

Tennessee State Technical Advisory Committee Meeting

(IN PERSON)

August 12, 2025

Members and Guest Present:

Trevor Hunt, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Sheldon Hightower, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Garret Morris, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Linda Ortiz, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Sam Marshall, Tennessee Department of Agriculture

Sarah Smith State, Farm Service Agency

Clint Borum, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency

Brad Miller, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency

Paul Schumacher, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Jeff Powelson, Central Hardwoods

Tommy Whaley, Tennessee Association of Utility Districts

George Clay, Tennessee Department of Agriculture

Sougata Bandton, Tennessee State University

Felix Ogunmoken, Tennessee State University

Andrew Quintana, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Robby Cogburn, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Dustin Boles, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Levi Morgan, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Garrett McFall, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Nathan Hicklin, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Jayne Casey, Rural Development

Patrick Jaynes, Rural Development

Sarah Smith, Farm Service Agency

Arthur Hawkins, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Charles Hord, Tennessee Cattleman Association

Greg Pak, Tennessee Forest Association
Shane Harrison, Tennessee Division of Forestry
Emily Stefanick, Panther Creek Forestry
Chase Hulan, Tennessee Wildlife Federation
Mike Taliento, Producer in Montgomery County
Kaela Wallen, Cumberland River Compact
Suping Zhou, Tennessee State University
Angela Warden, Technical Service Provider
Richard Simmons, Producer
Katrina Seaman, Tennessee State University
Kristin Hanrathy, Private land
Adam Daugherty, Natural Resources Conservation Service
Forbes Walker, University of Tennessee Extension
Trent Cash, Producer

Welcome – Trevor Hunt ASTC- Partnerships

Good morning. Thank you all for being on the call this morning. Today's meeting will be recorded.

- We will follow the agenda as presented, next we'll have opening remarks from State Conservationist, Sheldon Hightower.

Opening Remarks – Sheldon Hightower - State Conservationist

- Focus on locally lead concepts. How to streamline our programs and program delivery to our customers.
- 224 active employees in Tennessee. 13 interns in our Pathway and 1890 program.
- Priority to expand Natural Resources Conservation Service programs to enhance farm productivity to all farmers no matter the size large or small.
- Disaster recovery is a priority of the agency to help build and sustain any areas that have been affected by a natural disaster.
- Partnerships are important to getting agriculture efforts on the ground for the state of Tennessee to sustain productivity.

Key Priorities

- **Enhancing farm productivity** while protecting our natural resources through effective conservation solutions.
- **Expanding program accessibility to ensure that all farmers**—regardless of operation size or background—get the support they need.
- **Strengthening partnerships** with conservation districts, state agencies, and local leaders to drive results for Tennessee agriculture.
- **Supporting producers in disaster recovery** to help them rebuild and sustain their operations.

Tennessee State Technical Committee

- I'm excited about what the conversations are going to lead to, because what we want to do is make things better for our producers. We cannot do this without the help from the folks in this room. We want to take the opportunity as we meet in person to make things better for 2026.

Farm Bill Programs

- Our focus over these past few months has been on the delivery and implementation of our conservation programs to producers in Tennessee.
- As of July 17, 2025, the Farm Bill conservation payments totaling nearly \$51 million.
- 80% obligated Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) We requested additional \$19 million dollars of funds from our National Office.
- The Conservation Stewardship Program totals \$25 million obligated funds. Up from \$4 million in previous years (2018 vs current). We received an additional \$11.5 million from our National Office.
- Agriculture Conservation Easement Program wet land and wildlife habitat 7 applications totaling \$5 million dollars in funding. Regional Conservation Partnership Program \$1.8 million.
- Watershed operation with Acting State Engineer Paul has eight projects for about \$8 million across Tennessee to address flood control and drinking water.
- Disaster recovery from hurricane Helene \$43 million in efforts so far. Through the Emergency Watershed Program. The team is working with 11 sponsors over 190 sites.

NRCS Programs Update Garrett Morris – ASTC- Programs

Farm Bill Programs

- I would like to revisit the financial assistance allocation provided to the Tennessee Natural Resources Conservation Service and made in fiscal year 2025. This is all with the intention of providing some information that can fuel the recommendations of the State Technical Committee for Mr. Hightower as we move through the rest of the fiscal year and prepare for FY 26 and beyond.
- The original \$138.8M put Tennessee over 10% higher than what was obligated during FY 2024.
- Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funding actions are still under review or paused.

