



NRCS New Mexico State Technical Advisory Committee

USDA Conference Room
100 Sun Avenue, NE, Suite 602
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87109

Meeting Minutes

April 09, 2025

COMMENCEMENT

The meeting began at 9:00 a.m.

ATTENDEES

There were approximately 25 in-person attendees and 58 virtual attendees.

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS (Kenneth Branch, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs)

This is the first of two New Mexico State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) meetings in 2025.

- The focus is where we are and what we need from STAC to move forward.
- The time between meetings is to process the information presented and make recommendations at the next meeting with enough time before the end of the fiscal year to implement changes.
- Agendas and maps are available to in-person attendees.
- Meeting information will be posted on the New Mexico NRCS website.
- Presentations to be made by NRCS Resource Technology Section (RTS), Programs, Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), and Engineering staff in addition to partner organizations.

STATE CONSERVATIONIST'S REMARKS (J. Xavier Montoya)

The STAC meeting is very important to NRCS.

- A lot of information will be shared.

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- There is a hiring freeze.
 - Many employees chose to take the Deferred Resignation Program (DRP) and Voluntary Early Retirement Authority (VERA).
 - Probationary employees were reinstated after being terminated.
 - There is a lot of work to do with fewer staff.
 - Please give us feedback on how to best move forward.

PROGRAMS (NRCS Program Staff)

Introduction to the State Technical Advisory Committee (Kenneth Branch)

This is NRCS' opportunity to introduce what we do and the purpose of the State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC).

- The roles and responsibilities of STAC include:
 - Provide information, analysis, and recommendations for Programs, Engineering, et al. for what we do.
 - Identify emerging concerns and program needs.
 - Recommend conservation practice standards and specifications.
 - Recommend state and national program policy based on resource data.
- Since 2018, acequias are now eligible for Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) based on our work.
- There are local work groups (LWGs)—the STAC for local level partners—and they make recommendations to NRCS District Conservationists.
- Please attend LWG meetings to relay information to us at the STAC meeting later this year.
- Public outreach is important to get our information into the field and help folks know what we do and who we are.
- Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24) recap and overview:
 - Map 1 shows our field offices, and the number of contracts obligated per service center.
 - Some field offices received Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) money instead of EQIP General funding.
 - Attempted to spread funding across the state.
 - Always try to use “headquarter” money first before we use our “local” money (e.g. IRA money).
 - Map 2 shows dollar amounts obligated by program. There are opportunities for different land uses, for example, forest landowners.
- Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) to date:
 - Once EQIP and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) rankings are done and preapprovals have been sent, then obligations can be done.
 - Staff are writing contracts now after on-the-ground visits.
 - We have Emergency Watershed Projects (EWP), which are high-volume projects consisting of old and new projects.
 - We received more money for the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP).

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- Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon (HPCC) Conservation Restoration Plans (CRPs) continue along with EWP acequias.
 - There are a lot of rumors regarding IRA funds for existing contracts,
 - IRA Funds for existing contracts are still open for payments and implementation.
 - New IRA obligations are frozen.
 - Program deadlines and 80-percent obligation targets discussed.
 - Staffing:
 - There are dozens of staffing changes as a result of the DRP and the VERA program.
 - Despite the losses, we still have responsibilities.
 - There is a travel freeze currently in effect.
 - A list of staff emails was shown.

Questions, Responses, and Comments

Jason Martin (NRCS): The application deadline to be considered for ranking has passed, but people can always submit applications year-round.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) (Maggie Gnann, Resource Conservationist)

- EQIP background:
 - EQIP is a completely voluntary program.
 - It is recommended that the nine steps of planning are completed.
 - It is helpful because it focuses on resource concerns: SWAPA + E (Soil, Water, Animal, Plant, Air, Energy).
- EQIP fiscal year 2025 "General" Funding Pools: national pool, state pool, and area/local pool.
 - National pools are the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI), and WaterSMART.
 - High tunnel, organic, urban, western drought, energy, and source water priorities for Teams 3, 6, 9, 11.
- Conservation Incentive Contracts (CIC):
 - Applications ranked based on all funding pools for which they are eligible.
 - Farmers are not expected to know all the funding pools when they go into the service centers.
 - State pools include the 2018 Farm Bill specific targets for financial assistance (FA) (e.g., livestock related conservation practices, wildlife, beginning farmers and ranchers, and socially disadvantaged".
- Water Management Entities (WMEs):
 - WMEs can enter into an EQIP contract if all criteria are met.
 - May get help from Farm Service Agency to determine if you are a WME.
- Underutilized state pools: Conservation Planning Activities (CPAs), Design Implementation Activities (DIAs), and Conservation Evaluation Monitoring Activities (CEMAs).
 - They can be added to EQIP contracts to allow work with Technical Services Providers (TSPs); for example, prescribed grazing.
 - There is a very long list of state pools.
 - For CPAs, DIAs, and CEMAs, you will need TSPs, typically.

