



Natural Resources Conservation Service

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Minnesota NRCS State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) Meeting Notes

October 15-16, 2024

Waite Park, MN

Welcome and Introductions

- Minnesota NRCS State Conservationist Troy Daniell started the meeting off by welcoming attendees and emphasized their importance to NRCS carrying out its mission.
- Ryan Galbreath explained the purpose of the State Technical Advisory Committee and reminded attendees of the [STAC website](#), and the notes, operating procedures, and archived documents available there.
 - Emphasized the committee as advisory and informal. From time-to-time NRCS may poll participants, but never call for votes.
 - Discussed the subcommittees that are active and invited involvement in one or more of them.
 - Subcommittees with Tribal and urban & small-scale agriculture emphases may be added.

Prescribed Fire Efforts

- Jason Andersen of Pheasants Forever spoke on the importance of Prescribed fires and around the theme of "Nature needs fire." He explained the overall goal of making prescribed more accessible by promoting safe and effective fire on private lands. Efforts towards the goal are being made through policies, training, and equipment/implementation.
 - Policies: Support more prescribed fire by revising Job Approval Authority (JAA), burn participation guidance, and increased NRCS conservation practice payments.
 - Training: Offer conservation planning and JAA training, as well as live-fire field days to get staff comfortable with fire as a conservation practice.
 - Implementation & equipment: Empower landowners to burn their own lands by offering classes and workshops. Promote prescribed burn associations – neighbors helping neighbors. Provide burn trailers equipped with such things as UTV spray units, backpack sprayers, protective clothing, road signs, drip torches, two-way radios, and hand tools. Fire ready burn trailers are planned for spring 2025.
 - More information: Jason Anderson, janderson@pheasantsforever.org, [Presentation slides](#)

NRCS Notice of Funding Opportunities

- Molly Mehl, ASTC – P&O presented on grants and agreements NRCS has provided in recent years. She elaborated on the Notice of Funding Opportunities (NOFO) past and pending. A selection of the variety of grants and partners was shared. In 2023, 10 tribal food sovereignty grants and 5 general grants were awarded. In 2024, 5 general grants were awarded.
 - Emphasis was placed on the changes that will be taking place for all agreements (including and beyond any NOFOs) from NRCS in 2025:
 - New shorter, national template
 - Indirect cost increased to 15% from 10%
 - Equipment threshold increased to \$10K from \$5K
 - Exceptions for noncompetitive awards sharply curtailed
 - Important dates for the NRCS MN NOFO 2025:
 - Last day to submit ideas - Oct 31, 2024 (Halloween)
 - Expected posting of the 2025 NOFO – Jan 20, 2025 (Martin Luther King Jr Day)

Expected due date for submissions - TBD near Mar 17 (St Patrick's Day)

Expected selections announced - TBD near May 1, 2025 (May Day)

- More information: Molly Mehl, molly.mehl@usda.gov, [Presentation slides](#)

NRCS Programs Report

- NRCS program updates were presented by Keith Kloubec, Michelle Jezeski (Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) Manager), and Michelle Legatt (Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Coordinator). The discussion included FY24 Program Summaries, FY2025 Program Delivery and Local Work Group Updates.
 - A review of CSP FY24 was provided with details on funding, applications, contracts, acres top practices, and payments. The CSP annual minimum payment was increased from \$1500 per year, to \$4000 per year.
 - CSP highlights include upward funding trend, increases in payment schedules, earlier sign-up, and an increase in minimum annual payment amounts.
 - Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) was also reviewed and details of FY24 funding, applications, contracts, acres, top practices and payments shared.
 - RCPP updates were provided with information for the 4 active projects in MN along with metrics from the FY2024 Notice of Funding Opportunity.
 - FY25 application deadlines were shared and discussion on the current and future farm bill were covered.
 - More information: Keith Kloubec, keith.kloubec@usda.gov, [Presentation slides](#)

