share then it may be looked at as though they don't need all the employees they have because of all the hours spent on cost-share compared to the dollars claimed. He stated it is in the best interest of the district to be truthful on their time sheet. Steve commented on the issue of the Commission always approving the staff recommendation. He said he felt like the Commissioners were not reading their packet prior to the meeting and were being guided through the issues at the meeting. He suggested not putting up the staff recommendation slide until the very end after the Commission had discussed the issue and finally asked what the staff recommended or asked Bryan what he recommended.

Kenny stated he felt that the supervisors needed more recognition than they get for the hours they put in for the districts. Steve said it was a shame that the Commission cannot sit down for informal discussions such as this one due to the Sunshine Law. Peggy said the districts would like to have the Commission start getting out in the state again for meetings so they can show case what they are doing through tours, etc. Also, maybe districts could come to the Commission meeting and showcase one district per meeting with presentations on what their programs are and what they are doing. Bryan and Bill had to leave, intended to leave at 2:00 but did not actually leave until 3:00. Did not get a change to get into the attitude discussion, but all were agreeable to setting another meeting date.