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- EQIP FY25 area/local pools:
 - Dedicated to North and South Areas.
 - An area/teams map is included.
 - Eleven teams have three to five ranking pools that are focused on specific land uses (e.g., irrigated crops, dry crops, range, etc.).
 - There are 78 fund pools in EQIP General alone.
 - The Source Water Protection Watersheds FY25 map includes 2025 NRCS NM Priority Watersheds.
 - May be changing slightly (i.e., find different participants).
 - Recommendations received regarding important areas.
 - More input needed.
 - Within Source Water Protection Watershed practices, there are different reimbursement rates.
 - There are new rate categories, including forestry practices.
 - Input needed regarding FY25 NWQI.
 - As a state, we need to have at least three watersheds under NWQI.
 - We have flexibility as to implementation watersheds or planning watersheds.
 - We have one year to write a Watershed Plan with help from Headquarters.
 - For fiscal year 2026 (FY26), considering the removal of Tucker Canyon and Estes Arroyo because of lack of participation.
 - May remove Flora Vista in fiscal year 2027 (FY27).
 - The Tijeras watershed may be a good addition.

Questions, Responses, and Comments

Unknown Speaker: Regarding the Animas River Soil and Water Conservation District, there is a lot of transition up there. Do you understand why contracts are dropping off? Is it producers' means or capacity?

Maggie Gnann (NRCS): There is a lot of NRCS staff turnover. The current funding plan is also capped at \$93,000, which isn't a lot. Also, we are waiting for guidance from Headquarters.

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): The first two years we had a lot of participation.

Unknown Speaker: Do you check water quality?

Maggie Gnann (NRCS): Yes, that is a consideration along with participation.

Unknown Speaker: (New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts (NMACD): The Tularosa Watershed should be added to the planning phase. It is a municipal watershed. It begins at the upper watershed and continues all the way through the town.

Maggie Gnann (NRCS): Tijeras has a lot of planning done already.

Unknown Speaker from the NMACD: Tularosa also has a lot of planning done.

EQIP continued (Maggie Gnann, NRCS)

- High Priority Practices (HPP):
 - There are no specific areas in New Mexico (NM).
 - It is underutilized and has a higher payment rate.
 - They can overlap with source water practices, but for HPP they are limited to 10.
 - In FY25 we had 10 HPPs.
 - Do these HPPs need to change?

Questions, Responses, and Comments

Unknown Speaker: How well are they lining up with past contracts?

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): They do not include HPPs that are normally used, like forest stand improvements.

Unknown Speaker (NRCS): How do local priorities line up with new administration policies?

Maggie Gnann (NRCS): We can go down to the level of specific scenarios.

EQIP continued (Maggie Gnann, NRCS)

- Allocations:
 - There were big jumps from FY23 to FY24 because of IRA money.
 - In FY23, we received \$28.5 million; in FY24, we received \$54.8 million.
 - In FY25, we received \$23.7 million for EQIP General, \$41.1 million for EQIP IRA. EQIP IRA is on hold.
- Applications doubled between FY23 to FY24 because of IRA and EQIP General funding instead of just General.
- Contracts obligated in FY23 were 353; in FY24, 480 contracts were obligated.
- 2024 Farm Bill Contract Map shows how some offices function and how participants go into field offices.
- Also shown, the FY24 IRA Contract Map.
- The top five EQIP practices are different between the EQIP Farm Bill and IRA.
- More in-depth information available at link provided on slide.

Questions, Responses, and Comments

Eddie Foster (NRCS): Regarding the HPPs, are we going off customer needs as opposed to what NRCS thinks they need?

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): For the higher payment rate, it is based on atypical practices.

Nick Goodman (NRCS): Can we make canceled practices an HPP?

