

USDA State Technical Advisory Committee Meeting
June 18, 2025
OSU Veterinary Med Auditorium, Stillwater, OK

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Jeanne Jasper, State Conservationist for NRCS Oklahoma:

Called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. and thanked everyone for coming.

- Mention of proposed NRCS fiscal year 2026 budget
- April was the 90-year anniversary of Black Sunday and the establishment of the Soil Conservation Service. Celebrations were held to reflect on all that has been accomplished in 90 years. Still more work to do.
- Subcommittee slide presented NRCS contacts. Jeanne emphasized the responsibility of the partner to reach out to those contacts if a subcommittee meeting was to discuss a topic of interest.
- Discussed changes in State Leadership Team; introductions were made
- Discussed changes in Oklahoma Team boundaries
- National level changes-brief overview of Chief's Office
- Lost over 50 Oklahoma NRCS employees over the last 6 months

Congressional Delegations Update

Steve Carson, Field Representative from Senator James Lankford's office:

Explained that the new Farm Bill might be signed by October. There were hold ups under Democratic administration and then the Farm Bill started from ground zero with Republicans in the house. Key issues being discussed at this time delaying the process include agreeing upon "green energy" and ethanol emissions. Feed yards being much of that target and also commodity support prices being too low. Reminder that there are a lot of rumors under the new administration and to be wary of that. If it is something concerning, probe into where the information is actually coming from to determine if it is a reliable source.

Emma Alexander, Field Representative from Senator Markwayne Mullin's office:

Markwayne has been concentrating on reconciliation of the "one big beautiful bill". July 4th is the target date for this completion. The senate is scrubbing the bill line by line.

NRCS Reports and Programs Update

Karla Stephens, Assistant State Conservationist-Programs:

Brief introduction and career background

Slide presentation covering

Review of 2025 EQIP funding levels and current obligation status

Explanation of the allocation process from NHQ and how States must allocate

Recent information from NHQ stating that for the remainder of FY25, NRCS would only obligate financial assistance contracts with farm bill funds.

FY26 Program sign-up deadlines - Explanation of the applications process and that each state must set application cutoff dates for each fiscal year in order for field office staff to assess and rank. FY24 this was set on November 1st for all programs, not just EQIP. NRCS employees felt that this worked well. **A proposal to set all of the program sign-up deadlines in the first week of November 2025 was made. The audience was asked for feedback – no responses given.**

Ranking Criteria – described key components and locally led process for Team priority resource concerns for funding.

Source Water Protection Priority Areas and funding 90% cost-share rate.

ACT NOW – The State Conservationist makes the final determination about practices and thresholds in consultation with the State Tech Committee. It's a process for contracting and not additional funding. Practices are targeted that can get planned and contracted quickly.

FY 25 Act Now practices

- Soil Health- cover crops, no-till, crop rotation, nutrient management
- Grass planting- introduced and native
- High Tunnels

Proposing to keep these practices again for Act Now in 2026

Trey Lam with the Oklahoma Conservation Commission

Trey asked if brush management could be added to ACT Now for FY 26. Caleb Stone and Karla Stephens mentioned that it has not been added due to time required to plan prescribed burns, build fuel loads if needed, and get cultural resources cleared for mechanical removal. The suggestion will be considered by the state conservationist.

Funding levels for State Payment Rates

The State Conservationist, with input from the State Technical Committee, set payment rates at the lowest level that still allows the adoption of the practice.

Oklahoma current payment rates are set at the maximum allowable: 75 % regular; 90% historically underserved.

The audience was asked for feedback on this proposal.

Jeanne Jasper gave a further explanation about payment rates and different percentages of funding that could be set. Higher cost-share rates get more participation from clients with less out-of-pocket expenses. Lower share rates require more out of pocket expenses from the producer. When program funding is reduced, lower rates enable more producers to receive funds. What is more productive - getting people in the door, helping more producers financially by setting a lower cost-share rate or setting a higher cost-share rate to be able to compensate producers with less out of pocket expense on their part?

Trey Lam with the Oklahoma Conservation Commission mentioned it was difficult to determine the “sweet spot” of being able to adequately financially assist as many producers as possible without their out-of-pocket expense deterring them from participation and ultimately applying conservation practices.

Leah Lowe with the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife mentioned that brush management should be kept at a higher pay rate.

The discussions and suggestions will be taken into consideration by the State Conservationist.