- We want to keep in mind that the information provided today can be used by NRCS and the State Technical Committee to help steer some decision making and your recommendations to the State Conservationist on how we handle programs and other items throughout the rest of the year and next year.
- With \$30M in Farm Bill preapprovals, we can address nearly 18% of the demand. I will say that the pools with the highest demand this year are in the areas of forest management plans and high tunnels. We have a significant amount of demand for our socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers, beginning farmers and ranchers, and wildlife.
- If framing thoughts for next year and subsequent years, I think additional funding directed towards those pools would likely be a benefit. Also, as Mr. Hightower said, additional funds have been requested by Tennessee from the National Headquarters.
- We have offered additional program signups for hurricane Helene in East Tennessee, which includes the following counties: Carter, Claiborne, Grainger, Green, Hamlin, Hancock, Hawkins, Jefferson, Johnson, Sevier, Sullivan, Unicorn, and Washington.

Financial Assistance Payments

- \$54.4 Million – Financial Assistance Payments Made During Fiscal Year 2025.
- 25% increase in TN NRCS financial footprint (*FY2024 to FY2025*).

ACEP Update

- \$5.9 Million initial allocation for FY2025 (Farm Bill funding).
- Applications for FY25:
 - WRE – 11
 - ALE – 1
 - approximately \$1 million will be spent on agreements.
 - not all applications will move forward.

NRCS Contract Obligation Trends

- The State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) can also recommend state and national program policy to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) State Conservationist, based on resource data. Refer to the trend's slides.
 - **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)** – loss of \$1.4M from 2020 to 2021; loss of \$4.6M from 2021 to 2022; increase of \$14M in 2023; increase of \$53M in 2024.
 - **Conservation Stewardship Program CSP** – Increase each FY of \$2M – \$6M.
 - **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)** – an average of ~\$800K annually; Tennessee has been included as a partner state for REGIONAL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP (RCPP) projects until FY2024; without Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) budgeted amounts still on track to obligate greater than the average.
- Looking at the trends/patterns for these programs, what would the committee like to see changed? What opportunities are seen?

- Have targets been met during Fiscal Year 2025? Refer to the slide with targets listed.



Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

- ☐ dedicate funds toward Source Water Protection (required by the Food Security Act of 1985) **YES**
- ☐ National Water Quality Initiative (required by the 2018 Farm Bill) **YES**
- ☐ MRBI (explicitly for LCI) **YES**
- ☐ WLFW Golden Winged Warbler (explicitly for LCI) **YES**
- ☐ WLFW Northern Bobwhite Quail Pilot (explicitly for LCI) **YES**
- ☐ Joint Chief's Landscape Restoration Initiative (explicitly for LCI) **YES**
- ☐ 15-20% to assist Beginning Farmers and Ranchers **YES**
- ☐ 15-20% to assist Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers **YES**
- ☐ 50% to target livestock-related conservation practices **YES**
- ☐ 10% to target wildlife-related conservation practices **YES**
- ☐ use ACT NOW **YES**
- ☐ budget at least \$200,000 or 5%, whichever is greater, for Conservation Incentive Contracts **YES**
- ☐ use StrikeForce **YES**
- ☐ prioritize Urban agriculture **YES**
- ☐ offer High Tunnel System opportunities **YES**
- ☐ On-Farm Energy **YES**
- ☐ Organic Initiative/ Organic Transition Initiative **YES**
- ☐ budget funds to respond to disaster emergencies **YES**
- ☐ offer Conservation Initiative Grant funding, not required **NO**

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

- ☐ 15-20% to assist Beginning Farmers and Ranchers **22%**
- ☐ 15-20% to assist Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers **8%**
- ☐ budget a minimum of \$200,000 for Organic **\$306,650.80**
- ☐ use 40% of allocation for CSP Renewals **31%**
- ☐ use 60% of allocation for CSP Classic **69%**

TN State Technical Advisory Committee Input (via 2024 survey averages)

- ☐ 16% to target wildlife-related conservation practices
- ☐ 19% to target Soil Health
- ☐ 7% to target High Tunnel System opportunities
- ☐ 8% to target Urban agriculture
- ☐ 19% to target Local Working Group resource concerns **53%**
- ☐ 16% to target NIPF
- ☐ 8% to target priorities other than those listed above
- ☐ 43% of CSP allocation toward Classic AgLand **67%**
- ☐ 30% of CSP allocation toward Classic NIPF **32%**
- ☐ 27% of CSP allocation toward priorities other than those listed above