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): No. The primary intent of HPP is not to get more money for producers but instead to get a new kind of practice into the state.

Jim Armendariz (NRCS): For example, cover crops and prescribed burns should be tried more in NM.

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): We have other ways to address typical practices.

Unknown Speaker: Is EQIP limited to adjusted gross incomes of less than \$900,000?

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): That may change with the new Farm Bill.

Unknown Speaker: Regarding IRA funding maps, what is happening with producers now?

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): Obligated contracts are now opened up again per the new administration. National guidance is forthcoming.

Regional Agreement for Organic Specialists (Katrina Hunter)

- General Program Overview:
 - Six regional organic specialist positions were created—two in the west, two in central, and two in the east.
 - They are housed with partner organizations.
 - Katrina Hunter and Kristina Peterson share responsibility in the western region.
 - Their focus is on conservation planning and implementation of organic practices.
 - There are designated NRCS Organic Champions.
 - They host monthly meetings to share information and best practices with field office staff.
- Overview of Organic Transition Initiative:
 - Highlights regarding why there is a need for their services:
 - to deepen NRCS' awareness of organic systems,
 - to build relationships with organic producers,
 - to instill confidence in NRCS staff.
 - Among other activities, they offer at least 24 NRCS training sessions per year.
- New Mexico Organic Statistics:
 - NM organic acreage equals 32,189 acres (including non-field, pasture, rangeland, and total field crops).
 - There were 93 organic operations as of 2021.
 - The NM organic market grew 44 percent from 2019 to 2021.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) (Martin Meairs, Resource Conservationist)

- CSP overview:
 - Offers technical and financial assistance to agricultural and forest producers:
 - Program offers 5-year contracts with yearly payments.
 - There is a \$200,000 cap.
 - Minimum payment for FY25 CSP Classic is \$4,000 per year.
 - No caps are applied to tribal entities.
 - There are eight CSP ranking pools including pools for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers/Ranchers (SD) and for Beginning Farmers/Ranchers (BFR).
 - At a minimum, 5 percent of funds are required to be allotted to SD and BFR applicants.
 - All funding for FY25 CSP IRA Classic is currently on hold.
- Classic CSP Contracts:
 - In FY25, 150 applications received: 47 selected for funding, 6 to BFRs, and 19 to SDs.
 - In FY24, total applications received were 146 and 62 were selected for funding. BFRs comprised 13 approvals and SDs, 12 approvals.
- FY25 Funding Allocations:
 - FY25 Classic CSP Allocations are approximately \$7.5 million.
 - FY25 CSP Renewal Obligations equaled \$3,674,851 for 15 contracts.
 - FY25 CSP IRA Renewal Obligations equaled \$3,883,836 for 15 contracts.
- FY24 Funding Spent:
 - FY24 CSP classic: \$11,159,256 spent on 62 contracts.
 - Classic CSP-IRA equaled \$6,720,905 for 32 contracts.
 - Renewal CSP equaled \$380,365 for 3 contracts.
 - Renewal CSP-IRA equaled \$1,739,305 for 1 contract.
- NM Priority Resource Concerns
 - Categories are Agricultural Land and Non-Industrial Private Forestland.
 - There was one change to NM Priority Resource Concern categories.
 - Ranking Weights by Resource Concern Categories include, for example, reduction of wildfire threat and pest damage (Forest), and soil health improvements (i.e., cover crops and crop rotations), and mitigation of water quality degradation (i.e., agricultural land). Additional ranking consideration is given to the number of Priority Resource Concern categories met and addressed.

Questions, Responses, and Comments

Unknown Speaker: Regarding the tribal cap, does it have to be on tribal land, and does it matter which tribe it is?

Martin Meairs (NRCS): Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) is not capped if the applicant is a tribe or tribal organization. AGI is capped for tribal members.

