

State Technical Committee Meeting Minutes

May 22, 2025

Texas

Charles Kneuper, State Resource Conservationist, called the State Technical Committee (STC) to order at 9:15 a.m. on May 22, 2025, in Temple, Texas.

Present for the meeting were 54 STC members and 17 NRCS Texas staff.

Agency Updates:

Kristy Oates, State Conservationist NRCS Texas:

- Provided update of current Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) activities.
- Aubrey J.D. Bettencourt serves as Chief of NRCS, sworn in on April 7th, 2025.
- Celebrated NRCS 90th anniversary on April 27, 2025.
- Celebrated USDA's 163rd birthday in May.
- Summarized status of NRCS watershed program activities.

Jeff Dudensing, Conservation Chief, Farm Service Agency (FSA):

- Summarized FSA activities including Farm Loan updates, CRP, disaster assistance, and staffing updates.
- USDA announced specialty crop program MASC 1.3 billion in additional program assistance.
- Summarized activities in other parts of the state experiencing recent flooding and preparation for hurricane season.

Michael Canales, Community Programs Director, Rural Development (RD):

- Provided update on programs and funding availability through RD.
- Staffing updates.

Farm Bill updates:

Charles Kneuper, NRCS

- Summarized local workgroup and priority resource concerns.
- Highlighted local workgroup general feedback including:
 - Population growth upstream and impacts on:
 - Water Source
 - Water Quality
 - Drought Conditions
 - Damage due to feral hogs
 - Payment rates
 - Soil amendments
 - Comments made regarding the time between application and funding.
 - ☆ **Question:** Who has the authority over hog damage?
 - ☆ **Answer:** Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) and Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

Stacy Riley, NRCS

- On target to spend all funds currently available for EQIP, CSP and ACEP by September 30th, 2025.
 - ☆ **Question:** *Will the funds already allocated be paid out?*
 - ☆ **Answer:** *Yes. We are still working through processes but are still on target to obligate available funds by the end of FY2025.*
- National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) sign up deadline May 30, 2025.
- Closed 6 ACEP-Wetland Reserve Easements in 2025 so far, approximately 4,000 acres will be functioning wetlands in the next 1-5 years.
 - Geographical area rate cap (GARC) must be updated each calendar year, currently the rate is \$5000/ acre or the appraised fair market value of the easement whichever is less for WRE/WREP.
- Closed 4 ACEP-Agricultural Land Easements in 2025 so far, approximately 5,000 acres.
- RCPP: Several project areas, approximately 20-30 contracts on track for implementation.
 - ☆ **Question:** *Is there National level guidance on RCPP? There is a delay of obligation for land management contracts.*
 - ☆ **Answer:** *Obligation must be entered manually for RCPP specifically, causing delays.*
 - ☆ **Question:** *What is the level of staffing loss at the FPAC level?*
 - ☆ **Answer:** *At this time, we do not know official numbers for FPAC.*

Jeff Dudensing, FSA

- Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) updates, the current sign-up deadline (Continuous and General CRP) is June 6, 2025.
 - ☆ **Question:** *Is the continuous sign up right now?*
 - ☆ **Answer:** *Yes. 90% of the soil rental rate for continuous, 85% for general.*
 - ☆ **Comment follow-up:** *State Technical Committee member suggested that customers should apply for State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) through Continuous CRP due to the automatic approval process versus General CRP and ranking.*
 - ☆ **Question:** *How many more CRP acres can be added/accepted?*
 - ☆ **Answer:** *The acres are capped at 27 million acres.*
- Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) Updates – Authorized in 36 counties but available statewide. Emergency Commodity Assistance Program (ECAP) deadline is August 15, 2025.
 - ☆ **Question:** *Is there a particular metric that triggers the events getting funded?*
 - ☆ **Answer:** *Comes from the county committee, depending on the severity of the natural event. (Should be a catastrophic event, not a normal freeze etc.). The County Emergency Board includes FSA, NRCS, and County Extension Agents (TAMU) and County Committee can make recommendations to implement ECP.*

