

Healthy Soils Task Force (HSTF) Meeting Minutes

Thursday, March 12, 2020
Nebraska Dept. of Agriculture
301 Centennial Mall South, 4th Floor
Lincoln, NE 68509

Members Present: Jerry Allemann, Keith Berns, Lisa Lunz, Mike McDonald, Nate Pflueger, Charles Shapiro, Heidi Borg (staff for Senator Julie Slama), Ray Ward, Steve Wellman and Greg Whitmore

Member Present by Phone: Hannah Birge, Ron Bolze, Bob Bettger, Senator Tim Gragert and Jeff Steffen

Members Absent: Richard Bartek and Steve Tucker

Staff and Audience Attending: Steve Roth, Nebraska Department of Agriculture; Andrew Little, University of Nebraska Extension; Tyler Williams, University of Nebraska Extension; Kristi Block Nebraska Grain and Feed Association; Aaron Hird, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), George Cunningham, Sierra Club; Alex Brechbill, staff for Senator Gragert and Alan Moeller, Nebraska Elder Climatology Legacy (by phone)

Meeting was called to order at 1:00 p.m. CDT.

Chairman Keith Berns reported that the meeting was being operated under the Open Meetings Act and that a copy of the Open Meetings Act was posted on the wall of the meeting room.

Berns also noted that a Public Meeting Notice was published in the Lincoln Journal Star on Feb. 21, 2020. An affidavit of the notice was available for review.

Ward made a motion to accept the minutes from the Feb. 6, 2020, meeting. Seconded by Whitmore, the minutes were accepted by acclamation.

The agenda was accepted as previously presented with no changes.

The following financial report, compiled by the Nebraska Department of Agriculture's Finance and Accounting staff, reflects travel expenses through the end of Feb. 2020.

Expense	8/1/2019 - 2/29/2020	
Meeting Notices	\$	30.54
TSB Rental	\$	54.05
Mileage	\$	1,570.79
Parking	\$	18.25
Grand Total	\$	1,673.63

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Allemann made a motion to accept the financial report as presented. Seconded by McDonald.
Roll call vote:

Aye: Allemann, Berns, Bettger, Birge, Bolze, McDonald, Pflueger, Shapiro, Steffen, Ward, Wellman, Whitmore

Nay: none

Abstained: none

Absent: Bartek, Lunz, Tucker

Motion carried.

Andrew Little, assistant professor of Landscape and Habitat Management at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln, provided a brief overview of a project he is implementing titled "Precision Conservation." In a handout, Little describes precision conservation as a novel approach to striking a balance between ag production, conservation and environmental quality goals, with an end result that can profit landowners financially. He offered his contact information for anyone interested in finding out more about the program: alittle6@unl.edu or 402-419-1913.

Tyler Williams, Cropping Systems Extension Educator for UNL with a focus on climate and weather impacts, presented a pilot project he is working on titled "Weather Ready Farms Certification Program." The program is designed to improve or increase the resilience toward the impacts of extreme weather on Nebraska's farms. Williams's PowerPoint presentation is available on the [HSTF webpage](#). Williams said the brochure he presented is still in the draft stage and will be revised as appropriate.

Mike McDonald gave a report on outreach efforts by himself and other Task Force members who attended agricultural and conservation related events across that state. They were given the opportunity to present information on the activities and objectives of the Task Force and to distribute surveys.

Surveys were completed primarily by people involved in production agriculture. McDonald said that the exercise was not intended to be a scientific project but designed to give the Task Force a barometer of the overall mindset and actions being taken by some of the farmers and ranchers in the state.

McDonald presented results compiled from completed surveys received at meetings in Hickman, Broken Bow and Mead. The results included demographic information in addition to the answers to questions regarding: the obstacles to increase cover crop usage; incentives to make changes to improve soils health; and factors that impact the rates of commercial fertilizer applications. The data presented by McDonald will be posted on the [HSTF webpage](#).

To begin discussion of the main objective of the Task Force, Berns reviewed what is spelled out in statute: LB 243 specifies that the Task Force shall develop a comprehensive healthy soils initiative for the state of Nebraska and that a comprehensive action plan be developed to carry out that Initiative.

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Berns said that the Initiative/Objectives Committee that he appointed at the previous meeting, met on March 5 to discuss the process and direction the Task Force may be able to take to develop an initiative and comprehensive action plan.

Committee member, Aaron Hird, State Soil Health Specialist, presented several slides demonstrating how his agency, NRCS, has divided the state into separate “eco-regions” as a way to address the differences in environmental conditions and soil composition in various areas of the state. Those slides will be posted on the [HSTF webpage](#).

Based on the information Hird presented, the Goals and Objectives Committee recommended that the Task Force take a similar approach as it develops its initiative and comprehensive action plan and consider dividing the state into six eco-regions in developing the action plan.

Alex Brechbill, staff for Senator Gragert, presented an outline of possible tasks, next steps and timeline the Task Force could follow as they develop an initiative and comprehensive action plan. The outline was a result of discussion that took place during the Goals and Objectives Committee meeting and will be posted on the [HSTF webpage](#).

After discussion among Task Force members, Berns said it would be prudent to begin drafting documents that could comprise the report that is to be presented to the Nebraska Legislature by the end of 2020. As a result, Berns made the following committee assignments, giving each tasks to be completed as part of developing the report:

Report Writing

Keith Berns
Hannah Birge
Alex Brechbill
Aaron Hird
Mike McDonald
Possible assistance from The Nature Conservancy

Report Reading and Critique

Charles Shapiro
Senator Gragert
Ron Bolze
Alan Moeller
Department of Agriculture representative

Initiative (Big Goal/Vision) Committee

Mike McDonald
Steve Tucker
Greg Whitmore
Nathan Pflueger
Alan Moeller

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Benchmarks and Measurements Committee

Charles Shapiro

Ray Ward

Jeff Steffen

Bob Bettger

Aaron Hird

Berns said he would be in contact with committee members in the coming months and would consider having conference calls or video chats to review drafts of documents as they become available. His intent would be to have a full Task Force meeting later in the summer once he felt there was enough materials to review and evaluate.

Meeting adjourned at 4:26 p.m. CDT.