Payment Schedule, Easements, and Conservation Innovation Grants (CIGs) (Athena Cholas, Resource Conservationist)

- Payment Schedule
 - The goal for FY26 is to reduce practice scenario options.
 - One practice scenario may be used in a wide range of situations.
 - New activities and payment scenarios will be limited.
 - Instead of more, try to do better with what we have.
 - We should know by June how many scenarios will be cut.
 - Very few new scenarios will be added.
 - Ten counties have payments that are about 1 percent higher than the rest of the state based on locality and cost of living adjustments (COLAs).
 - Selection of the county is made when the application is entered in Protracts from a county dropdown.
 - The counties that are listed are limited to what is allowed for that user. Once the county is selected, it cannot be changed for that application. (Note: it would require entering a new application.)
 - Many CEMAs are available mostly for use in EQIP. These allow evaluation and monitoring to check conservation practices that have been implemented. They can be performed by qualified individuals and do not require TSPs. These are good options for organizations that have working relationships with eligible EQIP farmers and ranchers.
 - New Mexico was instrumental in new payment activities to use remote sensing on watering facilities. This is very useful for the large ranches in the southwest. There currently are no practice standards that just address water conservation or water infiltration. New Mexico could draft new practices with input from STAC to address water purification, conservation, and groundwater infiltration.
- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP):
 - Includes agricultural land and wetland easements.
 - ACEP vision includes protection of agricultural use and future viability of farming enterprises.
 - Limits non-agricultural use of the land.
 - Protects grazing uses and related conservation values by restoring and conserving eligible land.
 - Provides support for state, local, and private farm and ranch land protection efforts.
 - ACEP challenges include perception of some landowners that the easement value is too low, the cost of appraisals is too high, and there must be complete agreement among members and shareholders, and there is little to no flexibility in future boundary changes.
 - Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) rankings:
 - Priority given to a project's proximity to already protected land. Should ranking prioritize one type of protect land over another?
 - Should priority be given to projects that include natural areas such as hedgerows or riparian areas?

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- Should additional points be given to projects receiving other grant funding (e.g., state and local funding)?
 - Recommendation last year was to consider headwaters for priority. It was not used as a priority for this fiscal year because so much of the headwaters were already public land (e.g., Gila).
 - Wetland Restoration Criteria (WRE) guidelines:
 - Eligibility requires a need for restoration (e.g., brush and phreatophyte species, removal and installation of fences to limit grazing, among others).
 - Landowners give up almost all of their rights on wetland easements and many actions require permission from NRCS.
 - NRCS pays 90 percent of the market value for these rights.
 - Most WREs are in small geographic areas, but with several of them in the same area, they are seeing benefits.
 - A document must be produced and NRCS needs STAC recommendations as to priorities for restoration.
 - The priority is to return to the historical condition (e.g., hydrology, plant communities) or as best as we can get it.
 - Percentage of an alternatives area dependent on the state.
 - Conservation Innovation Grants (CIGs):
 - No new obligations made in FY25.
 - Existing contracts can continue work except payments cannot be made for IRA funded contracts for work completed after February 25, 2025.
 - NM will not offer CIGs in FY25.

Questions, Responses, and Comments

Cecilia Rosacker (Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust [RGALT]) Where are we with current applications? Is there no IRA funding going forward with current applications? Is there a waiver for IRA funding. The deadline is May 30th for a new round of ACEP applications. We didn't know this until today. The land trust community needs to know what kind of funding will be offered. We want to know what's happening. Without knowing what kind of funding NM will ask for, it's hard to invest time with the landowners if we don't know. It would be nice if the New Mexico Heritage Act (NCHA) funding would match up with ALE priority and also timing. NCHA is only \$1.5 million/year. How do we make ALE work in NM?

Athena Cholas (NRCS): To get more funding in New Mexico we need to turn in applications as early as possible. Beginning in FY25, we got \$.5 million in funding, but we had \$9 million in applications. Now we have funding for \$3 million total. Hopefully, in FY26 it will be higher. There is no May 30 application deadline. New Mexico has not set the FY26 application deadline.

Cecilia Rosacker (RGALT): What's early to submit?

Athena Cholas (NRCS): Funding is often determined by past year applications. March of the same year is recommended. We're off to a good start for FY26 because of unfunded applications submitted last year. We're hoping to use IRA money, but we don't know yet.

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): We are moving in the right direction of getting more money, but it will take some time because we haven't historically received that much money. NM has funded more easements than in the past and if we continue to show the need, we will get more funds in the ACEP allocation. But it will take time and won't be done in one year. There are no waivers for IRA.

Athena Cholas (NRCS): NM will look at NHCA and try to match it with ALE priorities and timing for successful projects. A 2023 report on the lasting impacts of the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program is available with statistics of the current owners and benefits of the easements.

Shannon (Amigos Bravos): A recommendation on restoration actions was placed in the chat.