Opportunities for Gulf RESTORE Act projects

Kyle Wright, NRCS

- Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA). BP, the United States, and the five Gulf states have agreed to a \$8.8 Billion settlement resolving claims for federal civil penalties and natural resource damages related to the Deepwater Horizon BP Spill.
 - Gulf Restoration projects are funded from two sources. Restore Act and Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA).
 - Texas currently has one Nutrient Reduction Project: Petronila Creek.
 - Requesting input for future NRDA project proposals in Texas
 - Agricultural lands within the boundaries of three 12-digit HUC watersheds.
 - Improve water quality by implementing conservation practices
 - Developing conservation plans that identify natural resource concerns to reduce nutrient and sediment runoff
 - 5-year Duration
- ☆ **Question:** Is NRCS looking for project area suggestions?
- ☆ **Answer:** Yes, please contact Kyle Wright at kyle.wright@usda.gov
- ☆ **Question:** Have you entertained a microbial solution?
- ☆ **Answer:** No, but would willing to discuss.

Subcommittee Reports:

Forestry, Jason Raines

- Discussed carbon capture rates of Texas forestlands
- Recommendations:
 - Requested prescribed burning as a high priority practice.
 - Requested a progress report on the online training provided by Texas A&M University.
 - Requested prescribed burning accomplishments
 - Commented that prescribed burning Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) and financial assistance requests will likely increase for the rest of 2025+, suggest increasing Prescribed Fire training availability for NRCS staff.

Water Resources, Kyle Wright

- Additional HUC12 watersheds were proposed for FY26 in 3 of the watersheds (Aransas, Lake Lavon & Lampasas) and single HUC12 watersheds are proposed for removal in 2 of the watersheds (Lake Lavon and Lampasas).
- After brief discussion the subcommittee agreed with the proposal as submitted. The proposal has been submitted to headquarters for review.
- NRCS is currently working to update the Wetland Functional Assessment Model and the Wetland State Off Site Method. Dennis Brezina is leading the update. If you are interested and would like to review and/or comment on the update, please contact Dennis for more information.
 - Reach out to Dennis Brezina (Dennis.Brezina@usda.gov) if interested.

Wildlife, Cyndee Watson

- We are drafting recommended language to clarify water depth for shorebirds under CSP 646 C&D.
- Adapt and adopt the current scenario under CPS 314, #383 - Mechanical Control, Mid and Understory Vegetation for GCWA habitat management since the 645 Upland Wildlife Habitat Management scenario for GCWA is no longer available. We recommend adding “improve habitat for identified wildlife including T&E species (e.g. Houston Toad, GCWA) via mechanically shredding or chipping invasive woody plants with forestry mowers, masticators, mulchers, etc., or to accommodate extensive hand-cutting supervised by trained GCWA biologists or habitat managers.”
- Support the implementation of more prescribed fire and increased prescribed burning training for NRCS staff.

Open Discussion:

Comment: Conserving water is a priority; agriculture suffers first when water restrictions are established. USDA programs need more funding to conserve water, especially in areas experiencing a high frequency of population growth.

Response: Water conservation goes beyond NRCS. Currently NRCS looks for opportunities to share technical information and collaborate on water conserving opportunities. New technology was mentioned in conjunction with Environmental Quality Incentives Program Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG).

Response: Water issues flow from a State Level in policy where there are additional levels of issues such as: groundwater availability, water rights, etc. “How do we bring/share technical knowledge to the State?”

Comment: USDA needs a quick reaction time for emergency programs for disaster relief. Issues caused by wildfire such as carcass removal and melted irrigation systems need immediate response to get the land back into production.

Response: There are USDA programs to address emergency conservation needs through both FSA and NRCS. NRCS has the conservation practices standard *emergency animal mortality management*.

Comment: Prescribed fire is getting more popular, biggest problem is insurance. Large scale prescribed fire is less about education, and more about getting the insurance in place. Premiums are too high for prescribed fire.

Response: Insurance issues are important but fall outside of the STC purview. More appropriate at the state legislature and not NRCS programs/ practices.

Comment: Practice 328, Conservation Crop Rotation, is a popular practice in Zone 1, particularly scenarios converting irrigated cropland to dryland farming. This practice does not efficiently conserve water but focuses on an increase of the Soil Conditioning Index (SCI) or Soil Tillage Intensity Rating.

Response: Conservation Crop Rotation, practice 328, is not an irrigation practice. *This practice is applied to support one or more of the following purposes:*

- *Reduce sheet, rill and wind erosion*
- *Maintain or increase soil health and organic matter content*
- *Improve soil moisture efficiency*
- Planners should work with landowners on addressing resource concerns with suggested alternatives (practices) and use available assessments.

