

Maine State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) meeting March 12, 2025

The second Maine State Technical Advisory Committee meeting for Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 was held in-person at the USDA State Office in Bangor and via Microsoft Teams.

Attending in person

Matt Walker, NRCS State Conservationist
Tony Jenkins, NRCS State Resource Conservationist
Leslie Nelson, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Programs
Thomas Kielbasa, NRCS Public Affairs Specialist
Chuck Penney, NRCS Outreach Coordinator
Carol Weymouth, Executive Director of the Maine Association of Conservation Districts (MACD)
Felix Blinn, Landowner and STAC Subcommittee Member
Nicole Rogers, Maine Forest Service
Julie McGivern, NRCS Agronomist

Attending on Teams

Tom Gordon, Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF)
Joe Roy, Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and wildlife
George McLaughlin, Ag Engineer/Maine Potato Board
Peter Behringer, U.S. Forest Service
Mark Hedrick, Maine DACF
Sharri Venno, Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, Planner
Carolyn Merriam, Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, Fisheries Biologist
Amelia Tutmalria, Northeast technical assistant specialist and poultry specialist for the Intertribal Agriculture Council
Andy Reed, MACD and Waldo County Soil and Water Conservation District
Peter Beringer, U.S. Forest Service, NH
Anna Biddle, NRCS
Caleb Goossen, Maine Organic Farmers and Growers Association (MOFGA)
Jeanne Christie, Office of Congresswoman Chellie Pingree.
Erin Cocca, Xerces and NRCS
David Wardrop, Golden Forestry Services technical service provider, Forester
Joshua Dera, NRCS
Robin Dyer USDA Wildlife Services in Maine
Megan Facciolo, NRCS
Carrick Gambell, NRCS
Jennifer Hebert, Somerset County Soil and Water Conservation District
Kira Jacobs, Environmental Protection Agency
Seth Jones, NRCS
Thereasa Kapust, NRCS
Sandya Kesoju, NRCS
Brian Mack, NRCS
Chris Mann, NRCS

Phil Quint, NRCS
Rachel Schattman, University of Maine
Bill Sheehan, Maine Department of Environmental Protection
Angela Williams, NRCS
Alex Wong, Maine Department of Environmental Protection
Nanne Kennedy, Meadowcroft Farms

The meeting commenced at 8:30 a.m.

Introductions (Tom Kielbasa, Public Affairs Specialist)

Welcome

NRCS Briefing (Matt Walker, State Conservationist)

Reflected on the new name of State Technical Advisory Committee. This addition of advisory is fitting to reflect the crucial role the committee provides with feedback and guidance.

Last week NRCS-Maine dissolved the Climate Smart Ag and Forestry Subcommittee, to align with the current administration's priorities. Many rapid changes and unknowns.

Partner Agreements with other agencies – (many with partner employees that work alongside NRCS (Soil and Water Conservation Districts, American Farmland Trust, MOFGA, MACD), any of those agreements with Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funds, which are appropriated through 2031, are on hold for payout. Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) and Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) funding are exceptions in that IRA payments could be made until February 25, then those were be paused as well. Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) is exempt from the pause.

Contracts with landowners – existing IRA contracts for Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) (signed, obligated, contracts) are moving forward as planned; there was a pause, but it has been lifted. Modifications may or may not be approved.

New IRA contracts are not being obligated currently.

Classic Farm Bill, CSP, EQIP and Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) – Obligated contracts, including mods, are business as usual. New obligations are on temporary pause.

Employee losses for streamlining and efficiency have included approximately 1,400 NRCS probationary employees lost nationwide, 12 in Maine. They have or will be reinstated for 45 days, but we are unsure if that mean return to the office.

Maine also lost: 4 Pathways students, 4 to the deferred resignation; and one traditional resignation. That is 21 employees lost in past month. That's a 20% loss, with 5 of those in engineering.

All staff have returned to the office.

Mission statement “We deliver conservation solutions, so agricultural producers can protect natural resources and feed a growing world.”

Vision statement, “Our vision is a world of clean and abundant water, healthy soils. resilient landscapes and thriving agricultural communities through voluntary conservation.”

Don't lose sight of those as we move forward. April marks 90 years and we'll continue to help people help the land.

