

Blue Ridge PRISM (Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management)
Quarterly Meeting Minutes
November 2, 2016

This month's Blue Ridge PRISM quarterly meeting was preceded by an information session focused on the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) funding opportunity. The information session began around 1:15 after introductions were made around the room. Participants ranged from landowners, government personnel, private contractors, and nonprofit partners. Attendance exceeded the forty people at the previous quarterly meeting on July 20, 2016. After introductions were made, Ashton Stinson, Program Director of the Blue Ridge PRISM, began with an introduction to the Blue Ridge PRISM and Rod Walker delivered an information session on the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

Below are the following three components of the meeting:

- Blue Ridge PRISM Introduction: Ashton Stinson, *Program Director*
- RCPP Information Session: Rod Walker, *Co-Founder*
- Quarterly Meeting: Rod Walker, Ashton Stinson, and PRISM leadership

The sections below are organized by the titles of the accompanying powerpoint slides.

Blue Ridge PRISM Introduction

Blue Ridge PRISM Program Director Ashton Stinson introduced herself to the meeting attendees and shared about her career experiences both with an international non-profit organization and in stateside land conservation and invasive species management work.

Please reference the quarterly meeting slides for the presentation. More information can also be found on our website: www.blueridgeprism.org

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Background

Rod Walker, founder of the Blue Ridge PRISM, presented on the RCPP funding opportunity.

Question: How does the Blue Ridge PRISM address best practices and mitigate the negative effects of herbicide use?

Rod: No one in the PRISM wants to use more herbicide that is needed. If you take a look at our fact sheets you'll find recommendations on treatment methods.

Kory Kirkland (NRCS): Herbicide is often one of the most effective tools in treating invasive species. Department of Forestry and the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) are involved with finding the best herbicide techniques.

Jim Hurley (PRISM/landowner): The contractor training that the PRISM is holding in December will cover best practices, rates/percentages, and timing of treatment to minimize negative environmental impact. We will look to the VCE and Department of Forestry for more information.

The Blue Ridge PRISM's role in the RCPP program is to provide all of the marketing plus education and outreach to make landowners aware of the funding opportunity.

RCPP Overview

Twenty percent of the original \$894,000 award is kept by NRCS and about \$50,000 goes to Virginia Department of Forestry for their role in the program.

In order to get the maximum amount of value out of this program, we're focusing on invasive species removal only. The financial incentive that landowners receive does not include restoration work.

Question: Knowing that removing invasives requires partners in the effort, is there any plan to identify such partners?

Answer: Neither the PRISM nor the NRCS recommends contractors and RCPP does not pay the contractors. The PRISM is compiling a list of contractors to help landowners "pick their partner" for this work.

Landowner: We are all partners in this work; the PRISM gives landowners the resources to make the right decision.

Sam Quinn (The Farm at Sunnyside): We, as landowners and land managers, must take it upon ourselves to look toward the next step [after RCPP contract is signed].

Rod: The VCE and Department of Forestry will help to coordinate in this effort, There are many resources.

Jim: Under the EQIP contract, RCPP requires a ten year commitment to maintain the contract.

Question: How are contractors evaluated and how do they establish best practice?

Kory: There are expectations up front as to what is expected of the contractors. NRCS makes recommendations on what should be done and methods are specified. Technical guidance is based on program recommendations (10 invasive species). The contractor and NRCS both want a good product to be delivered.

As part of PRISM's agreement with NRCS, there are quarterly reports and matching funds to be provided for our RCPP program. We will be working with our partners to help us with fulfilling the reporting requirements.

NRCS RCPP Agreement Status

There are two major components to RCPP eligibility, *landowner eligibility* and *land eligibility*. For practical matters, if you own land in our ten county region, you are most likely eligible. Your local District Conservationist will let you know if you're eligible.

The work can be done by a contractor or by the landowner. At the end of each year, DOF/NRCS will approve the work and you will receive the incentive payment for that year.

Question: How do you work seasonally when plants are dormant?

Rod: It depends on the plant you're targeting. This may be the wrong time of year for some people and plants. Depending on your circumstance, you may want to wait until spring.

Question: If you only complete 75% of the work, do you not get reimbursed?

Kory: NRCS can do a partial payment but the other 25% does not carry over.

Question: How much time do you need to allow for paperwork— what's the lead time?

Kory: Roughly, one month to complete the paperwork, one month to go through the batching/ranking process, one month to be under contract [three months total]. Once the contract is written, you have 12 months to do the work. In order to control the number of applications that we're handling at a time, applications come in batches.

Rod: When do we move from hypothesis on timing to actual dates?

Kory: The dollar per acre rates for 2017 have not been released from the national program. Once the rates are released, the formal process begins. [Since the meeting, the rates have been released and the first applications are being processed. The first batching period closes on December 16.]

Question related to the three year contract. Answers below:

Rod: The assumption is that you will be able to treat the same invasive three times over the three year term of the contract.

Landowner: If you *get* the funding, you should step up and use it instead of putting it off.

NRCS RCPP Eligibility and Application Process

The goal of the three year contract is that you're able to get the invasives down to a manageable level. In Jim Hurley's experience, three years should allow landowners to get their invasives into minimal maintenance mode.

NRCS RCPP Rates

Question: Would something like bringing in a mulcher be covered in the program?

Kory: It depends on the scenarios that are given from NRCS headquarters.