Response: Regenerative Agriculture/Farming (increasing soil organic matter %) can make a big difference when it comes to irrigation water savings. Recommendation for adding regenerative options to practices and encourage/promote use to more farmers.

Question: (regarding the Conservation Stewardship Program ranking and funding total in Zone 1) Ranking should be consistent across all zones, more oversight and training is needed throughout the state for NRCS staff.

Answer: Landowners choose how many resource concerns they want to address, but ranking should be consistent based on each site-specific land use and resource concerns.

Question: What is the status of CIG grants?

Answer: There is not currently a notice for CIG grant opportunities available.

Question: (regarding NRCS and virtual fencing)

Answer: Virtual Fence is available as an option under practice code 382, Fence. Virtual Fence does have limitations for use but is available anywhere in the state of Texas.

Answer: Water telemetry fact sheets are also currently being developed.

Kristy provided closing comments.

Meeting adjourned – 12:00pm



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FY 2026

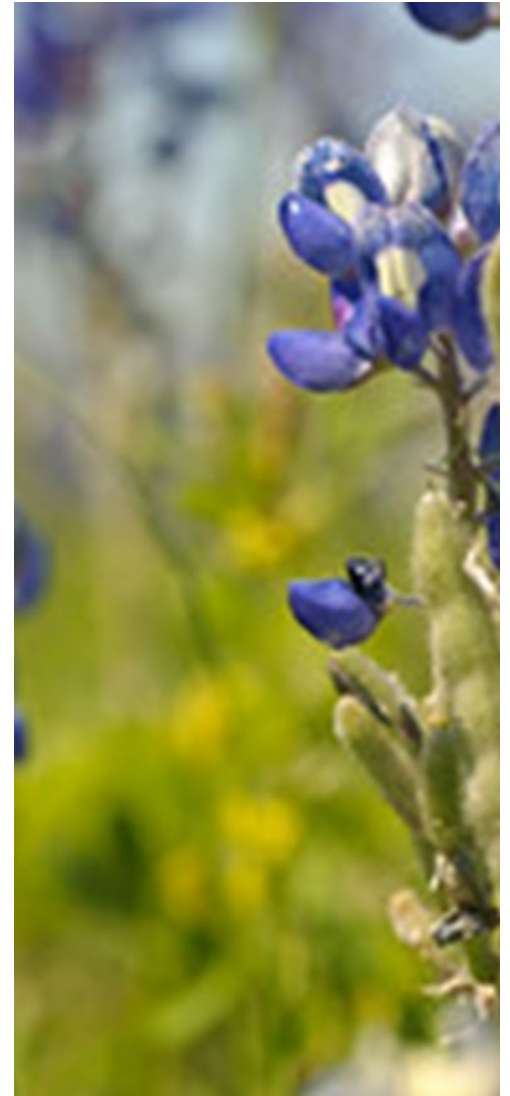
USDA-NRCS Texas Priority Resource Concerns



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Responsibilities of the LWG

- Identify priority resource concerns and identify, as appropriate, high-priority areas needing assistance.
- Assist NRCS and the conservation district with public outreach and information efforts and identify educational and producers' training needs.
- Participate in multicounty coordination were program funding and priority area proposals cross county boundaries.
- Utilize the conservation needs assessment to identify priority resource concerns that can be addressed by USDA programs.



2026 LWG Resource Concerns:

Dryland Cropland:

- Sheet and Rill Erosion
- Organic Matter Depletion
- Plant Productivity and Health
- Wind Erosion
- Classic Gully Erosion

Rangeland/Pasture:

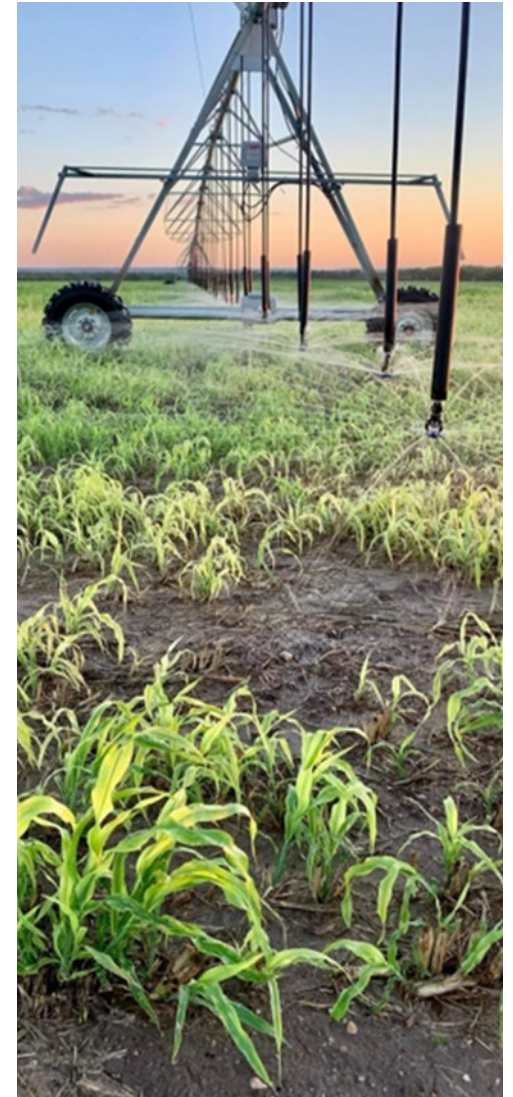
- Plant Productivity and Health
- Inadequate Livestock Water Quantity, Quality and Distribution
- Feed and Forage Imbalance
- Plant Structure and Composition
- Plant Pest Pressure

Irrigated Cropland:

- Inefficient Irrigation Water Use
- Sheet and Rill Erosion
- Organic Matter Depletion
- Wind Erosion
- Water-Groundwater Depletion

Forestland:

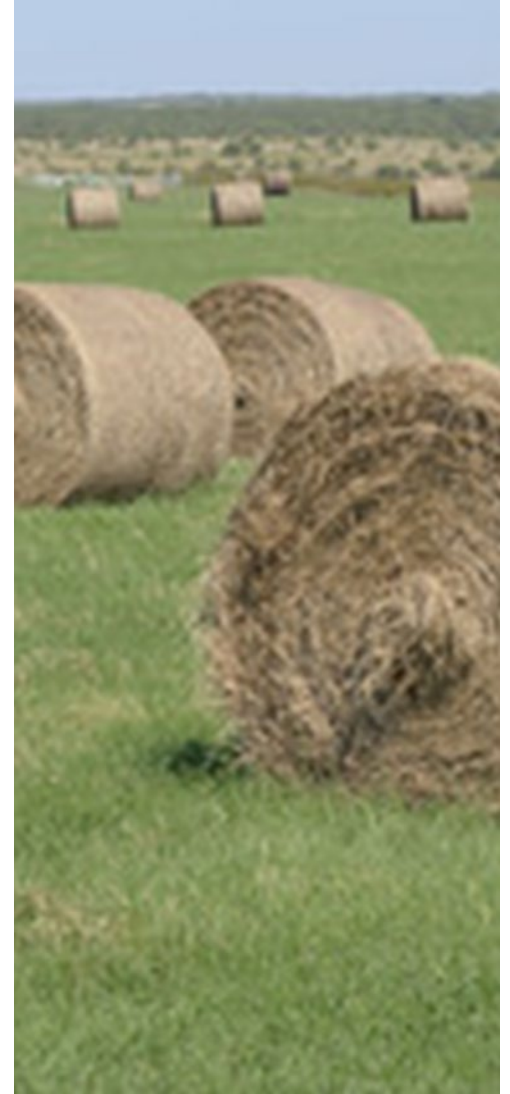
- Plant Productivity and Health
- Plant Structure and Composition
- Plant Pest Pressure
- Terrestrial Habitat for Wildlife and Invertebrates
- Wildfire Hazard from Biomass Accumulation



2026 LWG Resource Concerns:

General Concerns:

- Population growth upstream and impacts on:
 - Water Source
 - Water Quality
 - Drought Conditions
- Damage due to feral hogs
- Payment rates
- Soil Amendments
- Comments made regarding time between application and funding.