Felix – As landowner amazed at the support with centuries of knowledge.

Tony – Any indication of a Farm Bill?

Matt - We do not know about Farm Bill or budget. We do have political appointee positions being filled Secretary Brooke Rollins, Richard Fordyce nominated Undersecretary of Farm Production and Conservation, Colton Buckley appointed Chief of Staff, Acting NRCS Chief Lewis Aspey

Thank you for being here and your feedback.

MACD (Carol Weymouth, MACD Executive Director)

*Full report available as attachment.

For over 80 years we've been partners with common shared goal of providing solutions to environmental challenges in Maine and across the nation.

Recently NACD conducted a survey of over 3,000 state and territory soil and water conservation districts to gather data concerning changes in federal funding. Results available at NACD website.

NACD board members meet or communicate with elected officials to share information, challenges and concerns about statewide and local environmental issues, plus illustrate the importance of federally funded conservation programs.

Primary goals include voluntary conservation practices, programs and education.

Programs (Leslie Nelson, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs)

Application batching period EQIP, AMA and CSP year was last August 23, 2024.

Application deadline for agricultural easement program Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) – Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) and Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) with two deadlines: Dec. 6, 2024, and Dec. 20, 2024.

Batching deadline for FY26 has been set for Aug. 22, 2025.

We accept applications on a continuous basis, so please get your applications in.

ACT Now is a faster process where, if there is funding, applications can be approved and obligated if the application meets a state determined minimum ranking score without waiting for all applications in the ranking pool. ACT Now was offered for its second year in FY25. The first year we did just the conservation activity plans and this year we expanded it out through IRA and added management practices.

The deadline was March 7, 2025, and the rankings score minimum was 75 points.

\$875,000 was set aside for FY25 EQIP ACT NOW and those were expended in January with 194 ranked applications pre-approved for funding.

\$6,200,000 for EQIP IRA ACT NOW and we had 85 ranked applications. IRA obligations are currently on hold, so some of those are paused.

*These are unofficial numbers and subject to change.

Our Fiscal Year 2025 funding pools:

Statewide fund pools: (*are directed, meaning that we are told we will offer these)

*Beginning farmer ag waste

*On farm energy

Organic

*Socially Disadvantaged

*State wildlife pool, new based on some recommendations from the committee

Tribal Projects

*Urban

*National water quality initiatives (focuses on Cross Lake and Sheepscot watersheds)

Water conservation (irrigation)

*Conservation incentive contracts (pasture)

In AMA we offer two sub accounts: high tunnels and irrigation.

CSP is split between ag land and forestry.

Under each of those, we offer a classic, beginning farmer and a socially disadvantaged.

And we also offer organic under ag land as well.

Under EQIP IRA pools, new obligations are currently on pause.

We're waiting for guidance. This year there was a climate smart agriculture and forestry list of practices. These were broken down into forest land, ag land (crop, pasture and farmstead), socially disadvantaged and water conservation (irrigation).

David Wardrop – If the pause goes much longer, the timeline of some practices may need to be adjusted based on the nature of some practices not being able to be implemented during certain times due to seasonality, such as bat regulations or construction.

Matt and Tony - Noted and if they move forward our planners will have to circle back on case-by-case basis to make sure timing is logical. Good point.

Local Fund Pools. Again, Ag waste, cropland, forestry and pasture.

FY25 Allocations and Preapprovals

Farm Bill Traditional EQIP – Allocation \$8,724,551

Preapproved are at approximately 92% of EQIP State Pools funds, 95% of the Local Pools funds, and 84% of the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI). These numbers are subject to change. They haven't been obligated. Obligations are paused.

AMA Allocation \$675,000. Ninety-nine percent of that money has been pre-approved in potential applications.

CSP has \$1,070,000 allocated and 99% has been pre-approved.

As soon as we receive more guidance, we'll start moving those forward to obligations.

Our target goal to have obligations done by June 30, 2025.

Next year, FY 2026, for EQIP, AMA and CSP the deadline for sign up is Aug. 22, 2025, and we're also currently accepting applications for our easement programs.

Tony – It's important to get applications in, even though our funding outlook may not be what it was with the IRA funds. The applications are important to measure the demand that's out there and if there are funds, we can only we can only contract if those with need apply.