Angel Montoya (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service): What limits the amount of funding NRCS receives for ALE?

Athena Cholas (NRCS): The funding requested for the applications is what limits the amount of money we get.

Christopher Rustay (Playa Lakes Joint Venture): What is the deadline for comments?

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): We don't have a deadline, because we will have another STAC meeting later in the year. Comments can be sent anytime. For ACEP please send comments as soon as possible.

Athena Cholas (NRCS): Also, for payment schedules please send comments as soon as possible. NM would like national to look at costs of cement and PVC as soon as possible for next year's payment rates.

Jim Armendariz (NRCS): What responsibility do landowners have with wetland reserve easements?

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): They must follow the stewardship guidelines and easement's deed, including paying taxes, but the federal government takes over the majority of responsibilities of stewarding the land. A lot of people look at easements in a negative way because they can't do much with the land anymore, but there is a specific conservation purpose, and they bring a high wildlife value to the land.

Athena Cholas (NRCS): The goal is for the federal government to do the restoration and maintenance of wetlands.

Jim Armendariz (NRCS): Future generations may lose interest in conservation goals.

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): There are two sides to how easements can be viewed. Future generations will receive a land without development so that can be seen as a benefit.

Claire Catlett (New Mexico Land Conservancy [NMLC]): Conservation easements are voluntary, and landowners are typically considering future generations before they enter into an agreement. The landowner has specific goals of how the land is to be managed in the future. NRCS' deed terms are negotiable to some degree. There are many intergenerational farms protected with ALE easements. The goal is to keep family land in family hands. I want to compliment the ALE program for keeping family land productive and inherited through the generations.

Jonathan Hayden (NMLC): Mostly what is in the ALE agreement is what you cannot do. Can't subdivide and can't do certain things that will degrade the land.

Athena Cholas (NRCS): The wetland easement restoration criteria guidelines document is very important for landowners to know what can be done for economic benefits and be compatible with the wetland stewardship.

Angel Montoya: Does NM NRCS have funds for operations and maintenance?

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): No operation and maintenance funds for other programs but for easements, this would be for stewarding wetland easements.

Athena Cholas (NRCS): For easement operation and maintenance we requested more technical assistance money, and we need to confirm if it was approved.

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): NM has not been a big player in ACEPs up to this point but moving forward, we should get more money when national looks at the historical use of ACEP in New Mexico.

Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP) (David Griego, Resource Conservationist)

- EWP Projects Status:
 - There are 14 active EWP projects and 1 pending project (i.e., Chaves County Flood EWP).
 - Preparing 3 of the 14 projects for closeout.
 - Names of, and statistics for all 15 EWP projects were shared via PowerPoint.
 - The largest project is the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon (HPCC) EWP.
 - HPCC EWP is huge with a total project amount of approximately \$270 million.
 - We are still receiving applications for the HPCC project.

Questions, Responses, and Comments

Unknown Speaker: Is the [inaudible] fire an EWP?

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): There must be a project sponsor to implement the program, which is usually a state agency or municipality. Do not let the names fool you. We look at the watershed impairment; there must be one. Another common misperception is that the president or state must designate it as an emergency. Small events can be designated as an emergency by NRCS.

Unknown Speaker: Is there a yearly allocation?

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): No state has a preapproved pot of funding. There is a 220-day completion requirement, with exceptions. We seek sponsors who can meet their financial match obligation.

RESOURCE TECHNOLOGY UPDATES (RTS) (Art Ariaz, State Resource Conservationist)

RTS offers a diverse range of services including training, business tools, archaeology, forestry, agronomy, biology, and ecological sciences.