Question: How do you cover Ailanthus re-sprouts?

Rod: Ailanthus would be covered under practice 666 and the second and third years would be covered under practice 314.

Question: Has anyone done work in the \$22,000 scope? How far does the money go?

Sam Quinn: We used Virginia Forestry and Wildlife Group for 15 acres of property where half the canopy was threatened by invasives. The cost was \$4,000. Work with your forester/NRCS to create the best plan for your property.

NRCS Contracts

The landowner has two independent contracts: one with the NRCS and one with the contractor.

Question: Is there any way for a landowner to go into a contract with another neighbor?

Kory: That could be a tricky situation between neighbors.

Jim: I have seen a situation where 5 landowners have had a 5 contract project.

Landowner: As an idea, neighbors could apply for separate funds from RCPP and contract with the same contractor under one bid.

Question: Is there a list of vetted contractors?

Rod: The PRISM has a list but we are unable to vet it because this is a federal project.

Jim: The work plan will mention general methods for guidance. Scrutinizing the work is important.

Brian: A solution for landowners could be to interview contractors and ask for references.

Jim: We may want to consider providing a list of questions for landowners to ask contractors on our website.

Quarterly Meeting

Ashton presented a project report update on the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). The Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) has five District Conservationists (DC) serving the 10 counties of the PRISM. So far they have reported 48 inquiries made by landowners regarding the RCPP monies available for invasive plant removal work on private properties. There have been 21 applications made by landowners through the NRCS.

PR Campaign

PRISM launched a public relations campaign on October 3 after the RCPP contract was signed. Ashton put together a Press Kit online to be e-mailed and publicized through PRISM's partners. Our PRISM materials have a new look and brand thanks to the stiltgrass-inspired logo design created by Shirlee Grody.

A press release (see our website www.blueridgeprism.org) was sent out to 114 news outlets. Volunteers are needed to make follow-up phone calls to the news sources to encourage them to share our information. Additionally, we have stacks of community bulletin board notices that can be posted (with permission of location owner) at feed stores, coffee shops, markets and other sites. Ashton encouraged all members and friends of PRISM to help distribute the information about the RCPP opportunity for landowners. Please contact Ashton if you are interested in posting notices in your area.

Website

Under Ashton's supervision, our website is being addressed as a system. It will help in handling e-mail, provide CRM donor management, allow newsletter sign-up, manage our Mail Chimp account and, possibly, provide opportunity for people to donate to the PRISM through the website. The site will also provide a central place for posting meeting minutes and for presenting our mission, our strategic plan and contact information such as the PRISM phone number: (434) 218-9139.

Fact Sheets/Landowner Kit

PRISM member Susan Roth has been photographing and writing fact sheets, published on our website, about the top 12 non-native invasive plants on our list of worst offenders. Susan has now taken the fact sheets to a new level by making them user-friendly for outdoor work. The Landowner Kits provided to Area Stewards will contain fact sheets full of information about best practices, equipment, herbicides, contractors, and reading lists, etc. for invasive plant removal work.

Education and Outreach

PRISM volunteers have been busy with Education and Outreach activities in the past several months. They include tabling at the Augusta County Fair, the Middle James Roundtable, the Monticello Heritage Harvest Festival, and the Virginia Nursery and Landscape Association Field Day. Additionally, volunteers have given informational presentations to the Partners in Conservation Summit, the Albemarle Natural Heritage Committee, the Greene County Ruritan, the Potowmack Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society and, via podcast, to the National Invasive Species Council.

Tracking Volunteer Hours

Ashton reported that the PRISM is signed up to use www.trackitforward.com to allow PRISM volunteers to record their hours. Volunteers should go to the Track It Forward website, create an account, and enter their volunteer hours, the date, and any notes worth mentioning.

Printing

Printing costs for our brochures and information materials is significant, even with our own printer that allows some amount of in-house production. Ashton received a bid from one printing company in Lexington for 24 cents per page in color, front and back printing. She is seeking a second bid from a local company.

Training Sessions

Ashton is setting up training sessions for contractors located in or near our 10-county area. The first training session will be in Albemarle County in December. Since the RCPP monies are federal dollars, our contractor list cannot promote one contractor over another. The goal of the training is to have contractors learn how to do the work required. Training sessions to help landowners learn how to do work on their own land may be sponsored by the Virginia Working Landscapes at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute in Front Royal. The training would be held several times a year with each session concentrating on the invasive plants that are in season.

Other Updates

Wavyleaf update: Jim Hurley reported that the first budget amendment failed and he is in the process of proposing another amendment.

Area Stewards: Brian Morse stated that there are a few people interested in becoming area stewards but their engagement will most likely happen next year. Jim reported that he has been in conversation with two new potential area stewards and has been more active in the Ruritan's group.

Noxious Weed Laws: Rod reported that the noxious weed law committee will be creating the regulations required because the law changed. Kevin Heffernan stated that there is a meeting on December 13 that will address rules around transport, sale, etc.

Funding/Grant writing: Rod reported that he and Maggie are working on a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) proposal. NFWF would provide funding for Ashton's position and education and outreach. We will know if we have received the grant in December.

Treasurer's Report: Rod reported the "cash in the bank" as of 10/28/16 and added that most of the funds are already "penciled in".

The Blue Ridge PRISM's next quarterly meeting will be held on Wednesday, January 25, 2017 location TBD. Please check our website or Facebook page for updated information.