

State Technical Committee Meeting

September 19, 2024

The State Technical Committee meeting on September 19th, 2024, covered key updates and future plans for New Mexico's natural resources programs. Highlights included obligating \$55-60 million in EQIP funds, fully funding all CSP applications, and completing the ACEP audit. The state has 13 approved EWP projects and is implementing innovative practices like conservation restoration plans and acequia support. Challenges include staffing shortages and the need for increased adoption of underutilized practices. Recommendations for 2025 include focusing on source water protection and wildlife habitat management. The meeting also discussed the importance of outreach and collaboration with local municipalities and partners. The meeting presented information on payment schedules, ACEP, CIG, and EWP updates. Athena introduced the new approach of issuing quarterly updates for payment schedules to include new practice scenarios ensuring fairness and timely contracting. New Mexico's payment schedules will now be issued on a county level affecting 11 counties with COLA or locality pay. The new web page format simplifies access to payment rates and scenarios. New practices include telemetry for watering facilities and virtual fences. The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) has funded nine easements, with land trusts actively funding more. EWP projects include aerial seeding, sediment removal, and revetment fences with 13 active projects across the state. The state tech committee meeting continued with updates from the Resource Technology Services (RTS) team. Key points included the completion of 1,300 conservation plans covering 129,000 acres, with a total budget of \$1.4 million. The team also finalized a Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative agreement with the Quivira Coalition focusing on outreach for historically underserved producers. Training programs were highlighted, including conservation planner courses and cultural resource trainings. The team also discussed ongoing projects, such as the Hermit's Peak and Calf Canyon Conservation Restoration Plans, and the challenges of securing funding for watershed projects. The meeting discussed the availability of information on the NRCS New Mexico website, including PowerPoints, agendas, and minutes. The New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts announced its annual meeting in Albuquerque from October 28-31, with a general session on October 29 and a hotel reservation deadline of September 30. The Forest and Watershed Health Coordinator Group will hold its annual meeting on October 11 at the Rio Grande Nature Center State Park to review the 2020 forest action plan. Recommendations for the State Technical Committee are encouraged, and attendees were reminded to subscribe to the GOV Delivery system for updates.

Action items

- ☐ Send recommendations for NRCS programs to the provided email addresses by October 4th.
- ☐ Review payment scenarios and consider increasing payment rates or supplement payments to address issues with cancellations due to rising costs.
- ☐ Consider adding Prescribed Burning on rangeland as a high priority practice.
- ☐ Consider source water protection areas in Team 6, 9 and 11 and whether practices or outreach should be modified based on lower application numbers in recent years.
- ☐ Provide map and details of NRCS watershed projects online.
- ☐ Consider adding reforestation practices for wildfire recovery areas as eligible for source water or other funding.
- ☐ Submit recommendations for payment schedules to NRCS throughout the year. The payment schedules will have quarterly updates, but most changes will be considered for FY2026.
- ☐ NRCS to participate in regional meetings on Wetland Reserve Easement restoration and administration.
- ☐ The 2023 Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) Notice of Funding can be used to prepare for the upcoming 2025 state funding opportunity.
- ☐ Complete design and implementation of multiple emergency watershed protection projects across the state.

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- ☐ Include the FSA update in the meeting minutes.
- ☐ Finalize additional GLCI agreement signed for outreach in CO, AZ, NM.
- ☐ Hire new agronomist to replace Phil Herrera retiring in October.
- ☐ Plan two conservation planning courses in FY2025 to train new employees and partner staff.
- ☐ Design plans for two active WPO projects hoping to start construction on one rehab project.
- ☐ Provide recommendations for the State Technical Committee by October 4th by email or through the website.
- ☐ Subscribe to the GOV Delivery system for announcements by emailing Luke.
- ☐ Inform NRCS if interested in joining the State Technical Committee mailing list.

Outline

State Technical Committee Meeting Overview

- Kenneth Branch outlines the meeting agenda, including program updates, lunch, and Q&A sessions.
- Emphasizes the importance of feedback from the State Technical Committee on natural resource programs.
- Mentions the need for recommendations on conservation practices, standards, and policies.
- Highlights the role of local work groups in providing feedback to the State Technical Committee.

Highlights of 2024 and Program Deadlines for 2025

- Kenneth Branch discusses the most funds ever obligated in the state's history, around \$55-60 million.
- All CSP applications were funded, but it means starting from scratch for 2025.
- 13 approved EWP projects across the state, with new staff member David leading the program.
- Completion of national ACEP audit findings.
- Implementation of new projects like conservation restoration plans.