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FSA Program Updates

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Conservation Updates



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Conservation Reserve Program

Active Enrollment

CRP General

- Contracts: 8,856
- Acres: 1,384,227
- Annual Rent: \$49.9 million*

CRP Grasslands

- Contracts: 1,296
- Acres: 409,385
- Annual Rent: \$7.0 million*

CRP Continuous

- Contracts: 13,243
- Acres: 2,157,100
 - SAFE: 250,463 acres
- Annual Rent: \$72.6 million*

*estimated

General CRP Signup Results

Signup 206

- 381 offers
- 179,072 acres offered
- 193 acceptable offers
- 71,670 acceptable acres

Grassland CRP Signup Results

Signup 62

- 246 offers
- 28,224 offered acres

- 227 offers
- 24,117 acceptable acres

Emergency Conservation Program Updates

Helps farmers and ranchers repair damage to farmlands caused by natural disasters

- Authorized in 36 counties
- Wildfire, Severe Storm, Tornado, Flood, Hurricane
- EC3, EC4 approved practices
- \$57 million issued
 - As of Sept. 5, 2024



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Key Updates



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Farm Loan Updates

Enhancing Program Access and Delivery for Farm Loans rule

- Low-interest installment set-aside program
- Flexible repayment terms
- Reducing loan security and collateral requirements
- **Effective Sept. 25, 2024**

Debt Consolidation Tool

- Evaluate potential impact and savings for a debt consolidation loan

ELAP Updates

Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honey Bees, and Farm-Raised Fish Program (ELAP)

Dairy Cattle

- H5N1 impacted dairy cattle
- Cover a portion of the cost of milk loss
- Must have confirmed positive H5N1 test
- File notice of loss by Jan. 30, 2025

Crawfish

- Losses due to extreme heat conditions in 2023
- 2021 – 2023 production data
- Austin, Brazoria, Chambers, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harden, Harris, Jefferson, Liberty, Matagorda, Newton, Orange, Waller and Wharton counties
- File notice of loss by Jan. 30, 2025

Food Safety Certification for Specialty Crops Program

Reimburses on-farm food safety program expenses related to a food safety certification

For specialty crop operations that are:

- a small business; or,
- a medium-sized business

Jan. 31, 2025, deadline

Category of Eligible Expenses	Payment Amount of Eligible Costs
Food safety certification	75 percent, up to a maximum of \$2,000
Development of a food safety plan for first-time certification	75 percent (no maximum)
Maintaining or updating a food safety plan	75 percent, up to a maximum of \$675
Certification upload fees	75 percent, up to a maximum of \$375
Microbiological testing – products	75 percent, up to 5 tests
Microbiological testing – soil amendments	75 percent, up to 5 tests
Microbiological testing – water	75 percent, up to 5 tests
Training	100 percent, up to a maximum of \$500



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Questions?



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Opportunities for Gulf Restoration NRDA Projects in Texas

