

State Technical Committee Meeting

May 28, 2025

Meeting called by: Devon Cunningham, N.H. Acting State Conservationist

Facilitated by: Jeremy Fowler, Public Affairs Specialist, N.H. NRCS

Attendees

In-Person: Devon Cunningham (NRCS), Jeremy Fowler (NRCS), Ian Hanley (SCC), Don Keirstead (NRCS), Kimberly McCracken (NRCS), Patrick Suprunowicz (USDA Rural Development), Steve Scapicchio, (NHACD), Catherine Coverdale (Xerces Society), Matt Brown (NRCS), Heather Grybas (NRCS), Tracy Boisvert (NRCS), Char Cochrane (NRCS), Tabitha Edwards (NRCS), Erin Cotton (Sen. Hassan's office), Brian Eisenmann (NRCS)

Virtual Attendees: Marilyn Milne (FSA), Lauren Zielinski (Connecticut River Conservancy), Jeremy DeLisle (UNH Extension), Ben Engel (Southeast Land Trust), Teresa Downey (Northeast Organic Farming Association), Gabe Roxby (NRCS), Melissa Lang (N.H. DES), Stacy Lemieux (U.S. Forest Service), Leigh Mae MacLellan (American Farmland Trust), Katherine Zink (N.H. DES), Audrey Mayer (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service), Rachel Carow (American Farmland Trust), Elizabeth McKenna (Sen. Shaheen's office), Jaweria Khan (public), Kevin Lambert (RD), Wendy Weisiger (NH Forest Society), Musharaf U. Rashid (public), Nosheen Irshad (public), Desirée Robertson-Dubois (American Farmland Trust), Stacy Luke (Merrimack County Conservation District), Stephanie Tidwell (NRCS), Fatima Jamal (public)

Opening Remarks:

Devon Cunningham, Acting State Conservationist, NRCS, N.H. ([link to video](#))

- Is the Acting State Conservationist after the retirement of Becky Ross.
 - Anticipating another appointment by NRCS headquarters within the next 90 days.
 - Also functioning in the NRCS, N.H. Management and Strategy role.
 - Staffing is down at present from 73 to 56 federal employees and six partner employees
 - Further staffing reductions possible, we just do not know what that will look like yet.
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Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) updates:

State Programs and Field Operations Update:

Kim McCracken, Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations & Acting Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, NRCS, N.H. ([link to video](#))

- Currently Acting ASTC for Programs since the departure of Marques Munis.
- Overview of what has been accomplished in Fiscal Year 2024 and 2025 up to present (slides here)
- A brief look at 2026 based on what we currently know (slides here)
- Reviewed currently publicly available data tools
 - Farmers.gov data source available here: <https://www.farmers.gov/data>
 - NRCS website data: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/resources/data-and-reports/rca-data-viewer>
- Tracey Boisvert, Easement Specialist, NRCS, N.H. - Easement Highlights:
 - FY 2024: Closed on eight projects in five counties
 - 1,112± acres

- Four entity-held (agricultural land easements)
 - Three U.S. held (wetland reserve easements - WRE)
 - One Regional Conservation Project Program (RCPP)
- Breakdown of funding for above-listed easement projects (See slides)
- FY 2025:
 - WRE: Presently three of sixteen applications selected for funding
 - Closed of six projects, two more pending
 - 1,308 acres protected
 - ALE: Presently four of four applications selected for funding
 - One project closed, 396 acres
 - RCPP: Presently, two applications; one deferred from last year
- Encouraging to submit more applications
- Easement subcommittee conducted in March
 - Solicited feedback:
 - How to make our easement programs can be more efficient?
 - How can we increase interest in the program?
 - Feedback from above:
 - Easement requirements are complex, and our land trusts are small in New Hampshire
 - Sometimes it's a challenge for smaller land trusts to consider.
 - Limited sources for matching funds
- Kim McCracken - Land management Programs (EQIP, CSP, AMA)
 - Seeing a tremendous increase in interest in NRCS conservation programs
 - FY2025: 309 contracts
 - Expended all funding for EQIP interest in round 1 of selections, had to request more funds to attempt to satisfy demand
 - More demand than ever
 - Significant backlog of applications that we did not have the funding to support
 - Partnerships really helped bring customers in the door
- Kim McCracken - Review of data available to the public:
 - Farmers.gov data source available here: <https://www.farmers.gov/data>
 - NRCS website data: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/resources/data-and-reports/rca-data-viewer>

State Resources Conservationist/State Soil Scientist and Tech Team Updates:

Don Keirstead, State Resource Conservationist/State Soil Scientist & Team, NRCS, N.H.:

- Experienced a tremendous upswing in work going out on the ground; focused on getting those projects accomplished. This highlights the number of partner meetings we attended this year to reach farmers, ranchers and non-industrial forest landowners.
- New Hampshire has a lot of technical service providers, particularly in forestry.
- Continuing outreach and support for organic and integrated pest management practices
- Working a bit with some of our wildlife partners and some of our disaster preparedness partners on drought and excessive rainfall resilience
- Feedback from subcommittee and outreach meetings:
 - Deer Fence / Bird Netting: Can NRCS bring that back:
 - Unable to influence at our level as these are not treating conservation concerns this would have to be authorized in a new Farm Bill; presently fencing can be used to keep livestock out of sensitive area not to exclude conflict with wildlife

- Subsurface drainage: Handling excess water on agricultural operations, as seen with more local, heavy rainfall events
 - Working with engineering team to expand delivery of these practices
- Soil Carbon amendment: adding compost or even biochar to the landscape
 - More interest in this offering, a relatively new practice for the agency
- Support for Technical Service Providers (TSPs): many forestry providers, not enough agricultural TSPs, how do we expand delivery in pest management, nutrient management, drainage/water management. Trying to attract more service providers into N.H. to support the needs
- Flexibility for streambank erosion designs: Trying to find other solutions that aren't entirely rock, or entirely bioengineering
- Heather Grybas, State Geographical Information System Specialist, NRCS:
 - Looking to invest in geospatial assets critical to conservation planning
 - 3D Hydrography Program (3DHP): newer program to complete remap hydrography data using lidar data
 - N.H. Dept. of Environmental Services approached N.H. NRCS last year with a proposal to collaborate on funding to procure funding for 3DHP mapping
 - Additional partners are welcome to reach out to Don Keirstead if interested in contributing to funds
- Chad Cochran, State Agronomist, NRCS:
 - Soil testing activities: critically important to many other practices
 - Required for certain practices but previously no function to help offset the costs of soil testing through our programs
 - Flexibility was found to provide basic soil testing. Can now use CEMA for Soil health Testing (216); and Soil and Source Testing for Nutrient Management (217)
 - Waste Storage facilities and Nutrient management practices were popular last year, these are practices that require soil testing, but other practices requiring testing: seeding or doing crop rotation
 - Can also now use for higher resolution soil testing; instead of 1-2 samples on a large field, can use GIS data to break fields up into 2-acre subfields and test independently
 - Allows more accurate application with less waste and saved money; this helps bring this technology to the Northeast
- Don Keirstead - New practice for NRCS:
 - Virtual fencing practice: Uses GPS collars on livestock that provide audible tone when they get near a virtual fence. This can replace physical fencing and can be moved in your field very easily.
 - Can be used under Prescribed Grazing Scenarios (528) and Fence Scenarios (382)
 - Can significantly help reduce the record keeping burden for grazing practices
 - Better solution for difficult locations where physical fencing is not feasible
- Katherine Coverdale, Xerces Society Partner, NRCS:
 - Integrated Pest Management: Utilizing prevention, avoidance, monitoring and suppression tools to reduce pesticide use.
 - Weather stations and trapping programs has made a significant difference for our producers
 - Development surrounding mating disruptions: using non-pesticide pheromones to confuse male insects during mating time reduces pest population and therefore pest pressure leading to less pesticide application. In some cases, this has eliminated the need for pesticide application. This is anticipated to be offered in FY 2026.

State Conservation Engineering Updates:

Brian Eisenmann, Assistant State Conservation Engineer, NRCS, N.H.:

- **Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program:**
 - Two storms over the past two years have resulted in five towns requesting assistance under the program: Gorham, Bartlett, Hearts Location, Lancaster, and Dalton
 - Unfortunately, Hearts Location, Lancaster and Dalton did not meet the qualification requirements.
 - Gorham and Bartlett did qualify
 - Gorham sites from Dec.2023 storm completed as of last fall
 - Bartlett is ongoing, design completed, and it is in permitting, hopeful completion this fall

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Updates:

Matt Brown, State Conservation Engineer, for Jessica Rock, State RCPP Coordinator

- Filling in for Jess Rock during this meeting
 - This project is for streambank stabilization near a cultural resource that involves complex engineering.
 - Project 2361 is implementing the first Type II agreement. Type II agreements allow for:
 - The Partner to hold the agreement for the construction work
 - Pay at cost for work implemented
 - This is the first one in New England
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USDA Agency Updates:

Farm Service Agency (FSA):

Marilyn Milne, Deputy State Executive Director, FSA: ([link to video](#))