Conservation Easements Management

- MN Easement staff Kaitlyn Miller, Ryan Antholz, and Caroline Clarine provided an update on MN NRCS Easement activities. This included updates for FY24 and FY25 including results of recent management/stewardship of MN NRCS conservation easements. The focus was on lessons learned and successes in brush management, prescribed burning, prescribed grazing, wetland restoration and wetland management. Discussion included how MN NRCS is working to manage these easements for wildlife and wetland benefits.
 - Kaitlyn covered the basics of the NRCS easement programs and covered updates on FY24 and FY25. Funding for Easements in Minnesota has increased from 2024 to 2025, primarily due to funding from the Inflation Reduction Act, as now each state gets a specific allocation as opposed to a national funding pool. Kaitlyn also covered the new Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC), which covers how much NRCS will spend on easements in MN.
 - Ryan discussed the use and benefits of grazing, fire, and brush management on easements. He covered specific projects on several easements and was able to present before and after photographs of the work completed on the easements. He showed the massive push to burn MN NRCS easements starting in 2019 and discussed the ability to level off and maintain a burn regimen. In the Prairie Pothole Region, the focus is on resource concerns that include the conversion of grasslands and pothole wetlands to ag crop production, and water quality. Rotational grazing, cover crops, Wetland Reserve Easements, and edge of field grass and wetland buffers are some of the conservation practices promoted to achieve this.
 - Caroline covered the history of funding for management on easements, including over six federal contracts for over \$11.5 million from 2019-2025. Specific easements were discussed as well as how decisions were made to restore the easements. Light gauge steel sheet pile is used as a rodent barrier to help maintain structures and expand their

life span. Restorations are designed to be as naturalistic as possible and last as long as possible, often going beyond the specific design standards for the practice.

- More information: Kaitlyn Miller, kaitlyn.miller@usda.gov, [Presentation slides](#)

FSA Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Update

- Angela Hanson, Chief Agricultural Program Specialist, presented updates on CRP. Current contracts and acreages, 2018 Farm Bill limits, and signup periods were discussed.
 - As of 9/30/2024, CRP enrolled contracts totaled 56,048 involving 1,010,451.19 acres.
 - Minnesota contracts totaling 55,048 acres from all sign-up types are scheduled to expire 9/30/2025.
 - For CRP General SU62, signup period 3/4/2024 – 3/29/2024, 124 contracts were approved, consisting of 3,826.43 acres.
 - The 2018 Farm Bill caps CRP acres at 27 million. There are currently 24.7 million acres enrolled.
 - More information: Angela Hanson, angela.hanson@usda.gov, [Presentation slides](#)

Economic Analysis of Conservation

- Agricultural Economist Samuel Porter presented a report on the economic impact of public conservation expenditures and the database & model used to estimate it. He introduced the Impact Analysis for Planning (IMPLAN) input-output database and model. He also showed data from the most recent report, FY2021.
 - The IMPLAN model traces the flow of goods and services through the economy. The models show the direct, indirect, and induced effects of conservation spending, which include additional industry purchases, household spending, and jobs created.
 - Data for the model are gathered from reports and systems provided by NRCS, Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD), and Watershed Districts, to name a few.
 - In FY2021, the programs with the largest share of total expenditures were CSP (68%) and EQIP (23%).
 - In the same year, the models showed that the total output was 181% of the total expenditures (1.81 cost to output multiplier) and created more than 2,500 direct and indirect jobs.
 - More information: Samuel Porter, samuel.porter@usda.gov, [Presentation slides](#)

NRCS Minnesota Public Affairs

- Public Affairs Specialists Melissa McCann and Adaya Williams introduced the Minnesota NRCS Public Affairs team and presented the videos they create and post on the Minnesota NRCS YouTube channel.
 - A wide array of playlists including wildlife conservation, climate smart ag, wetland and stream, and cattle grazing are offered.
 - Currently reaching out to various organizations and partners to promote NRCS YouTube videos.
 - Our videos are producer-led videos, and we are eager to highlight all the hard work producers do, so if anyone has any stories that they'd like to see, please reach out to us!
 - Videos include traditional and shorts. Producers and partners are encouraged to like, comment, share, and subscribe.
 - Input on improving our YouTube channel and suggestions for new topics are welcome.
 - More information: Melissa McCann, melissa.mccann@usda.gov, [Presentation Slides](#)

Partner Updates

There was informal general discussion on several issues, projects, and announcements.

