OFFICE OF SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION

STATE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION COMMISSION

September 19, 2017

1:15 PM

3734 GOVERNMENT STREET

USDA OFFICE

ALEXANDRIA, LA

PROCEEDINGS/MINUTES

**CALL TO ORDER**

Chairman Skains called the regular monthly Commission Meeting to order at 1:20 P.M. Chairman Skains gave the invocation and asked Mr. Donavon Taves to lead in the Pledge of Allegiance.

**ROLL CALL**

The roll was called by Mr. Joey Breaux.

Members and Alternate Members present: Mr. Reggie Skains, Chairman; Mr. Randell Fletcher; Mr. John Compton, Secretary/Treasurer; Mr. Ed Yerger; Dr. Ernest Girouard, Vice Chairman; and Dr. Guy Padgett, Mr. Donavon Taves, LACD President;

Members absent: Dr. Rogers Leonard, LSU AgCenter; Southern University Agricultural Center Representative

A quorum was present.

Others Present: Mr. Brad Spicer, LDAF-OSWC/Executive Director SSWCC; Mr. Kevin Norton, NRCS State Conservationist USDA-NRCS; Mr. Joey Breaux, LDAF-OSWC, NRCS District Conservationist, Mr. Brian Baiamonte

**PUBLIC COMMENTS**

Chairman Skains asked if there were any comments from the public or Commissioners and there were none.

**APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES**

Chairman Skains asked for any comments from the public or Commission members about the August 22, 2017 State Commission minutes and there were none. Chairman Skains called for a motion to approve the August 22, 2017 State Commission Meeting minutes as emailed.

**Motion:**  Mr. Fletcher made a motion to approve the August 22, 2017 State Commission Meeting minutes as emailed. The motion was seconded by Mr. Yerger and passed unanimously.

**UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

Chairman Skains said they would now take up Unfinished Business and asked Mr. Spicer to review the agenda items with the State Commission.

NRCS/OSWC Farm Bill Cooperative Agreement

Mr. Spicer said the districts have earned over 96% of the Farm Bill funds allocated to the districts, leaving a balance at the end of August of roughly $19,000, and all except two districts will earn all their funds by the end of September. He said he estimates that but about $5,000 will be earned by the end of September.

District Funding

Mr. Spicer said that the districts have received their state allocation that included a cut of $31,141 made by the legislature. He said that cuts will range between 400 to about $1,000, depending on the district workload funding. Chairman Skains thanked Mr. Spicer for his assistance in making sure that the districts weren’t cut as much as was originally proposed. Mr. Spicer said that we should thank Commissioner Strain as well because he looks out for the districts. He wanted to also mention that audits from the 12 districts earning funding less than $75,000 have to be delivered to the State Legislature office by September 30th. Chairman Skains asked if there were any comments from the public or Commissioners and there were none.

LACD Annual Mid-Year Meeting

Mr. Kevin Norton asked about the hotel selection for the event. Mr. Spicer said that he had been in touch with Best Western and Holiday Inn in Alexandria. He said that he plans to meet with them next week to make sure that they have a clear understanding of some issues that have come up through communications with them. He said based on the current proposal that Best Western would be the less expensive of the two choices. Mr. Donavon Taves said that he looked forward to communication and if he was available to come down on certain visits that he could make arrangements. Mr. Spicer said that the decision was up to Donavon and whoever he decides to work with from LACD.