Innovative Projects and Staffing Challenges

- Kenneth Branch introduces the Hermit's Peak/Calf's Canyon Conservation Restoration Plan, a unique collaboration with FEMA and local claims office.
- Discussion on the challenges of staffing due to the influx of EWP projects and the need for more staff.
- Xavier Montoya emphasizes the importance of thinking differently while staying within the agency's policy framework.
- Mentions the goal of increasing staff to 190 with potential IRA funding.

EQIP Program Updates and Recommendations

- Maggie Gnann provides an overview of EQIP, its goals, and the allocation of funds for 2024.
- Discusses the challenges of funding applications due to limited funds and the need for recommendations on practices.
- Highlights the importance of addressing resource concerns and the role of high priority practices.
- Mentions the need for more outreach and collaboration with municipalities to protect drinking water source areas.

Source Water Protection and High Priority Practices

- Maggie Gnann explains the criteria for source water protection practices and the need for more outreach.
- Discussion on the challenges of getting municipalities involved and the importance of private landowner participation.

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- Maggie Gnann outlines the high priority practices and the need to adopt more underutilized practices.
- Emphasizes the importance of addressing financial hardships through payment scenarios and high priority practices.

Wildlife Habitat Core Practices

- Maggie Gnann discusses the importance of wildlife conservation and the need to adopt underutilized practices.
- Mentions the challenges of funding wildlife practices and the need for more outreach and collaboration.
- Kenneth Branch explains the criteria for wildlife practices and the importance of addressing wildlife habitat.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) Overview

- Martin Meairs provides an overview of the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).
- Discusses the changes in minimum payments and the addition of historically underserved clients.
- Mentions the ranking pools for CSP and the importance of outreach for new applications.
- Emphasizes the importance of funding at least 5% of CSP funds into SV and beginning farmer accounts.
- Mentions the importance of State Priority Resource Concern Categories.

CSP Application and Funding Statistics

- Martin Meairs provides statistics on CSP applications and funding for fiscal years 2023 and 2024.
- Discusses the challenges of funding applications and the importance of outreach for new applications.
- Mentions the use of act now for CSP applications and the benefits of expedited funding.
- Emphasizes the importance of addressing financial hardships through payment scenarios and high priority practices.

Payment Schedules and Updates

- Athena Cholas discusses the new quarterly release system for payment schedules allowing for updates to include new practice scenarios.
- The new system aims to provide frequent waves of new practices, offering fresh opportunities for growth and innovation.
- Payment schedules will still be issued once a year, but quarterly updates will address any missing scenarios or corrections.

County-Level Payment Schedules

- Athena Cholas mentions the attempt in FY2024 to issue payment schedules on a county level using OPM rates for COLA and locality pay. It will be done in FY 2025.
- 11 counties in New Mexico have a COLA or locality pay, which will be added to the base payment rate for the state.
- Concerns about fairness are expected, but this system is being used by OPM and Social Security, so it is an established practice.
- Testing is being done to figure out how to handle scenarios where a ranch covers two counties with different COLA rates.

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Payment Schedule Information Online

- The new webpage format for payment rates will be easier to navigate, with a drop-down menu for state and program selection. The public can find the webpage with an internet search using “NRCS payment schedules.”
- Users can choose between a cost list and a scenario description, making it simpler to find information.
- The new format will omit the detailed list of materials, equipment and labor hours which caused confusion in the past.
- The state office will still have access to detailed information for customization and verification of rates.

New Practices and Enhancements

- New CSP enhancement includes telemetry for watering facilities. Telemetry is also available in EQIP. EQIP will offer payment scenarios for virtual fences or geo-fences.
- Interim practices for annual forages in grazing systems is being tested with potential for future release as a practice standard.
- Partnerships with organizations are crucial for developing new practices.
- Examples of successful interim practices include groundwater recharge basins and on-farm recharge on active farmland.

Easements and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)

- New Mexico has a modest ACEP program, with nine easements funded and three closed this year.
- The land trusts are actively funding more easements with other sources of funding.
- There are two state ALE ranking pools, one for land that is cropped and one for grasslands of special significance. Ranking priority for the crop and pasture ranking pool is Valencia County and areas with surface water rights. Recommendations can be made on how to allocate funds between the two ranking pools.
- The state is working to improve communication and collaboration with land trusts and landowners. The Farmland Information Center provides easy-to-find information on easements, including checklists and updates on NRCS bulletins.
- Many partners are actively working together to identify ways to improve ACEP-ALE including the issue of high cost of putting land into easements.