STAC/Local Work Groups

Explanation of the roles of these groups to consult with the State Conservationist was given.

Payment Rate Schedules

Explanation of the background information that goes into how the payment is set for states. Oklahoma works with Texas. Caleb Stone, Acting State Resource Specialist, explained that the dollar amounts are hidden and they don't see the actual dollar amounts of practices until the cost-list comes out. The state staff only provide what is required to do the practice. Economists provide the dollar figure to each component of the practice.

Farm Bill 2025 CSP funding

Review of 2025 EQIP funding levels are currently underway.

Jimmy Emmons, NRCS Assistant Chief - Requested discussion of barriers to CSP applications and/or contracts. A group discussion about enhancement activities changing over the years, have become more difficult to meet many of the requirements, and some producers are not willing to do. General consensus is that CART is too complicated and time consuming to assess and rank applications. Producers future plans of crop rotations "locks them in" and they don't feel that they have the flexibility to adjust crops according to weather conditions or commodity prices.

ACEP- Agricultural Conservation Easement Programs

Brief description of programs that are a part of ACEP: Wetland Restoration Easements (WRE), Agriculture Land Easements (ALE), Healthy Forest Reserve Program (HFRP), Emergency Floodplain Protection (FPE)

WRE – An overview of 2025 funding and categories of eligible land types was given. The Wetland Restoration Criteria and Guidelines were provided as a handout during the meeting sign-in and the audience was reminded that the criteria and guideline packet would be sent via email to STAC meeting attendees. Subcommittees were encouraged and attendees were reminded to reach out to the NRCS contacts listed for more discussion.

WRE Proposal for 2026 priorities presented:

Playa Lakes JV

Neosho Bottoms

Adjacent to existing WRP/WRE

Adjacent to USFW National refuge

Adjacent to ODWC State Wildlife Management Area

The audience was asked for feedback – no responses given.

Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) for 2026

Recommendation of 80% of appraised fair market value with \$3500, based upon past appraisal. There are difficulties in setting a cap too high when reserving approved projects with NHQ.

Discussion led by John Hendrix, USFW, concerning Neosho Bottoms. Could those rates be set differently since most of the bottoms are pecan orchards with a higher value? **Melanie Oliver, NRCS Easement Manager**, discussed appraisals. **Amy Hagerman, OSU Department of Ag Economics** mentioned that an OSU Fact Sheet was available that broke down 8 regions in the state: \$4600 in one area down to \$1300 in another area in the state. We could potentially get some justification for GARCs using this document.

The audience was asked for feedback with much discussion held. There were options that Melanie Oliver can discuss in more detail in a smaller group setting. A subcommittee meeting will be held to discuss options prior to FY 2026 GARCs being submitted to NHQ.

The discussions and suggestions will be taken into consideration by the State Conservationist.

ALE - Brief overview of program objectives-protects working ag lands from urban sprawl, etc. and that landowners work with Sponsors such as The Nature Conservancy or Texas Ag Land Trust. Overview of 2025 funding and request for additional funds. The audience was informed that Tiffany Nelson, who assists with ALE is their point of contact.

Land eligibility and easement rates were reviewed.

Priority areas for Grasslands of Special Environmental Significance (GSS) were discussed.

GSS proposals for 2026 – maps provided on slide

Red Hills – Northwest Oklahoma

Flint Hills – Portions of Osage and Kay Counties

The audience was asked for feedback – no responses given.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program – A brief overview of program objectives and collaboration with project partners to implement common goals was shared. Audience was reminded that Tiffany Nelson is the RCPP Coordinator, and the program is making progress with implementation of one project. A tentatively approved \$21 million InterTribal Buffalo Council project is moving forward, and Oklahoma is the lead state. Jeanne Jasper informed the audience that there would be no RCPP signup in 2025 and we hope to have one early in 2026.

Technical Updates

Caleb Stone – Acting State Resource Specialist

Discussed the source water protection areas which have been the same since 2023. These areas have been selected to target specific issues with water quality and higher funding rates. CART (Conservation Assessment and Ranking Tool) assessments use geospatial data to pull the watershed and soils data for an application. Each conservation practice has point values associated with how well that practice addresses a resource concern. Those points are adjusted within CART based on the geospatial and soils data to prioritize the highest conservation benefit.