2017-2018 Legislative Contact Plan

Chairman Skains said that the SWCC has been working on developing a legislative contact plan to help address the legislature regarding district funding before the legislative session, but that the Commission hasn’t gotten very far with the creation of the actual plan. He said that since there were no preferences or other plan suggestions made at the previous meeting, he took the opportunity to outline a tentative plan. He said that he has prepared a list people and has spoken to a few of them that he believes will help to develop and implement the plan. He said that this will not be a closed group and that anyone can be involved. Chairman Skains said all 220 of our supervisors should be involved in implementing the plan. He said that we must move forward and feel the pressure because we cannot suffer any more cuts. He said that we must get organized and plan to be prepared for special sessions in early spring. He said that he has not yet discussed the plan with the Commissioner. Chairman Skains said that he would like the Commissioner to support the plans and to make sure that he is on board and that it does not conflict with the Commissioner’s funding efforts. Chairman Skains said that he would like to have Mr. Joey Breaux, Mr. Brad Spicer, Mr. Kevin Norton, Dr. Rogers Leonard, Dr. Ernest Girouard, Mr. Earl Garber, Mr. Randell Fletcher, Mr. Donavon Taves, Mr. David Daigle, Mr. Steve Horvath, and Mr. Tim Allen be on the team as an advisor or a LACD representative. He said that if possible he would like to have a meeting with this group after the November or December Commission meeting to discuss the plan before the end of the year and also be prepared to also discuss it at the LACD Annual meeting in January 2018. He said that once the plan is put together that they we will meet with some of the Legislature leadership to get their support. Chairman Skains said if they can’t gain the leadership’s support then they would have to adjust the plans. He said that this is the approach he is recommending and he is open to other ideas. He said that we must develop a plan to save these Soil and Water Conservation District Program. He said that he knows it’s a hard time to do it but it must be done. He said that if anyone has any questions or other ideas that he can be reached on his cell phone, email, or that they can see him after the meeting.

**NEW BUSINESS**

NRCS State Conservationist Report

Chairman Skains said they would now take up New Business and asked Mr. Kevin Norton to give the NRCS report. Mr. Norton said September’s issue of the Louisiana *Conservation Update* is highlighting the conservation work with poultry producers. He said that toward the back of the issue there is a list of all the EQUIP funding opportunities. He said that they are taking applications continuously and the first ranking ends on October 20th and that NRCS has a major push to get the word out to turn in their applications. He said that NRCS’s effort is aimed at trying to obligate all the funds early in the year so that we can get the implementation done in the same year and then begin conservation planning for the next year. Mr. Norton said that we are moving the application due dates up so that better focus on conservation planning. He said they are really looking for a February or March obligation date so that they can move on to the CSP program. He said on the very back page is a listing of upcoming events. He said additionally The Census of Agriculture is scheduled to come out in December and that NRCS is still looking for Earth Team volunteers and The Women in Agriculture event is in February.

Mr. Norton said that NRCS is very close to the end of the fiscal year and that there is a lot of pressure to obligate all the funds. He said that EQUIP dollars won’t be completely tied up in contracts. He said that some applicants backed out of contracts at the last minute but we still had a great year. He said that the same thing is going on with our CSP program. Mr. Norton said that he thinks a lot of farmers are not ready to obligate to participate due to the unusual season we have just gone through. He said that we have a really good Wetland Reserve Easement program and out of the over 300,000 acres installed in the program approximately 60,000 acres aren’t yet restored.

Mr. Norton said that in addition to the current agreement, NRCS found another $300,000 to add to the agreement with the OSWC. He said that Mr. Spicer was able to construct a match for the additional funding. He said that it is a priority and must be obligated within the next eight days. He said the total is now 1.1 million dollars going out to the district for the Technical Assistance program. Mr. Norton said that the president did nominate Mr. Bill Northey to be Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC). He said that Mr. Northey will remain the Secretary of Agriculture in Iowa until his confirmation. He said NRCS is still under a hiring freeze but we did get the authority to hire two technicians, which will be in Tensas-Concordia SWCD and Lower Delta SWCD and also one Soil Conservationist in Morehouse SWCD.

Mr. Norton said that SWCC talked about a restructuring effort here in Louisiana and how we would move to focus field resources and strengthen and improve our customer service on the farm and increase technical strength of the field service. He said that he wanted to explain where we are in the process and to introduce Ms. Lori Ziehr, acting Assistant State Conservationist for Management and Strategy until October 18th at which time she will return to her duties as the Assistant State Conservationist for Water Resources and Landscape Planning in Texas. He said that she has the same duties as Mr. Britt Paul has here in Louisiana. He said that she took this assignment to gain experience as a developmental exercise. Mr. Norton said that they send people over to see if they are up for the challenge and she has been doing really well. He said that her post college career begin in Louisiana working for DNR in Thibodaux and from there she begin working with NRCS in Oklahoma and made her way to Texas. He said that it is helpful to have someone from the outside look at what we are doing our program. He said that internally we all operate with so a level of bias. Mr. Norton said that the hardest part of this for her is helping to build what a balanced servicing profile should be for the state.