- Personnel changes:
 - There have been several state personnel changes.
 - Pam Herrera retired, and Nick Goodman took over for her.
 - Stu Tuttle, Agriculture Conservation Experience Services (ACES)/New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts (NMACD) biologist, assisting with the HPCC EWP NEPA regarding acequia and watershed projects, retired NRCS.
 - Jim Wood, ACES, is assisting with the state archaeology workload.
 - Archaeology has been a bottleneck, so we appreciate Jim's help.
- RTS Updates:
 - All statewide travel was halted.
 - The goal is to do more day trips in smaller settings.
 - As of October 1, 2024, there will be cost sharing on virtual fencing and telemetry for storage tanks and watering facilities through EQIP and CSP due to NM's vision and leadership at the national level.
 - We assist with New Mexico Department of Agriculture's (NMDA) Healthy Soils program application review committee.
 - Staff also assist with EWP, HPCC restoration plan development as well as other field office and area office needs.
- Update on HPCC CRPs:
 - Plans are required for impact reimbursements due to fire.
 - Field visits ramped up beginning mid-March.
 - Three teams of two deployed in three areas of the state: north, south, and central.
 - At the application deadline, a law firm submitted 500 applications.
 - We planned on 400 applications but now have 900.
 - We are going back to the drawing board.
 - Approximately \$1.1 billion in CRPs written.
- Emergency Conservation Program (ECP):
 - The ECP is a Farm Service Agency program with NRCS involvement including technical support, engineering guidance, and conservation practice standards.
 - Any agricultural land affected by disasters is eligible to be brought back up to pre-disaster conditions.
 - ECP approved practices include debris removal from farmland; grading, shaping, releveling, or similar measures; restoring permanent fences; and restoring conservation practices.

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- An ECP county committee must declare the disaster.
 - After declaration of emergency, NRCS provides the technical expertise.

Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) (Ana Gomes, Natural Resource Specialist)

- CART overview and update:
 - CART was introduced in 2019.
 - Planners evaluate resource concerns and practices applied by clients, and the system matches benefits from the applied practices.
 - CART is a program neutral tool that streamlines conservation planning and program delivery. This tool is housed in Conservation Desktop.
 - CART works with the nine steps of planning in three phases.
 - Phase I is collection and analysis.
 - Phase II is decision support.
 - Phase III is implementation and evaluation.
 - Agency's goal to put as many legacy tools as possible into CART for one hub.
 - The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) system is being worked on, and it will probably be mandated next year.
 - It provides plan assessment ranking points.
 - We need help ranking pool priorities (through your Local Work Group meetings): (1) resource, and (2) program.
 - We must still go to the field to run the numbers through the planning material.
 - We are trying to make it a one-stop shop with all farm information, NEPA, and obligation information.

CPA-25 Biology Update (Nick Goodman, Acting State Biologist)

- NRCS Conservation Planning Activities (CPA-52) updates:
 - The NRCS CPA-52 is an environmental evaluation worksheet.
 - Environmental Justice (EJ) tab along with all references to EJ were removed after the installation of the new administration.
 - New CPA-52 worksheet mandatory after April 13, 2025.
 - Human socio-economic sections were added to the form.
 - This form will not be used next year.
 - Conservation Desktop Environmental Evaluation is tentatively set to be used in FY26.

Woody Residue Treatment (Andrew Lee, State Forester)

- Upcoming changes to woody residue treatment:
 - What we cut is "slash" or "debris."
 - Woody residue treatment is what we do with that slash or debris from a stand thinning.
 - National practice standard updated in 2024.
 - The national prescribed burn standards were updated in 2023 and again in 2024.

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- Must comply with prescribed burning policy to burn piles of slash—easy to say, hard to do.
 - The burn plan must be approved by staff prior to pile burns.
 - Help needed from partners and NRCS with idea generation.
 - For example, how do we keep piling and burning going forward?
 - Also, what is compliance?
 - Current and future options presented.

Questions, Responses, and Comments

Unknown Speaker: Can it be buried to decompose?

Andrew Lee (NRCS): On a large scale it is unrealistic but still an option. On a small scale it may be okay. Anything over 10 acres would require a lot of ground disturbance. There are cultural resource concerns too.

Unknown Speaker: What about creating biochar?

Andrew Lee (NRCS): It would still require a burn plan. If states request a variance from this requirement, it would be denied.

Unknown Speaker: What about Huegel Culture?

Andrew Lee (NRCS): Yes, it's an option but it has the same concerns as the burial decomposition question.

REGIONAL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM (RCP) (Kristin Graham Chavez, Assistant State Conservationist for Partnerships)

- RCP Updates:
 - Some funding was left over in some projects, so another round of ranking/funding was done.
 - Field offices are still working on obligating.
 - Wolf mitigation (grazing management and non-lethal predator) in NM and Arizona (AZ).
 - NM NRCS, AZ NRCS, and Western Landowners Alliance are working on ranking criteria, environmental evaluation, standards, specifications, scenarios, and Implementation requirements.
 - Inter-Tribal Buffalo Council Agreement is on hold because it was an IRA funded application.
 - Working with the Navajo Nation on their application.
 - They want to convert from windmills to solar with monitoring systems.