- Lucinda Winter from the Sustainable Farming Association (SFA). For 11 years, the Sustainable Farming Association has hosted the Midwest Soil Health Summit, a platform for sharing agricultural innovations and assisting farmers in successfully adopting principles to enhance soil health. As the importance of soil health has become more widely recognized and soil health education more readily available, SFA is shifting the event's educational focus and rebranding it as the Midwest Grazing & Soil Health Summit.
 - More than just a name change, the Summit's evolution acknowledges and celebrates the deep connection between soil and livestock in building thriving ecosystems and communities. This new emphasis allows us to explore the dynamic harmony between grazing and soil health—together, they create a regenerative path forward for farmers and ranchers.
 - I invite you to join us in Willmar on March 19 & 20, 2025 for the inaugural [Midwest Grazing & Soil Health Summit](#). Stay tuned for announcements about registration, speakers, and exciting new partnerships, as we continue to transform agriculture, one farm at a time.
 - More information: Lucinda Winter, lucinda@sfa-mn.org.
- David C. Wilson, PhD from Minnesota Forest Resources Council. Several updates were presented, including climate change considerations, carbon research, investment, and stakeholder involvement and coordination.
 - Forest Management Guidelines were updated to address current day issues.
 - The updated guidelines include a new logo, "Climate Consideration, that highlights attention to specific forest management activities and considerations.
 - Invested in and advanced research designed to help forest stakeholders better understand and compare forest management alternatives vis-à-vis carbon mitigation outcomes in tandem with other forest benefits.
 - More information: Dr. David C. Wilson, david.c.wilson@state.mn.us. [Update Notes](#)

Farm Economics – Brief Overview

- Keith Olander from Central Lakes College and the Farm Business Program gave a presentation on profitability in production agriculture. The presentation included production data for corn, soybeans, dairy, cow calf, and cull cows to describe the status of farm economics as well as what it takes to be profitable. There are training resources and decision-making tools available to producers.
 - Farm Business Management program provides individualized classes for farmer student.
 - FINBIN was introduced in the presentation. [FINBIN](#) is a national benchmark farm financial database designed to help producers identify where they are performing better than other like producers and where they may be able to improve. Individual producer information is not available in this database.
 - FINPACK is a business analysis tool for individual farms. FINPACK includes whole farm financial statement and ratio analysis. Data from thousands of farmers and ranchers using this tool contribute to the FINBIN database.
 - More information: Keith Olander, keith.olerander@clcmn.edu, [Presentation Slides](#)

Soil Climate Monitoring Network

- Joe Brennan, MN NRCS State Soil Scientist presented information about soil carbon monitoring and establishing a Soil Carbon Monitoring Network (SCMN) by collecting field-based data with a goal to assess outcomes of conservation programs.
 - National effort, Minnesota will identify priority sites to initiate the sampling in 2025.
 - NRCS is seeking to identify 20-30 opportunity sites with a well-documented history of conservation practices (regardless of participation in federal conservation programs) as applied to cropland, hayland, and grazing systems.
 - This is a complimentary effort the citizen science option of [CEMA 221 Soil Organic Carbon Stock Monitoring](#), which can be scheduled with NRCS conservation programs.
 - NRCS will coordinate all sampling and laboratory analysis, and the land does not need to be enrolled in NRCS conservation programs.
 - Partners are encouraged to contact Joe Brennan (612-246-0423) by November 8th to identify potential opportunity sites for soil sampling.
 - More information: Joe Brennan, joseph.brennan@usda.gov, [Presentation slides](#)

USDA Wetland Determinations, Minimal Effect Exemptions

- Paige Guetter, Assistant State Conservationist – Compliance and Senior Compliance Specialist John Tix presented an update for the Minnesota Conservation Compliance. The presentation included a review of the laws, policies, and NRCS responsibilities involved in determinations. The Minimal Effect Exemption was explained.
 - The Food Security Act of 1985 provided for the wetland conservation compliance.
 - Conservation compliance policy removes certain incentives for USDA program participants who convert wetlands to make possible the production of agricultural commodities.
 - Under certain minimal effect situations, NRCS may grant a USDA participant an exemption.
 - More information: Paige Guetter, paige.guetter@usda.gov, [Presentation Slides \(update\)](#), [Presentation Slides \(Minimal Effect Exemption\)](#)

Environmental Markets

- Dr. Adam Chambers, NRCS National Environmental Market Leader presented on USDA's role in environmental markets, agriculture's contribution to climate change, and the benefits of conservation efforts. The emphasis of the presentation was that we understand the problem and have the tools to solve it. The current generation may be the last with opportunity to mitigate it. For agriculture and forestry, we can make a modest investment now in carbon sequestration and greenhouse gas (GHG), or a larger investment to adapt to climate change later.
 - The three main GHG in agriculture: Carbon dioxide (CO₂), Nitrous oxide (N₂O), and Methane (CH₄).
 - There are numerous intervention opportunities. These include conservation practices such as cover crops, conservation tillage, and conservation buffers. For some practices, there are co-benefits. An example of this is the transition from conventional tillage to no-till/reduced till and residue management. The benefits include improved soil health, reduces atmospheric carbon, helps with nitrogen management, and increases sustainability. The presentation included others as well.
 - There are quantification tools available to help farmers better understand the emissions reduction or sequestration that may be achieved from implementing conservation

practices. CarbOn Management & Emissions Tool ([COMET](#)) is used for this purpose. COMET-Farm is a whole farm tool that requires much data input; COMET-Planner is a simplified tool that provides generalized estimates of GHG impacts from conservation practices.