Mr. Norton said that he would like to share the draft of the servicing profile that the team worked on so that he can begin to receive feedback and build out the final plan. He said that what we are dealing with today and how the 2014 farmbill has shaped our workload and how do we deliver it to our program participants. He said that Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) is the most flexible dollars and can be used to help support the priority things that districts want to do other than farmbill programs. He said that CTA has shrunk little bit and other programs have increased but are all tied together. Mr. Norton said that this year was a record year for funding but a sizable amount was dedicated to the August 2016 Floods. He said that we must also understand how the money is allocated. He said that the Conservation Technical Assistance’s part of the pie used to be at 55% but recently it has decreased to 28%. He said that there is no flexibility in how we allocate funds and that when asking the question how you structure the delivery system to enhance customer service, you have to know where and what are your problematic activities. He said that our challenge is to figure out how to get staff out in the field with the producers and not sitting behind a desk. He said that in 2012 we had 220 NRCS staff members and in in 2017 we have 191 staff members. He said that this was not what we planned; actually our staffing plan includes over 230 positions. Mr. Norton said that we all are aware of the changes we made as an agency in moving the hiring process up to the national office and the hiring freeze began around June. He said that we are not able to staff what we are funded for but we also have a process that is not allowing us to get people back into the system. He said that NRCS built the new plan that would increase our staff to over 220 people. He said that our goal was to get people out of the office and “into the field” doing conservation work with landowners and managers. Mr. Norton said that we want to maximize the talents in order to effectively deliver increased services with a decreased workforce. He said we need to be more efficient in administrating contracts in the field office and consolidate into a tighter staff, as well as to continue to strive to lead a broad-conservation effort with the SWCD at a local level. He said that we are going to move from the idea of saying the people in this office, stay in this office. He said that if there is a peak need in another office that we could have an employee leave the office from one day to a week to help that office when it is necessary. He said that no offices will be closed or added and this will be a field based plan. Mr. Norton said that NRCS will maintain staff to support SWCDs which is still the focus and there will be one District Conservationist (DC) Admin/Supervisory work unit position. He said that the DC will be responsible for multiple parishes and will supervisor no more than 15 employees. He said that employees within the work units will service all customers within the work unit regardless of physical location. He said that each field office will have one Lead Conservation Planner at a GS-11 Grade Level. Mr. Norton said that all DC positions will be GS-12s. He said that to get this done we will have to reclassify some positions and GS-12 positions will have an increased focus on the administration duties and they will have a Program Support Specialist (PSS) contracted through the OSWC to assist them. He said that Field Service workgroup members will be proactive in addressing concerns and address any misconceptions.

Mr. Norton said that half of workforce will be in the field offices. He said that the Watershed funds are reimbursable and that we would lose 12% of our workers if we were to lose these funds. He said Coastal Wetland Planning, Protection and Restoration Act (CWPPRA) funds come to NRCS through different authorization and funding. He said that State, Plant Materials Center, Easements, Area/Technical office, and Field offices provide field based services on a day to day basis. Mr. Norton said that 65% of our funding drives these positions. He said that in additional to the current employees there are 48 vacancies that will be used to fill out the staffing part of the proposed plan. He said that the Conceptual Work Unit Configuration would include one District Conservationist that would supervise all the people in the resource unit, one Lead Conservation planner that acts as a DC but does not have any administrative duties, at least one technician and then based on workload an office could have more technicians, Soil Conservationists, or Planners at the GS-9 Level. He said that he has been sharing the components of the plan throughout July and has shared with many NRCS members and plans to finalize the plan and submit the package to our national office by the end of October. Mr. Norton said that this is a restructuring staffing plan not a reorganization plan because we will retain all of the same organization levels and offices. He said that we are just realigning how we operate the offices. He said that instead having 44 District Conservationists spread across the state doing administration work, NRCS plans to aggregate the administration portion to 13 key positions with a support personel to assist them. He said that hopefully the support person will be through the expansion of the Cooperative Agreement that NRCS has with the OSWC. Mr. Norton said that he has shared this information with a few district secretaries. He said that the GS-11 Level positions are still expected to come to the board meetings. He said that the District Conservationist will be responsible for all boards in that resource unit. He said that the GS-11 position will be the resident technical leader in that parish and will also be expected to be at the board meeting because the technical aspect is just as important as administrative in the district. Mr. Norton said that there will be two NRCS staff members at every board meeting.