IRA Recommendations

- Recommendations on IRA priorities for crops, geographic areas or land uses that address carbon, methane and nitrous oxide can be submitted to Athena Cholas.
- New Mexico has the ability to customize state ranking questions and will receive a state IRA allocation.

Wetland Reserve Easements

- The state must report back to the national office on the state technical committee's approval of geographic area rate caps.
- NRCS is improving the process for preventing and handling violations in Wetland Reserve easements.
- NRCS will set up regional gatherings for staff to improve restoration administration and outreach for Wetland Reserve easements.
- A regional group on playas is meeting to improve financial and technical resources for playa restoration and protection.

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Conservation Innovation Grants Program (CIG)

- CIG is a large program nationally, with several national grants in New Mexico.
- The program encourages innovation and provides alternatives to traditional practices.
- The decision to consider the practice, Forage Harvest Management, as a priority practice in CSP was due to a CIG grant to NMSU that evaluated the harvesting height for better soil health and crop quality.
- Recommendations on state priorities are requested. Issues to consider are bark beetles, water conservation, and water filtration for irrigation and livestock drinking water.

EWP Projects and Practices

- David Griego is the EWP Program Manager. David explained that NRCS has 13 active EWP projects around the state, with various completion percentages.
- Practices being implemented include aerial seeding, mulching, flood barrier bags, protective structures, and sediment removal.
- Revetment fences and contour tree felling are also being used to prevent erosion.
- The team is working on site visits from the requests for assistance and coordinating with other agencies for disaster recovery efforts.

EWP Funding and Disaster Recovery

- EWP projects are funded through various sources, including FEMA and state funds.
- The HPCC, McBride fire and Cerro Pelado fire were funded at 100%, creating new policies and workload challenges.
- The team is working to control costs and improve coordination with New Mexico State University.
- Opportunities for landowners to enter CSP contracts and do work following natural disasters are being explored.

Lunch Break and Future Agenda

- The meeting will take a one-hour lunch break, resuming at 12:30 PM.
- The agenda includes updates from engineering, RTS, and RCPP.
- Participants are encouraged to connect back at 12:30 PM for the continuation of the meeting.
- The meeting appreciates everyone's participation and will resume with more updates.

Resource Technology Services (RTS) Update

- Art Ariaz (State Resource Conservationist) introduces the RTS team, which handles cultural resources, rain, agronomy, forestry, business planning tools, and wildlife biology.
- The team manages the Electronic Field Office Tech Guide (EFOTG) and maintains standards, specs, and implementation requirements.
- Recent updates include a new agreement with the Quivira Coalition and an extension with the GCLI agreement.
- The team provides training on various disciplines and assists with conservation planning and outreach.

(RTS) Staff and Training Overview

- Currently RTS has 9 specialists: Dan Bloedel (Resource Conservationist), Ana Gomes (Natural resource specialist-business tools), William Volf (State Archeologist), Molly Murphy (Archeologist), Jim Armendariz (State Range Specialist), Phil Herrera (State Agronomist), Amanda Brown (Admin Assistant), Andrew Lee (State Forester), Pam Herrera (Wildlife Biologist).

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- The team completed several training courses in fiscal year 2024, including conservation planner courses, cultural resource trainings, CD/CART training and soil health sustainability training.
- Upcoming mandatory training include two conservation planning courses in fiscal year 2025 to accommodate new employees for certified planner certification.
- The team also conducts outreach events, including the Hermit's Peak and Calf Canyon Conservation Restoration Plans, with a total of 1812 applications and 1300 completed.

Conservation Desktop and CART Planning Tools

- Art Ariaz discusses the Conservation Desktop (CD), and Conservation Assessment Ranking tool (CART) tools used for mapping, assessing, planning and ranking.
- The team conducts two CD and CART trainings annually to ensure staff are proficient in using these tools.

Outreach and Engagement

- Art Ariaz highlights the team's outreach efforts, including over 50 events in fiscal year 2024.
- The team uses the rainfall simulator to educate producers and the public about the benefits of post-fire seeding.
- The team also assists with HPCC conservation restoration plans and provides updates on completed projects.
- The team also organizes annual clinics on soil health and rangeland training.
- The team works with partners like NMAC and SWCD to coordinate training and outreach efforts.
- The team assists (technically) with Grassland CRP and interim plans for FSA.