Question from Trey Lam, Oklahoma Conservation Commission concerning ranking questions. How do producers know what to do to have a better probability of being selected for funding? Jeanne Jasper's response – NRCS considers the producers concerns and goals. That is what a conservation plan and potential contract are built upon. NRCS employees cannot give recommendations on how to rank higher. A local relationship and communication during planning process is what creates a successful outcome.

Further general discussion among the group regarding CART.

FSA Agency Report

Kim Haines, Conservation Chief

Talked about approved programs and brief information given on slides. Update CRP cost list for 2025. Watering Facilities for cost share (well, pumps, etc.). Important dates for continuous signup 63 periods. General CRP Signup 64 dates provided. Impacts of Grazing. Oklahoma is not participating in that at the moment. Discussed Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) – helps natural disasters. Flood, tornado, fires, drought – 15.3 million dollars used. Discussed numbers. Discussed Disaster Designation Summary. Emergency loans. Disaster Designation discussed. First time since 2019 we don't have any drought areas in Oklahoma! Discussed rainfall from Mesonet. Zane Fleming gave information on the rate cap about Oklahoma and nationwide.

CRP SAFE opportunities – open now- working in batches. Second round for continuous batching...no end to that yet. Playa states...sign up? More restrictive. Look into haying and where it can and cannot be done.

Partner Reports

Jeff Tibbits, Wetland Coordinator, Oklahoma Conservation Commission

Discussed OCC Wetland Implementation Programs. Implementation is a recent development. Technical aspect – existed for a very long time. Implementation began in 2023 in between partners. Diversified approach for delivering products. Funding to habitat work on the ground with landowners. Shifting from program building to implementation. 20,000 acres for prescribed fires in Oklahoma, outreach with Playa Lake Joint Venture. New and existing positions are provided. Fact Check, Pull our resources. Call out for collaborations! Partnership is growing. Locally Led.

Travis Jones – Noble Research Institute

Developing educational products for farmers and ranchers. Worked with OCC to provide education for watersheds and grazing course for 2025. The course in Leedey was very successful. Working with livestock producers course, did 4 with 2 virtual. Share knowledge with new generation. Received a grant to provide education tailored to Flint Hills grazing operations..

Additional Open Reports and Discussion

American Bird Conservancy mentioned specifically the NRCS staff reduction and asked how to help spend money. How can they help NRCS and partnership organizations? Help us Help You.

USFWS – John Hendrix – Their programs are yet to be funded. Never been this late. \$400,000 across the state doing different projects. Agreement with OCC – 184 landowners met – prescribed fire – and assisting with some cost-share, have another \$500,000 to spend on this project in the future.

Oklahoma Department of Food and Forestry - Meriruth Sellers discussed how amazing NRCS programs are. Hoop houses have been a huge success and thanked NRCS.

Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation - Joshua Luft – 124 applications for Oklahoma Land Access Program (OLAP), highest number ever. OLAP started out through farm bill funding and worked with about 80 landowners. No Farm Bill is making things difficult. Partnership discussed again.

Oklahoma Conservation Commission - Trey Lam – Water well drilling date has been extended to the end of July for the emergency drought program. Six million a year for woody species control in water restoration program. Training and Grants with fire departments. More interest in cedars and woody species than there has ever been. Training on how to properly maintain and repair country roads to prevent erosion. Collaborated with Chickasha Nation to establish an Urban Center facility in Ardmore to focus on small farm management.

OSU Fire Ecology – John Weir – Tuesday, June 24th is a field day to look at the impact of wildfires that occurred in Stillwater and surrounding areas. More information is on the OSU Natural Resources Facebook page.

Texas Ag Land Trust - Colin Walden – Looks forward to working with us on ALE. Hoping to get more money.

OSU Extension Service – Jason Warren - Lots of turnover in county offices. Encourage young people to go to local extension offices to build those local relationships.

NRCS Assistant Chief - Jimmy Emmons - Lots of changes. The big question is how do we deal with Reduction in Force and streamline programs. How can we do better with such a large amount of paperwork? One of the chief's focuses is staff being in the field with producers. Relationships with farmers are very important. Looking forward to getting back to DC, and excited to share information down the road about the CSP streamlining process. Another focus of the administration is technology and innovation. Mentioned using AI to assist as staff is reduced.

Open discussion ended at approximately 10:30 am. Jeanne Jasper concluded the meeting and thanked all for coming.