- The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is a good program to walk through a flex budget due to a smaller project structure (set up by REGIONAL CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP (RCPP) partners). Budget includes the key points listed:
- **BUDGET** at start of Fiscal Year (FY).
- **BUDGET (% of allocation)** for each pool or category expressed as a percentage of the total allocation.
- **BUDGET (Inflation Reduction Act IRA funds rescinded)** for those funds after being swept.
- **BUDGET FLEX** for any changes that occur after the start of the Fiscal Year, due to:
 - The Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) partner wanted to move funds between priorities.
 - Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) or Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds moved to reach statutory amounts for different priorities.
 - Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) or Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funds moved to address program targets set by National Head Quarters (NHQ).
 - Additional funds requested and received from National Head Quarters (NHQ).
 - Funds swept by National Head Quarters (NHQ).
 - Funds moved between pools (increased or decreased) to address the demand.

Local Working Group (LWG)

- This is a chance for the public to weigh in again, like Mr. Hightower said, our conservation efforts and our program efforts are locally led. We want feedback on what practices that NRCS should be cost sharing on and our payment rates. How to restructure or redirect our budget or allocation in different ways, or what kind of changes or recommendations that are made for our practice standards and how we implement our practices, are things taken into consideration. Our local working groups can bring a lot of those items to the attention of the State Technical Committee.

Linda Ortiz - State Resource Conservationist

- The primary role of the State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) members is to support the Tennessee Natural Resources Conservation Service by providing input on conservation priorities and criteria for natural resources conservation activities and programs, including application and funding criteria, recommended practices, and program payment percentages. The feedback and recommendations are directed to the State Conservationist for review and consideration.
- The top five resource concerns for Tennessee and for the four NRCS administrative areas are Plant productivity and health, Sheet and rill erosion, Classic gully erosion, Terrestrial habitat for wildlife and invertebrates, and Sediment from erosion sources. These top Resource Concerns are based on identified priorities by the Local Working Groups for each county, by customers and by our employees during field visits and farm assessments.
- The upcoming FY26 new and revised ecological science conservation practices and three initiatives that focus on water quality, Mississippi River Basin Initiative (MRBI), National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) and Source Water Protection Areas.
- Please welcome the chair of the Wildlife, Forestry and Urban Sub-Committees. (Arthur Hawkins).

Overview of sub-committees that interact with the State Technical Committee

- Partner-Led.
- Grazing – currently an internal Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Team.

Forestry

- Greg Pate presented an update as a delegate of TN Forestry Association (Co-Chair).
- Shane Harrington (TN Department of Agriculture, Forestry Division) is also a Co-Chair.
- They have 18 members (state, Federal, NGOs, Forestry Consultants, Wildlife experts).
- The sub-committee became less active during COVID-19 but restarted this year. Two meetings have been held so far. Recent meetings have focused on reviewing National and State forestry practice standards (e.g. Forest Trails & Landings, Plantings).
- They have also established an outreach program ("Eliminating Barriers for Landowners") that is geared towards forestland owners and foresters. Priorities include:
- General awareness of NRCS programs and opportunities.
- Getting an accredited forester program.
- Identifying more vendors to carry out the forestry work (e.g. Timber Stand Improvement, Forestry Stand Improvement).

To join – reach out to:

- Greg Pate (TN Forestry Association)
- Shane Harrington (TN Department of Agriculture, Division of Forestry)

shane.harrington@tn.gov

- Candance Dinwiddie (TN Forestry Association)
- Garrett McFall (TN-NRCS) garrett.mcfall@usda.gov

Wildlife – To join – reach out to:

- Dustin Boles U.S. Fish & Wildlife (USFW) dustin_boles@fws.gov
- Brad Miller TN Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) brad.miller@tn.gov
- Robin Mayberry (TN-NRCS) robin.mayberry@usda.gov

Urban

- NOTE: There is an Urban Fund Pool with its own priorities and associated geospatial layers; however, urban producers are also eligible for other fund pools.
- Partners can initiate additional sub-committees – Reach out to Trevor.Hunt@usda.gov or Linda.Ortiz@usda.gov
- Each of them shared a little bit about the roles and responsibilities of the sub-committees and encouraged other State Technical Committee members to join their sub-committees, which increase their participation in these focus areas.