Leslie – It's also important to keep getting the recommendations from the committees for our implementation for next year because we don't know what's going to happen, but we want to incorporate everything we can.

Rachel Fisk, Assistant State Vet, Animal Health and Animal Welfare Programs

Maine Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) Update

Poultry – Last 30 days the US has had 81 confirmed positive flocks. With 33 commercial and 48 backyard flocks. This is USDA definition - Backyard can be a large flock but just not rise to the level of commercial for USDA standards. Maine does not have any USDA “commercial” but we do have large flocks. The US had to depopulate 8.42 million birds in the last 30 days. Maine has two small backyard flocks with each HPAI, both in Cumberland County.

Certain criteria needed to close an outbreak, but the country has not reached the criteria. So, this is still the 2022 HPAI poultry outbreak. Over this period, Maine has had 22 outbreaks in backyard flocks, in 8 counties, with 2 active quarantines. Demographics of HPAI infected blocks in Maine have mostly been mixed flocks, housed together with outdoor access. All have had direct or indirect contact with wild waterfowl and that is the key to the HPAI introduction in these flocks. DACF response efforts include sick bird calls, testing, mitigation, assistance to flock owners and permitting imported poultry.

Methods of prevention for flock owners include practicing good biosecurity such as quarantine new arrivals to the flock, not sharing equipment, and limiting visitor traffic, especially into the bird area. Other methods are eliminating contact with waterfowl, keeping waterfowl in separate coops and being aware of indirect exposure from footwear.

In dairy cattle, the clinical signs are like other illnesses. Decreased feed consumption and decreased milk production, with more concentrated, thicker possibly discolored milk and variable increases to somatic cell count.

Surveillance testing of epidemiology has identified since the end of 2024 at least two additional spillover events have occurred from single original Texas bird-to-cattle event and cattle-to-cattle spread has occurred from there. Milk has a high level of virus, so parlor, workers, visitors, equipment, and vehicles are at constant risk for indirect transfer especially on large farms. In the country we have over the entire course of the outbreak 985 confirmed cases in 17 states. No detections in the northeast.

USDA Veterinary Services has rolled out the national milk testing strategy to demonstrate absence or elimination of HPAI in our dairy cattle in the country. Forty-five states enrolled; Maine is among the 39 provisionally unaffected states.

Maine's strategy is sampling our four, grade A milk silos monthly. That comprises about 65 to 67% of the state's grade A milk production. Individual farms contributing to each of the sampled silos are identified so if a positive test resulted, an affected farm could be identified quickly. Shippers of organic milk, processed in Massachusetts and New

Hampshire, will provide samples from the bulk tank monthly sent to Cornell's diagnostic lab. This covers all the Maine's farms shipping grade A milk, which is the directive from USDA veterinary services.

This is a zoonotic disease. The risk is low to the public, but there have been 70 humans confirmed positive with H5N1 influenza, which is a little bit different; that is the influenza affecting dairy cattle, poultry and other species rather than the typical. Clinical signs in people have been ranged from conjunctivitis to typical flu-like symptoms. There has been one human death. The primary risk factor is direct contact with infected animals. Producers can utilize biosecurity and simple wildlife management practices to prevent avian influenza on the farm.

Anna Biddle – What if you find dead wild songbird? Dr. Fisk - Don't handle with bare hands, double bag and contact Inland Wildlife and Fisheries. 3-5 or more birds are more likely to draw response. Not as much single deceased birds.

Tony – Silo testing: is that prior to pasteurization? Dr. Fisk – Yes, it would still be detectable once pasteurized because DNA is still present but inactive. Pasteurized milk is safe.

Caleb Goossen - Any monitoring of domestic pets via veterinarians?

Dr. Fisk- Cats seem to be more susceptible. New Jersey had a handful of cat detections. There is an algorithm for private practice vets. Cornell can tell if it is Avian or something else.

If you call our Augusta headquarters, they will connect you to the appropriate regional person to talk about the details and follow up.

Caleb Goossen -If the IRA funding pools are officially ended, and a new farm bill is passed, what happens to the applicants that were in the pipeline with IRA funding pool projects? Will they be somewhat automatically/systematically moved over to the pipeline for traditional funding pools for the same practices, or might some fall through the cracks?