ENGINEERING UPDATES (Elias Gnnann, State Conservation Engineer)

- Watershed Programs Overview and Update:
 - There are three separate programs: Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP), Rehabilitation Program (Rehab), and Watershed & Flood Prevention Operations Program (WFPO).
 - WFPO helps units of federal, state, and tribal governments (a/k/a project sponsors) to protect and restore watershed.
 - The Rehab Program helps project sponsors rehabilitate aging dams that are reaching the end of their design life and/or no longer meet federal or state safety criteria or performance standards.
 - EWP helps people reduce imminent hazards to life and property threatened by excessive erosion and flooding caused by natural disasters.
 - Watershed programs are different than Farm Bill programs. Must have a sponsor like EWP rather than an individual landowner.
 - Project sponsors must have the requisite authority and be willing to provide required functions, such as power of Eminent Domain, public participation, and long-term operations and maintenance responsibilities, among others.
 - Typically, these are 50- to 100-year practices. Long-term commitment can be a problem.
 - Capacity to do in-house design is limited due to staff incapacity.
 - National standard—430 Irrigation—was updated this year. New Mexico standard must be updated to become compliant.
 - We have four WFPO projects (100% of implementation costs borne by NRCS).
 - Headquarters ranks flood prevention as the highest priority.
 - There are six Rehab active watershed projects. As currently stated in the Continuing Resolution, the WFPO program has \$14.6 million national budget for FY25, and the Rehab Program has \$0.
 - As funding allows, the following are the goals for upcoming years:
 - Funding of 18 new dam assessments,
 - Funding of one new Rehab Plan,
 - Funding for design phase of two active WFPO projects,
 - Funding for construction phase for one active Rehab Project,
 - Add new projects as project sponsors submit new requests.

PARTNER UPDATES/PRESENTATIONS

Farm Service Agency (Joilynn R. Gray, Farm Program Chief)

- Overview of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP):
 - CRP is a voluntary cost-share program to assist owners and operators in conserving and improving natural resources with an emphasis on protecting and improving the nation's soil, water, and wildlife resources.
 - As of the date of the meeting, there has been no information regarding the 2025 CRP signups.

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- Cost share is offered on eligible practices including significant factors necessary to perform the practices including, but not limited to, equipment, services, and labor.
 - There are two CRP programs: General CRP and Continuous CRP.
 - General CRP contracts with producers for up to 10 years. FSA provides annual rental payments and cost-share assistance.
 - The Continuous CRP is divided into four types: Regular CRP, Highly Erodible Land Initiative (HELI) CRP, State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) CRP, and Grasslands CRP.
 - Regular Continuous CRP allows producers to enroll at any time for high-priority practices such as filter strips, riparian buffers, and grass waterways.
 - Highly Erodible Land Initiative (HELI) CRP establishes long-term cover on cropland susceptible to soil erosion and other adverse impacts that could degrade water quality, change in land use, and potential human health risks and property damage due to severe dust storms. HELI is for environmentally sensitive land devoted to certain conservation practices.
 - SAFE CRP addresses local wildlife conservation needs by allowing producers to use practices that benefit high priority State wildlife conservation objectives through targeted restoration of vital habitat. The priority of the two New Mexico projects (Lea, 2007, and Lea and Roosevelt, 2021) is the Lesser Prairie Chicken habitat.
 - Grasslands CRP allows landowners and operators to protect grassland, including rangeland and pastureland, while maintaining the areas as grazing land. Grasslands CPAs are becoming more attractive, and more counties are participating.
 - Contract duration is either 10 or 15 years.
 - Concern through observation in New Mexico is that some producers are offering land into GCRP, keep their contracts for only two to three years and then sell out to solar companies.
 - Approximately 1,214,000 acres in New Mexico are under CRP contract.
 - This is a decrease compared to past participation.
 - Conservation Priority Areas (CPAs) are divided into two types: National CPAs and State CPAs (Zone).
 - CPAs are designated as having adverse water quality, wildlife habitat, air quality, or other natural resource impacts related to agricultural production activities and to assist agricultural producers comply with Federal and State environmental laws or to meet other conservation needs such as air quality.
 - National Priority Areas – New Mexico is included in the Dust Bowl National CPA. This CPA is considered with the Grasslands CRP program.
 - State Priority Areas – New Mexico has air quality, wildlife, and water quality, which are considered with general CRP and grasslands, which is considered with the GCRP.
 - Each state zone, air quality, wildlife, and water quality, is limited to 25 percent of the state's cropland whereas the grassland

zone is limited to 25 percent of the total acres of hay, pasture, and rangeland in the State.