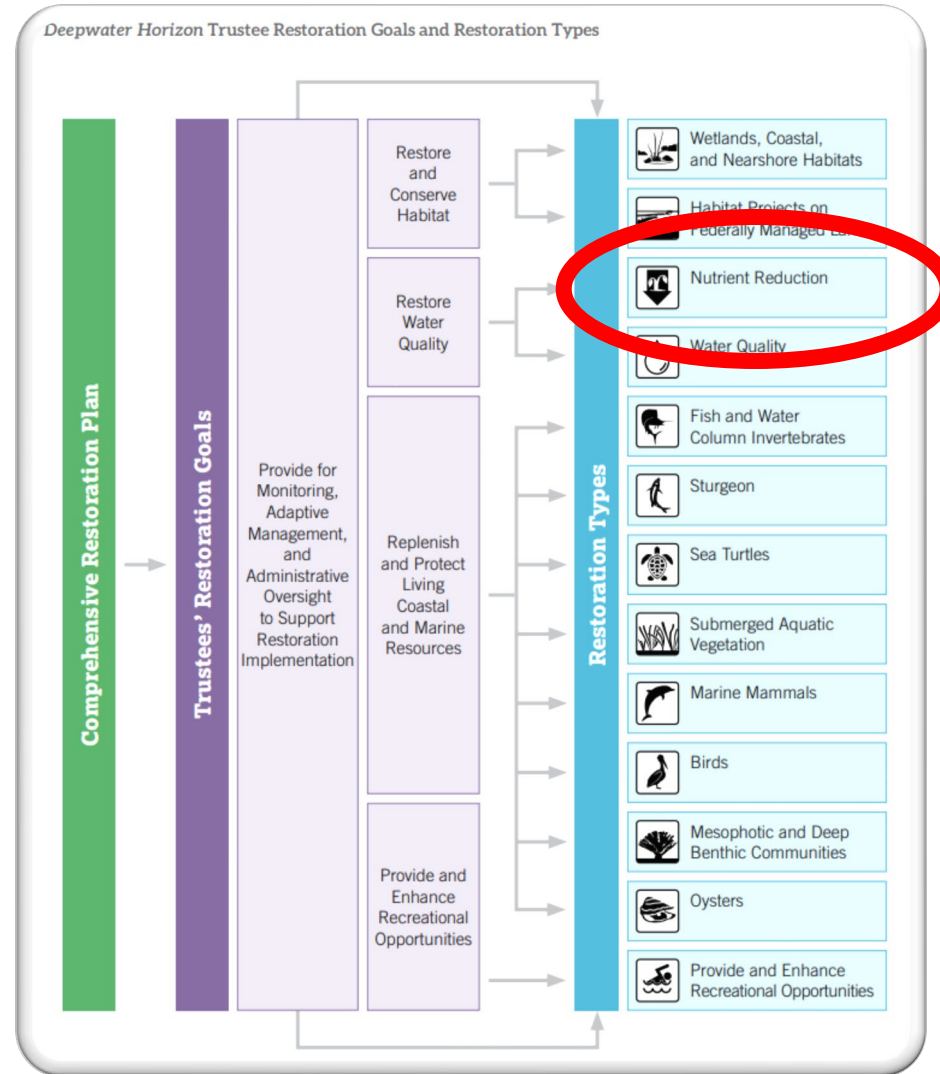


Kyle Wright, State Water Quality Specialist

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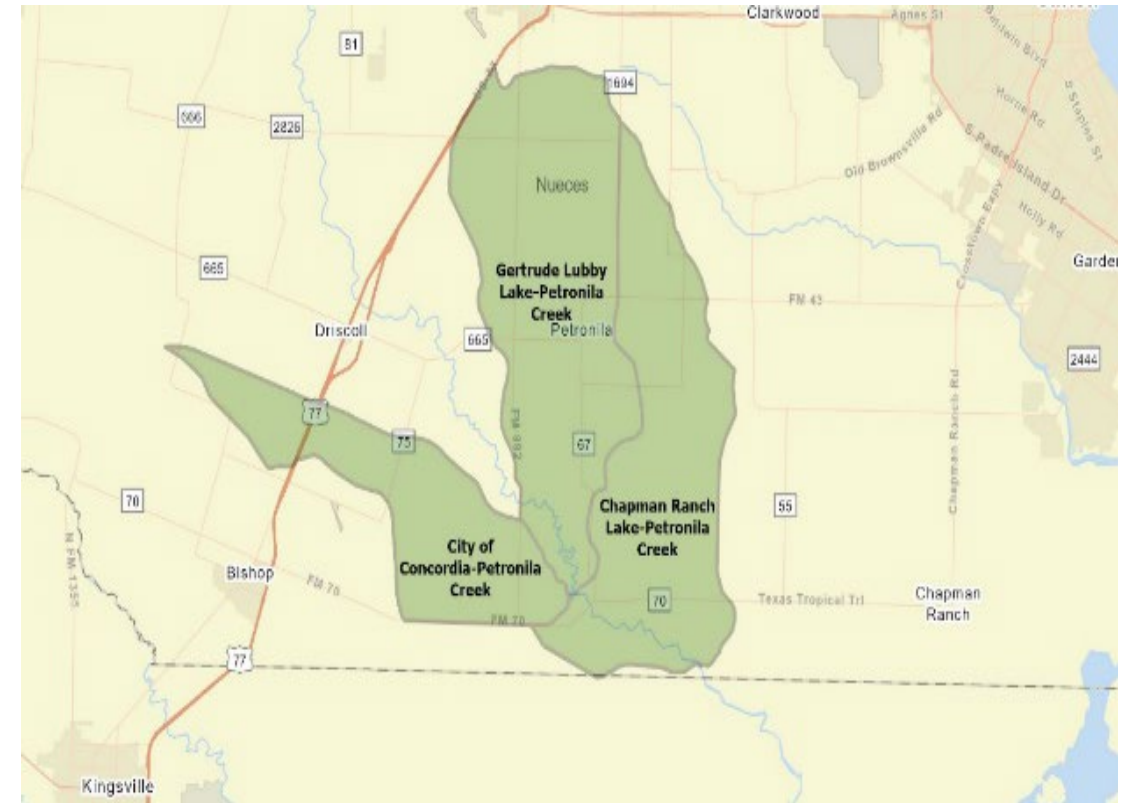
Gulf Restoration Funding Authorities