Leslie -If you don't get funded in funding pool, they could be deferred and then reconsidered in the following year. We do not know what new priorities or funding may be coming.

Carol – Act Now contracts are mostly Conservation Activity Plans (CAPs) so are those IRA funds supported?

Rebecca – The CAPs were not IRA. Those are paused but there was a separate Act Now with a list of practices and those were the ones affected because they were IRA.

Tony – This will rely on the system and be case by case depending on the situation. We try to not let people fall through the cracks with whatever funding mechanisms that we have.

Caleb - What if you lose spot in one funding pool?

Tony – It's not really a spot as much as ranking so they get reranked.

Dave Woodruff - Anything that can be done to help producers move forward in the future for those who have been paused, (ranking) whatever you can do to help because they have been mistreated.

Tony – noted

Subcommittee Reports

Tony – SRC - Forestry is hard hit with policy/funding pauses with IRA because forest stand improvement accounts for a lot of funding set to be obligated and that has been obligated the last couple years.

Subcommittees help guide NRCS in prioritizing resource concerns and financial assistance. We will probably have more substantial news next quarter. We appreciate your input, people who come on their own time (Felix, David, and all) your input is appreciated.

Felix – As landowner, I look at it as temporary obstacles not mistreatment.

Nicole Rogers – Forestry subcommittee meeting, appreciates Tony sharing the information he can. They spent time discussing workforce reductions and funding opportunities in the subcommittee on what they want to bring forward.

Crop tree release, precommercial thinning practices will be important as well as planning for forest health issues such as funds to be proactive against insect situations. Brush management - invasive plant control (codes 314 and 666 leaving it up to NRCS to figure out the best codes.) Spoke about wildfire concerns with landowners and foresters, ways to identify, and prioritize areas more at risk and potential ways to id and address wildfire concerns in TSP plans to inventory concerns. Trying to do more with less. Forest landowner support group will be kept up. If you want to be on the subcommittee meeting notices early, contact Nicole. We are interested in following up on fire and how we can be a positive influence and attempting to be proactive.

George McLaughlin – Irrigation has not met and nothing to report.

Carrick Gambill – Urban have held quarterly meetings, met at end of February, uncertainly but acting under the assumption of the urban fund pool and looking at ranking questions. Had a presentation from Dancing Harvest Farm in South Portland.

Next meeting planned for end of May.

Matt Walker- Consider substituting urban with small scale.

Tony Jenkins reporting for Kira Jacobs – Source water protection If anyone is interested in a leadership role in the subcommittee, there will be opportunity for co-chair. We have source water protection areas and applications in those areas.

Joe Roy – Wildlife – At national conference for state agencies to provide input on Farm Bill programs. Had good January meeting with NRCS presenting on WRE and Act Now information. Increasing to a quarterly meeting schedule from annual. Wildlife funding pool and ranking questions were discussed.

Nanne Kennedy - RE "Small Scale" instead of "Urban," and asked if that would not be MOST of our agriculture in state? Or is it referring to the 60% or more who do not make a profit but still file a schedule F or get counted on NASS? It seems that Urban Ag has its own set of issues, including soil development from contaminated waste sites.

Tony – We don't know yet what that means, but we will transfer into a form that is most beneficial to Maine producers.

STAC Issues and Input

Tony - As financial assistance funds go down, the importance of how we rank is going to go up. So, these subcommittee functions are more critical.

Carol- Any preparatory advice on if there is a shutdown?

Matt- If there is a lapse in appropriations it is possible NRCS would remain open, but we don't know.

Carol – MACD has sent info to Districts to be aware that non-feds can still work if shut down does occur.

Matt- STTC Issues and Input

Matt- Regarding the question on small scale, we can expect to see changes in terminology moving forward, but we just don't know at this time. There will be opportunity for very feedback to shape our future.

Next STAC meeting is scheduled for June 18.

David Wardrop – TSPs appreciate support Matt and Tony.

Matt- We do everything we can to protect our producers, our service providers and provide them the support we need. As part of the STAC, the subcommittees, you are good about letting us know the right things to do and we thank you.

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