

NRCS/Native Practices Meeting Report

February 22-24, 2010, Anchorage, Alaska, facilitated by Crystal Leonetti

Overview:

The first meeting of the NRCS/Native Practices Work Group was a resounding success. The work group is made up of 11 NRCS employees/policy-makers (8 were present), 7 American Indian/Alaska Native elders, and a USDA Civil Rights employee. NRCS policy-makers provide the expertise in NRCS processes, government-wide policies and NRCS' overall vision and strategy. NRCS field employees provide the insight into our day to day business with landowners and obstacles which prevent us from doing more business with tribes. The American Indian and Alaska Native elders provide experience living a subsistence way of life, hold degrees and are leaders in combining western science with traditional ecological knowledge, and have knowledge of native conservation methods. The three day, no agenda meeting was touted by all in attendance as both productive and meaningful.

The meeting purpose was to begin this important and historic discussion by creating a positive rapport amongst the work group individuals. The group is to provide advice and wisdom into the writing of an NRCS "how-to" guide on incorporating Native American methods of conservation into NRCS' list of conservation practices. In the bigger vision, this group is hoping to provide a catalyst (the guide book) for a stronger relationship between the agency and tribal partners.

Important Considerations Agreed Upon by the Work Group:

- Include the values of the native conservation methods and honor their spirituality (do not lose the intrinsic respect in the context of the practice) at the local level
- The interface between historical conservation and modern issues (i.e.: climate change, energy conservation) is very relevant
- There is a process that NRCS follows to write new conservation practice standards
- There is a process that NRCS state-level offices use to localize national conservation practice standards
- Consultation is necessary, it is needed, and it can be initiated by anyone
- We can be a better agency for the next 75 years, the next 7 generations, and beyond
- There are differing perspectives between production agriculture and the subsistence way of life, and NRCS employees have to make a paradigm shift to realize that
- Training at the local, state and national level is inherent to the success of this budding relationship among NRCS and tribal partners/landowners
- The guide book being written needs to be cross-referenced throughout NRCS policy if it is to live on in future NRCS generations
- The guide book should include stories and illustrations
- Intellectual property rights need to be further examined so that clear instructions to employees and partners may be included in the guide book

Lasting Impressions:

Larry Mercurieff expressed that this was a first for him: that the government was willing to have a meeting the way Native people historically held meetings, with no agenda.

Ida Hildebrand said that it will be difficult as we go through writing this guide book together because “the government has been telling us to sit down and shut up for 200 years... Now they are willing to listen? That will be hard for us.” She also says, however, that “this is a rare opportunity and we don’t have time to keep secrets.”

We all agreed that this project we are undertaking together could be history in the making. The ability to truly improve and build a working relationship between this government agency and tribal partners hinges on what we are doing now. This is the “perfect storm” (the atmosphere is right) for a good thing to happen. We will work together, spread the word, and make it last.

Next Steps:

1. Research
2. Write the first draft of the guide book
3. Work group members review the 1st draft and send comments and edits to Crystal
4. Work group meeting (April 12, 13, 2010 in Spokane, Washington) to agree on outstanding issues and agree on the 2nd draft
5. Others (employees and tribal partners) review 2nd draft and send comments and edits to Crystal
6. Final guide book finished by June 1, 2010
7. Presentation of the guide book (with recommended follow-up) at NRCS headquarters
8. Policy writing
9. Use the book

Work Group Members:

Kat Anderson, Ethnoecologist, California NRCS

Wayne Bogovich, National Agricultural Engineer, NRCS

Sarah Bridges, National Cultural Resources Specialist, NRCS

Noller Herbert, Conservation Engineering Division Director, NRCS

Ida Hildebrand, Doyon Athabascan, Chugach Regional Resources Commission, Alaska

Mike Hubbs, Ecological Sciences Division Director, NRCS

Orville Huntington, Athabascan, Alaska

Justine James, Quinault, Washington

Crystal Leonetti, Native Liaison, Alaska NRCS

Marie Meade, Yupik, University of Alaska Adjunct Professor, Alaska

Larry Mercurieff, Aleut, Seven Generations Consulting, Alaska

Herman Moonin, Alutiiq, Alaska

Gene Schock, State Resource Conservationist, Alaska NRCS

Karin Sonnen, Rangeland Management Specialist, Alaska NRCS

John Stensgar, Vice Chairman, Colville Tribe, Washington

Ad Hoc Member: Toni Stanger, USDA Civil Rights

Roylene Rides-at-the-Door, State Conservationist, Washington NRCS (not present)

Martin Bales, Colville Nation Tribal Liaison, Washington NRCS (not present)

Shawn Big Knife, Warm Springs Reservation Tribal Liaison, Oregon NRCS (not present)

Ad Hoc Member: Diane Gelburd, West Region Conservationist, NRCS (not present)

Ad Hoc Member: Bob Jones, State Conservationist, NRCS (not present)