- Oct. 2010: Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Task Force was established to implement and facilitate the restoration process.
- Jul. 2012: The Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act (RESTORE) was signed into law (established a Gulf Coast Restoration Trust Fund). \$6.659 billion settlement.
- Apr. 2016: BP, the U.S., and the 5 Gulf states agreed to a \$8.8 billion settlement resolving claims for federal civil penalties and natural resource damages (NRDA) related to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.



Petronila Creek Nutrient Reduction Project

- Agricultural lands within the boundaries of three 12-digit HUC watersheds
- Improve water quality by implementing conservation practices
- Developing conservation plans that identify natural resource concerns to reduce nutrient and sediment runoff
- 5-year duration



Commonly Utilized Conservation Practices

- 328 Conservation crop rotation
- 329 No till
- 340 Cover crop
- 345 Reduced till
- 393 Filter strip
- 590 Nutrient management



Requesting input for future NRDA project proposals in Texas

- If you are aware of any potential NRDA nutrient reduction projects or potential focus areas, please reach out.
- Contact Kyle Wright at kyle.wright@usda.gov
- We will consider benefits to the natural resources, availability of field staff, landowner willingness to participate and the willingness of agencies, groups and organizations to partner with NRCS for a successful project.
- We will coordinate with the Regional Gulf Coast Restoration Team to develop and propose additional projects in the future.



Questions?

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Fish and Wildlife Subcommittee Update

**Cyndee Watson
NRCS STC Fish and Wildlife
Subcommittee Chair**

**State Coordinator for Texas
Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program
cyndee_watson@fws.gov**

Fish and Wildlife Subcommittee

- Role – we serve in an advisory capacity to provide information regarding pressing wildlife concerns in Texas to the State Conservationist for her consideration.
- The subcommittee met in-person on April 24, 2025. In total, 19 people were in attendance and several noted that they appreciated the quality of in-person conversation and interaction.

Subcommittee Discussion

- During our meeting, we had several updates and discussions on:
- The subcommittee's role, membership and attendance
- CSP Enhancement 646 C&D
- CSP Enhancement 644A
- CP 645, helpful hint and the reference to the SGCN list
- CP 314, removal of lower-cost scenarios for chemical brush management, GCWA scenario and Mid & Understory thinning scenario
- Prescribed fire
- High Priority Practice Discussion (via email after the meeting)

Formal Statements

- we are drafting recommended language to clarify water depth for shorebirds under CSP 646 C&D
- not having a Farm Bill presents significant challenges with planning to address wildlife resource concerns
- we support the implementation of more prescribed fire

Formal Requests

We respectfully and formally request:

- to know if there is any policy discouraging the prescribed fire training
- to adapt and adopt the current scenario under CPS 314, #383 - Mechanical Control, Mid and Understory Vegetation for GCWA habitat management since the 645 Upland Wildlife Habitat Management scenario for GCWA is no longer available. We recommend adding “improve habitat for identified wildlife including T&E species (e.g. Houston Toad, GCWA) via mechanically shredding or chipping invasive woody plants with forestry mowers, masticators, mulchers, etc., or to accommodate extensive hand-cutting supervised by trained GCWA biologists or habitat managers.”

Formal Requests

Request the following for inclusion on the High Priority Practice List:

338 - Prescribed Burning

666 - Forest Stand Improvement

643 - Restoration of Rare or Declining Natural Communities

644 - Wetland Wildlife Habitat Management

394 - Firebreak

383 - Fuel Break

649 - Structures for Wildlife

384 - Woody Residue Treatment

646 - Seasonal Water Management for Wildlife

340 - Cover Crop only if used in combo w/ another wildlife practice to establish native plantings in appropriate season

Thanks on behalf of the Fish and Wildlife Subcommittee