- Carbon markets, carbon offset can reduce GHG emissions involving polluters of hard to control emissions. Through carbon market transactions, carbon can be offset. For example, Chevrolet purchased carbon offsets generated to avoided grassland conversion. There is market potential for the agriculture sector.
- More information: Dr. Adam Chambers, adam.chambers@usda.gov; [Presentation Slides](#)

Subcommittee Reports

- The Wildlife Subcommittee report was presented by Minnesota NRCS State Resource Conservationist Ryan Galbreath. Several updates to practice standards, habitat evaluation guides, job approval authority fact sheets, and guide sheets were discussed.
 - Payments for Prescribed Burning and Plug Planting within Wildlife Habitat Planting are increasing.
 - CPSs 644-645 are being combined to reduce redundancy in wildlife CPS scenarios.
 - Biology Technical Notes are being revised and combined into IR Sheets or guides.
 - Wildlife Habitat Site Preparation (828) is interim wildlife conservation standard.
 - More information: Dave Voigt, david.voigt@usda.gov; [Presentation Slides](#)
- The Forestry Subcommittee report was presented by Minnesota NRCS State Forester Callie Bertsch. She provided an overview of Forestry Conservation Practices.
 - Woody Residue Treatment (384) and Forest Stand Improvement (666) conservation practices are the top two practices in terms of funds obligated.
 - NRCS Foresters are in six offices in the state.
 - Successful Agroforestry Institute is planned by several partners; Gary Wyatt from UMN Extension will lead this.
 - NRCS Foresters are in six offices in the state.
 - Silvopasture Reduction Scenarios were revised along with The Nature Conservancy and the Savannah Institute.
 - Accomplishments of note include updating the Implementation Requirements for Forest Stand Improvement and Tree/Shrub Establishment, updating the [Conservation Tree and Shrub Groups](#), and completing a forest inventory project for the Grand Portage Indian Tribe and according to their specifications.
 - More information: Callie Bertsch, callie.bertsch@usda.gov, [Presentation Slides](#)
- The Easement Subcommittee report was included in the presentation by Easement Program Manager Kaitlyn Miller 10/15/2024 (see above).
- The Grazing Subcommittee report was presented by Grazing Specialist Jeff Duchene. Over the past two grazing sub-committee meetings, guest speakers presented on the Ecological Services Livestock Network, the Ducks Unlimited Climate Smart Commodities Partnership with the National Pork Board, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation overview of their Conservation Partners Program RFP.
 - NRCS asked for feedback on the updated version of the 382 Fence Material Specifications and Standard Drawings document.
 - Two new interim conservation practices are brought on in FY25: 827 Strategic Harvested Forage Management and 822 Non-ruminant Livestock Outdoor Management of Vegetative Cover.

- A Grazing Equipment and Demonstration trailer has recently been procured. This trailer will house common grazing infrastructure equipment and a TV to be used for field days, workshops, and staff trainings.
- More information: Jeff Duchene, jeff.duchene@usda.gov, [Presentation slides](#)

Agronomy Updates

- Minnesota State Agronomist Ryan Buetow presented agronomy updates. Ryan discussed changes to conservation practices, monthly agronomy team calls, and gave a brief overview of the things the agronomy team is working on.
 - New scenarios added in Minnesota to the Conservation Crop Rotation (328) conservation practice last year have become national scenarios this year.
 - Shallow incorporation scenario has been built for MN and Lake States within the Residue and Tillage Management, Reduced Till (345) conservation practice.
 - Monthly agronomy MS Teams calls provide opportunity to discuss agronomy related issues with field staff and partners.
 - Activities in the works include reevaluating some conservation practices and improving Farm Fest presence and demonstration.
 - More information: Ryan Buetow, ryan.buetow@usda.gov, [Presentation slides](#)

Closing Comments

Minnesota State Resource Conservationist [Ryan Galbreath](#) gave some closing remarks to bring the meeting to a conclusion. He expressed his gratitude to meeting organizers, presenters, and attendees. He encouraged all to continue the great conservation work.