CD/Cart Tool: Assessment and Planning

- Ana Gomes introduces the CART assessment tool, which streamlines the planning process and provides a centralized place for evaluating client operations.
- The tool starts in Conservation Desktop (CD) where planners use CLU Layers to delineate their farm or ranch operation, a land use and management is selected.
- The tool helps planners identify management issues, create practice and plan schedules, and assess resource concerns. If thresholds are met, the tool identifies if planned practices have addressed the resource concerns.
- The tool also supports progressive planning, allowing planners to address one resource concern at a time. This tool also takes that application to ranking through the various ranking pools. The locally led process (State Tech committee having input to local work groups) can have some input on how pool priorities and percentages are prioritized for ranking.

RCPP Funding and Projects

- Kris Graham Chavez reported on RCPP funding. \$137 million in application requests for New Mexico and \$1.5 billion nationally.
- The team is working on several active agreements, including the Ogallala project.
- The team is also coordinating with partners to renew and extend existing agreements.
- The team is preparing for new application deadlines and Grazing Management and Non-Lethal Predator Risk Mitigation in NM and AZ

Engineering Updates

Elias Gnann discusses the engineering standards and updates, including approximately 10 standards to be updated in October with minor updates from national.

- The team has a new staff member, Merceidez Fabok, who will manage the watershed programs in NM

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- The team covers watershed projects under the WFPO and rehab programs, focusing on large-scale areas and existing NRCS dams.
- The team faces challenges in finding viable sponsors and securing funding for watershed projects.

Watershed Program Challenges

Mercedeiz explained the differences between the Farm Bill program and the watershed program, emphasizing the need for larger entities as sponsors.

- The team faces challenges in finding viable sponsors and securing funding for watershed projects.
- The team is working on several projects, including the Hermit's Peak and Calf Canyon project and the Belen watershed project.
- The team is also exploring alternative solutions, such as decommissioning dams, to address funding limitations.

Funding and Prioritization

- Elias explained the funding priorities for WFPO and rehab projects focusing on flood prevention and high-hazard structures.
- The team ranks projects based on their importance and the population at risk.
- The team works to balance the workload and ensure staff are available to support new projects.
- The team also coordinates with district conservationists to provide alternative solutions and support sponsors.

Questions and Answers

- Participants ask questions about the funding process, project prioritization, and the role of district conservationists in supporting watershed projects.
- Mercedeiz and Elias provide detailed explanations and clarify the team's approach to project selection and funding.
- The team emphasizes the importance of early applications and coordination with district conservationists to ensure project success.
- The meeting concludes with a reminder to refer to the minutes for additional updates from FSA.

State Technical Committee Meeting Introduction

- Kenneth Branch explains that all meeting information will be posted on the website and provides a link for those who are online.
- Instructions are given for those not online to search for the New Mexico NRCS website and look for the State Technical Committee link.
- Luke has revamped the website, making it easy to access and find all necessary documents.
- Amanda will send the minutes of the meeting once they are available.

Engineering Conference and Annual Meeting Announcements

- Speaker 1 mentions the wow factor of the engineering conference at Island University and its annual attendance.
- Steve Kadas from the New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts announces their annual meeting from October 28 to 31 in Albuquerque.
- The general session will be on October 29, and the deadline for hotel reservations is September 30.
- Steve provides details about the hotel and venue for the annual meeting.

Forest and Watershed Health Coordinator Group Announcement

- Erin introduces the Forest and Watershed Health Coordinator Group's annual in-person meeting on October 11.

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- The meeting will focus on the five-year review of the forest action plan from 2020.
- Erin highlights the private land stewardship strategy and the mapping resources in the document.
- Interested participants can contact Erin for more information and the meeting location at the Rio Grande Nature Center State Park in Albuquerque.

Closing Remarks and Recommendations

- Kenneth Branch thanks everyone for attending the State Technical Committee meeting and encourages recommendations for October 4.
- Recommendations can be sent to the website or email addresses provided.
- Kenneth Branch mentions that many recommendations have been implemented and appreciates the input.
- Information about local work group meetings and the state website is provided, encouraging participation in these meetings.

GOV Delivery Subscription and Final Remarks

- Luke Luna reminds everyone about the GOV Delivery system for sending out information and asks if anyone is not subscribed.
- Instructions are given for those who want to subscribe to the GOV Delivery system.
- Kenneth Branch emphasizes the importance of the GOV Delivery system for announcements and program updates.
- The meeting concludes with thanks to everyone for their time and participation.