Chairman Skains said that there are eight DC positions open right now and that we know they cannot be filled due to the hiring freeze. He said that he also knows that Mr. Norton has several employees training at the GS-9 level scattered around the state. He asked are those going to be into GS-11 Level positions. Mr. Norton said there are four training DCs and two of them been filled. He said that when they get the plan approved, NRCS will advertise for four GS-11 Level positions. He said the fear is that the people who are doing jobs and that do apply for the GS-11 positions may not be the highest qualified candidate for that position. Chairman Skains said that he is in support of the GS-9 people being trained and able to apply for the GS-11 positions. Mr. Norton said that the DC is GS-12 and that the only people who will be able to apply are GS-11 positions. He said that anyone in a GS-9 position would have to take the next step which would be a GS-11 position. He said that people should not be concerned with disruption of career paths because there is only four GS-9 positions and the GS-11 positions are usually chosen from the GS-9 positions. He said that if we make the right selections with the GS-12 position that are responsible for all the supervision then they should be helping the GS-9 and GS-11 positions to find developmental opportunities. Mr. Norton said that Lori is here because she got a developmental opportunity and is learning a lot while helping NRCS. He said that in his career path he had every supervisor push opportunity on him to learn their job. He said that he took the opportunity while not stepping away from his job but took the opportunity to develop himself to possibly do their job or at least understand it if he was somewhere else. He said that if we put the right people in the right positions and we have the right expectations this could strengthen our overall conservation program. Chairman Skains asked Mr. Norton are the GS-11 positions excited about possible promotion to a GS-12 position during discussions or are they reluctant. Mr. Norton said that Mr. Brian Baiamonte knows what is going on with the District Conservationists so he can share with us. Chairman Skains asked Mr. Baiamonte do they think this is a great opportunity for them. Mr. Baiamonte said that there are a lot of mixed feelings. He said that there are some that are excited about it and think it is a step in the right directions and there are some that are not quite convinced that it will help. He said there are some GS-11 District Conservationists that aren’t excited about taking on more administrative and supervisory duties because they aren’t too good at it. Mr. Spicer asked wouldn’t you think in the long run that this would strengthen NRCS. Mr. Baiamonte said that he believes that this would help. Mr. Spicer said that this is where we have a weakness in our delivery system, not relating to the landowner and not spending sufficient time with them in the field. He said that back 30 years ago, a District Conservationist would work in the field with the landowner and they would develop their conservation plan together. Mr. Baiamonte said that we should have 44 Lead Planners that are out in the field every day. Mr. Spicer said that would strengthen your position locally with the producers. Dr. Girouard asked about workloads in the districts and where will communication lines exist between the District Conservationist, Planner, and the districts. Mr. Norton said that the GS-12 District Conservationist is the person responsible for the district. He said the chairman of each district board that has issues such as delivery of services would call the DC. He said that the chairman of each district board will have their DC’s cell phone numbers in case there are issues internally, the DC will be available to work with the chairman. Chairman Skains thanked Mr. Norton and said that this could really shape the future of NRCS and Soil and Water Conservation Districts in a very positive way.

**Correspondence**

Chairman Skains said the first correspondence item is a letter from the SSWCC to Dr. Ernest Girouard Jr. congratulating him on his honorable retirement form the Louisiana State University AgCenter.

Chairman Skains said the next item is an article from the Commissioner about assisting Harvey evacuees regarding Mobile Pet Shelter Deployed. He asked Mr. Spicer if he wanted to comment. Mr. Spicer said LDAF has 80 employees trained to work in emergency pet shelters and are looking at getting an additional 40 more employees to be trained. Chairman Skains asked are horses and cows involved in the shelter. Mr. Breaux said livestock and agriculture are separate for the pet shelter operation.

Chairman Skains said the next item is an article called *The Army Central Review.* He asked Mr. Spicer if he wanted to comment. Mr. Spicer said this article is a U.S. Army Region 6 Environmental Report that is published quarterly. He said that Region 6 covers Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. He said that he would like everyone to take a look at the rules in Louisiana including Oil Spill Prevention and Response, Revised definition of Solid Waste, Water Quality Regulations, and DNR Annual Fee Schedule.