- Conservation Reserve Program Update: There are three buckets: General CRP, Continuous CRP and CRP Grasslands
 - June 6 deadline for General CRP and Continuous CRP
 - Grassland signup to be determined based on remaining funding
- Annual Acreage and Production Report: Also known as non-insured crop disaster assistance program (NAP). Every July 15th, producers asked for eligibility purposes for several of our programs to report what they have planted on their farms and report their prior year's production.
 - July 15 deadline
- Emergency Commodity Assistance Program (ECAP): Provides relief for impacts from increased inputs, costs and falling commodity prices; specific to the 2024 crop year.
 - Aug 15 deadline
- Supplemental Disaster Programs: On May 12th, Secretary Rollins announced the much-anticipated supplemental disaster programs; will be rolling out over the late spring early summer season. The initial announcement included a tentative timeline for how that program will roll out.
- County committee elections upcoming June 16 – Aug. 1st
- FSA Staff appointments Nationally:
 - Just over 30 state executive directors announced across the country May 27th
 - New Hampshire is still waiting for an appointee to fill FSA State Executive Director position
- Deferred Secretarial Disaster Declarations:

- Regarding potential impacts to crops due to weather, a January extreme cold event saw some potential losses in the southern part of the state to peach crop. This will allow us to go through the season into harvest and see if there was an impact to production and give us a bookmark to the disaster implementation if we need it.
- Also tracking the excessive moisture that we've seen throughout the month of May.
- Drought status: Largely resolved in N.H. starting to lean toward excessively wet.

Rural Development Agency (RD):

Patrick Suprunowicz, Director of USDA, RD for Vermont and N.H.: ([link to video](#))

- Appoint May 5th, brief biography provided.
 - Getting spooled up in his new role.
 - Rural Energy for America Program (REAP): April 1 – June 30 closed to new applications to catch up. Program anticipated to be available in the 4th Quarter at pre-IRA levels of 25% match, \$250k max for energy efficiency initiatives and \$500k max for renewable energy systems.
 - No update on programs that will be cut yet.
 - Value Added Producer Grants: Still available, still popular with producers looking to expand their markets. Program \$75k max planning grant, \$250k max working capital grant
 - Reminder of Sec. Rollins April 4th announcement to protect National forest
 - Timber Production Expansion Guaranteed Loan Program: empowers timber producers to expand and diversify their businesses, can now support new timber technologies like mass timber in our public buildings in our schools.
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Congressional Delegation Updates:

Office of Senator Jeanne Shaheen:

Elizabeth McKenna, Special Assistant for Policy and Projects for Sen. Shaheen ([link to video](#))

- Sen. Shaheen now ranking Democrat on Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee
- Working closely with Sec. Rollins on paused programing
- Reintroduced SNOTEL Northeast to bring snow survey to New Hampshire and the Northeast
- Introduced Connecticut River Watershed Partnership Act.

Office of Senator Maggie Hassan:

Erin Cotton, Senior Assistant for Policy and Projects for Sen. Hassan's Office

- Farm Bill still being negotiated
- Appropriations Process Priorities
 - Funding the land and Water Conservation Fund and supporting
 - Supporting SNOTEL Northeast

Local Working Group Updates:

Ian Hanley, Executive Director, N.H. State Conservation Commission ([link to video](#))

- Facilitates the County Conservation Committees
- Local Working Group meetings exit report
 - Meeting standardized this year. Farm Bill still being negotiated

- Consisted of eight separate meeting comprising all ten counties. Merrimack and Hillsborough and Cheshire and Sullivan Counties had combined meetings.
 - Polled attendees to prioritize 40 identified resource concerns.
 - Most counties identified Farm Viability and Soil Health as among their top three priorities and Land conservation/preservation was the next most pressing concern.
 - This was followed by Loss of biodiversity, Water Quality and Wetland Conservation and Management
 - Feedback about NRCS:
 - Staffing is positive
 - Engineering backlog is causing delays
 - More availability for energy TSPs and energy audits requested
 - Request to reduce intake paperwork as barriers to service
 - Need to address duplicate practices and continue to fund practices over time
 - Incremental payments to address financial limitations for beginner farmers
 - Possibility of funding for ongoing maintenance, revaluation of lifespan of projects
 - More single practice contracts: Is there a minimum size that would be acceptable for a single practice?
 - Biological diversity should be ranked higher in scoring
 - Request for NRCS to do a better job of communicating with the districts on what they do with the working group information; requests on how this input shapes their actions
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Partner Updates:

U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Updates:

Stacy Lemieux, Natural Resources Staff Officer, U.S. Forest Service, White Mountain National Forest ([link to video](#))

- White Mountain National Forest is currently down 22 staff members right now; assessing impacts of those losses'
- Offering opportunities for lateral moves and downgrades to fill roles, mostly at national forest levels to support timber harvest, sustainable recreation and fire mitigation for USFS.
- Administration has issued guidance to increase harvest over the next several years and streamline National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) processes and other analysis tools. Currently working on strategies for White Mountain National Forests that will move in that direction and within anticipated staffing levels.
- Continuing infrastructure repairs from past storms
- Assessing recreational management for the summer and how they can maintain sites in an open status with reduced staffing

Open floor period:

- Visit this link to view the open floor Question and comment period: [link to video](#)