Questions, Responses, and Comments

Unknown Speaker: What is the red area on the State CPA Grassland Zone map?

Jim Armendariz (NRCS): The area in red indicates land susceptible to encroachment from woody species such as juniper.

Unknown Speaker: We are looking to get the SAFE program established here. How many eastern counties are over cap?

Joilynn Gray (FSA): Currently, there are two SAFE projects in New Mexico, Lea and Roosevelt Counties. As of the day of the meeting, there was not any information on whether there would be an open period for stakeholders to submit proposals for SAFE projects.

Effects of Shade Balls on Wildlife (Mike Cone, Roosevelt Soil and Water Conservation District [SWCD])

- Overview of the use of Shade Balls in New Mexico:
 - Evaporation from stock tanks researched, and they are losing a lot of water by evaporation.
 - Seven hundred thousand spread out through NM now.
 - One shade ball will conserve four gallons of water per year.
 - Not as much ice accumulation during winter. Algae and moss are also significantly decreased.
 - Price is dependent on oil prices, freight costs, and plastic.
 - Their cost is \$.62/ea. Standard cost is \$.70/ea. Roosevelt SWCD built a warehouse building to store shade balls.
 - They have distributed shade balls to several locations.
 - They would like them to be added to the EQIP list because of sticker shock by ranchers.
 - Ten balls per square foot, but if you do a 10-year amortization, they get cheap, quick.
- They received a grant to study effects of shade balls on wildlife: Do they dissuade wildlife from using stock tanks? Is there wildlife mortality indicated by use of shade balls?
 - They studied five tanks with shade balls and five tanks without them.
 - There were two cameras near each stock tank.
 - Results showed that most shots were nothing, next were cows, and last was wildlife.
- Future considerations to be studied:
 - What kind of birds were seen and what were they doing?
 - Bats—not one single bat seen.
- How much mortality in covered tanks?
 - Both types—covered and uncovered—had no mortality.

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- Did shade balls deter wildlife visits?
 - Results showed wildlife visits were relatively equal between covered and uncovered tanks.

Questions, Responses, and Comments

Unknown Speaker: Is there any concern about microplastics leaching/breaking down?

Mike Cone (Roosevelt County SWCD): We have not seen break down. There is a 10-year guarantee on them. They are filled with potable water, so they do not leach chemicals. Have not had one single person come back to ask for their money back.

Art Ariaz (NRCS): NM NRCS is already developing interim shade ball standard.

Nick Goodman (NRCS): There are new iterations of different shapes.

Unknown Speaker: Feedback received was to stick with the round ones. Different shapes are more expensive.

Mike Cone (Roosevelt County SWCD): Ice in between shade balls is not as thick so you do not have to break as much ice. Take a few shade balls off the tank during the winter so you have “removal” room within the tank. Loss due to “playing” is very limited. Younger cattle and horses like playing with them for the first couple of weeks but then lose interest.

Jim Armendariz (NRCS): How do they work with wells with a lot of mineral content?

Mike Cone (Roosevelt County SWCD): Carrizozo puts them on their storage tanks so the water will make it through the pipelines.

OTHER TOPICS

Mike Cone (Roosevelt County SWCD): They are being bombarded with questions from solar companies about what recommendations the producers/SWCDs can provide regarding mitigation of harmful effects on agricultural land. Rumor is that solar companies want to get 20,000 acres under lease. They have land use plan, which should give them a seat at the table regarding soil and water conservation. What do they say? Can someone help us tell them?

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): Art Ariaz’s resource staff can try to provide technical assistance.

Jim Armendariz (NRCS): Critical area planting.

Mike Cone (Roosevelt County SWCD): Nervous about the effects of stationary panels on vegetation underneath.

CLOSING REMARKS

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): Presentations and meeting minutes will be on the NM NRCS website in a couple of weeks.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting ended at approximately 2:30 p.m.