Chairman Skains said the next item is an article covering *State Ag Officials Visit White House on Infrastructure Priorities.* He asked if Mr. Spicer wanted to comment. Mr. Spicer said that Commissioner Strain attended the White House meetings and has been pushing for transportation infrastructure especially on the Mississippi River, rail and highways. He said Commissioner Strain discusses these issues while in Washington D.C. with administration leadership. He said that Commissioner Strain understands that Louisiana farmers have to have available a highly efficient means to transport their products within the US and to other countries.

Chairman Skains said the next item is an article covering *Secretary Perdue Announces USDA Improvements for Customer Service Efficiency.* Mr. Spicer said that this is an article about customer service improvements from Secretary Perdue and it had caption of the link to the video of Secretary Perdue speaking. He said the following article is NACD’s response to the restructuring and he said that we had a few lines underlined that would get our attention. He asked Mr. Norton if he had any comments on this. Mr. Norton said that Secretary Perdue was given the administration’s staff reduction number for USDA. He said that the requirement from the President is to reduce duplicate programs and leverage the efficiencies that can be gained by consolidating certain functions. He said if there are the things that are happening that alarms NACD or LACD that your views should be shared. He said that he is taking Secretary Perdue’s word that he is working to make sure the agencies are preserving their mission and delivering their programs but it is also very much about efficiencies. He said we are working to meet those objectives. Mr. Norton said that we have done a lot of work with limited staff so we need the ability to start filling positions. Mr. Spicer said that his concern would be that we might go through the same issues here as we have with contracting when we centralized that process. He said centralizing certain areas of agency operation can lead to not being able to properly address the agency’s mission and lead to inefficiencies. Mr. Norton said that we have 40 agreements that have yet to be obligated. He said the year is running out and by next week we may have only 15 or 20 agreements completely. He said that the 1.1 million dollars has yet to be obligated so we are hoping that it shows up before the deadlines. Mr. Spicer said that was his concern and that he will voice it through NACD.

Chairman Skains said the next item is an article called *Cover Crops Boost Yield and Weed Control, Survey Says.* Chairman Skains asked Mr. Spicer if he had any comments. Mr. Spicer said this article is from Conservation Technology Center. He said that this is a really good survey the center conducted and it summarizes the benefits of cover crops. He said that he would like the Commissioner members to take some time to review this article.

Mr. Spicer said the final articles cover *Conservation for the Future of the Family Farm, Combating desertification: Why We Must Take This Challenge, and The NACD eResource.*

Mr. Spicer said that if anyone is interested in having a special topic at any of the breakout sessions at the NACD meeting they have an opportunity to submit their topics.

**Supervisor Resignations/ Appointments and Reappointments**

Chairman Skains asked Mr. Spicer to report on the resignations and reappointments of supervisors. Mr. Spicer said there was one resignation this month: Mr. Charles Adams, elected position, DeSoto SWCD.

Chairman Skains asked for comments from the public or Commission members and there were none; he asked for a motion to approve the resignations, appointments, and reappointments.

**Motion:** Mr. John Compton made a motion to accept the resignation of Mr. Charles Adams, elected position, DeSoto SWCD effective September 19, 2017. The motion was seconded by Mr. Randell Fletcher and passed unanimously.

Mr. Spicer said that there were five requests for the State Commission to reappoint supervisors to a new term in office this month and they are: Caddo SWCD, Mr. Marty Wooldridge, appointed position; East Carroll SWCD, Mr. Donavon Taves, appointed position; Feliciana SWCD, Mr. Chris Martin, appointed position; Madison SWCD, Mr. Rob Carter Moberley, appointed position; and Vermillion SWCD, Mr. Patrick Hebert, appointed position.

Caddo SWCD, Mr. Marty Wooldridge, reappointed to fill his vacant appointed position. Term will begin September 19, 2017 and expire on September 19, 2020.

East Carroll SWCD, Mr. Donavon Taves, reappointed to fill his vacant appointed position. Term will begin September 19, 2017 and expire on September 19, 2020.

Feliciana SWCD, Mr. Chris Martin, reappointed to fill his vacant appointed position. Term will begin September 19, 2017 and expire on September 19, 2020.

Madison SWCD, Mr. Rob Carter Moberley, reappointed to fill his vacant appointed position. Term will begin September 19, 2017 and expire on September 19, 2020.

Vermillion SWCD, Mr. Patrick Herbert, reappointed to fill his vacant appointed position. Term will begin September 19, 2017 and expire on September 19, 2020.

**Motion:** Dr. Ernest Girouard made a motion to approve the reappointments of supervisors: Caddo SWCD, Mr. Marty Wooldridge, appointed position; East Carroll SWCD, Mr. Donavon Taves, appointed position; Feliciana SWCD, Mr. Chris Martin, appointed position; Madison SWCD, Mr. Rob Carter Moberley, appointed position; and Vermillion SWCD, Mr. Patrick Hebert, appointed position. The motion was seconded by Mr. John Comptonand passed unanimously.

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**Area I and II Election Convention Date and Location**

Chairman Skains said that the two areas agreed to have the Election convention in the Monroe area with the October SSWCC meeting. Mr. Spicer said that Mr. Ed Yerger won’t be here in October so the commission may consider rescheduling the meeting to November 7th. Chairman Skains asked Mr. Spicer who he spoke with in Monroe. Mr. Spicer said that he had discussed the meeting with Mr. Anthony Bridgewater. He said that Mr. Bridgewater had a contact at Delta College. Chairman Skains said Delta College is right next to the interstate in East Monroe. Chairman Skains called for a motion to have the SSWCC Area I and Area II Election Convention and Commission meeting on November 7th at Delta College in Monroe with the Election Convention starting at 10:30 AM and the commission meeting at 12:30PM. Chairman Skains asked for comments from the public or Commission members and there were none; he asked for a motion to approve the Election Convention and SSWCC meeting.

**Motion**: Dr. Ernest Girouard made a motion to have the Area I and II Election Convention at 10:30 AM and the SSWCC meeting at 12:30 PM on November 7th at Delta College in Monroe. It was seconded by Ed Yerger and it passed unanimously.

Mr. Spicer said that we also have a draft letter that needs to be approved to be sent out to the districts regarding the Election Convention for Areas I and II. Chairman Skains said he needed a motion to accept the letter to be sent out to the districts providing information regarding Area I and II elections.

**Motion:** Mr. Ed Yerger made the motion to send out the draft letter to the districts about the convention. It was seconded by Mr. John Compton. It was seconded by John Compton and it was passed unanimously.

Chairman Skains asked for comments from the public or Commission members and there were none.

**OTHER BUSINESS**

Chairman Skains asked for comments from the public or Commission members. Mr. Breaux wanted to let the Commission that 5 districts will sign an MOU with the AgCenter to join in on the Salvania Weevil biological control effort. He said the participating districts involved are Rapides, Lower Delta, Crescent, Gulf Coast, and possibly St. Mary SWCD. He said that nothing seems to be changing in the MOUs and that they have mailed letters to Dr. Rogers Leonard. He said that he should be responding shortly because the next harvest is soon and there will be a lot of cooperators signing up to get these weevils. Mr. Breaux said that at this point they are talking about how they will sustain the weevils. Mr. Yerger asked if he received the letters. Mr. Breaux said that he had received some and that he discussed it with Dr. Leonard. He said that Dr. Leonard thought that sending the letters of request to him would be best. He said that there may be cooperators in other districts that want weevils but their districts do not want to be a part of the MOU. He said in such cases the cooperators will be taken care of through other districts with the MOU.

**NEXT MEETING**

Chairman Skains said the next State Commission Meeting will be Tuesday, November 7, 2017 at Delta College in the LPB Conference Room B, 7500 Millhaven Road, Monroe, LA at 12:30 PM.

**PUBLIC COMMENTS**

Chairman Skains asked if there were any other comments from the public or Commission members and there were none.

**ADJOURNMENT**

Chairman Skains said if there was no other business or comments from the public or Commission members, he will accept a motion to adjourn.

**Motion:** Mr. Compton made a motion to adjourn at 2:49 P.M. The motion was seconded by Mr. Fletcher and passed unanimously.

/s/ Reggie Skains*\_\_\_\_\_\_*

Reggie Skains, Chairman

State Soil and Water Conservation Commission