Sarah Smith – State Conservation Specialist- Farm Service Agency

Conservation Reserve Program CRP

- All Farm Service Agency (FSA) CRP signups have ended for the year.
- CRP Signup 63 Continuous- Tennessee had about 345 offers accepted which amounted to about 4,000 acres that will be enrolled.
- CRP Signup 64 General- We have 22 offers with about 344 total acres.
- CRP Signup 207 Grasslands- We had about 12 offers with about 200 acres total submitted. We are still waiting on the ranking for those.

Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) Helene

- We have allocated about 18.5 million dollars so far for help with cleaning up of agricultural land for Helene.
- Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) Spring Storms.
- There has been about 1.5 million in damage from flooding and tornados from spring storms that we plan to pay out.

**Sam Marshall - Tennessee Department of Agriculture Land and Water Stewardship Division
Tennessee Department of Agriculture (TDA) Agriculture Resources Conservation Fund ARCF:**

- ARCF collections are slightly up in FY 2025 (\$11.7 million) compared to FY 2024 (\$11.4 million)
- 1st round of SFY 2026 ARCF allocations have been made.
- Amendments and funding memos are being generated as I speak.
- About \$5,290,000 allocated (both District and non-District grants).
- Agricultural best management practices (AgBMPs) comprised the largest allocation category at just over \$3.7 million.

- Recurring charges were all allocated out of the 1st round – operational grants, per diems, and contribution agreement salaries.
- Total Agriculture Resources Conservation Fund (ARCF) allocated as of August 12th, 2025.

Tennessee Department of Agriculture (TDA) Grants:

- The Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2024 grant was delayed – it was received in May 2025.
- Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2025 grants are delayed, with Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimating that State awards will not be issued until the 1st quarter of FFY 2026 (fall of 2026).
- The Request for Proposals for Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 2026 will come out in September.

Tennessee Department of Agriculture (TDA) Gulf of Hypoxia Cover Crop Project (GHP):

- To date, approximately 9,346 acres have been treated.
- Over \$582,250 in incentives have been paid to 84 landowners.
- Gulf of Hypoxia Cover Crop Project (GHP) has resulted in the following estimated load reductions:
 - 38,287 lbs. of nitrogen.
 - 17,492 lbs. of phosphorus.
 - 8,222 tons of sediment.
- EPA has indicated that additional allocations are anticipated (\$1.2 million).

Tennessee Department of Agriculture (TDA) Tennessee Riparian Incentives Program (TRIP):

- Thanks to a contribution from Tennessee, Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC), the Tennessee Riparian Incentives Program (TRIP) program has been expanded state-wide.
- Previously available only through the Farm Service Agency's (FSA) Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), TDA is working to expand the program through Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).
- Provides a 1-time, \$3,000 / acre incentive ABOVE the “parent” program's incentives Conservation Reserve Program/Environmental Quality Incentives Program (CRP / EQIP), up to 5 acres. Projects greater than 5 acres will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Closing remarks- Trevor Hunt, Assistant State Conservationist – Partnerships

- I would encourage you all to participate in our state Urban Agriculture subcommittee meeting tomorrow 8/13/2025 if that is something of your interest. There will be both in person and virtual options for participation. Those links have been sent out, but if you need access to them, please feel free to e-mail me and I will provide you with that information.
- I'll allow us to adjourn if there's no further comments. The next State Technical Advisory Committee is scheduled for November 11, 2025, at 9:00 am. Thank you all for your participation.

State Technical Advisory Committee Meeting Questions from Attendees:

Name	Question
Felix Ogunmoken Tennessee State University Assistant Professor [question to Garrett Morris]	Are you also looking at the lateral subsurface flow of nutrients and pesticide transport into the Mississippi River?
Jeronimo Silva U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Biologist [question to Garrett Morris]	How do we increase the implementation of conservation practices that benefit/improve aquatic habitats? Note: only approx. 3-4 out of 20 most used products provide moderate to significant benefits to aquatic systems.
Adam Daugherty Soil Health Specialist [question to Sam Marshall, Dep of Ag, Administrator]	Do you have a target date or timeline for cover crop rotation?
Felix Ogunmoken Tennessee State University Assistant Professor [to panel]	What does regenerative agriculture mean to you and what is the goal?
Sougata Bardhan Associate Professor, TSU [to panel]	What do you do in your forested areas in terms of conservation?
Richard Simmons, self-employed [to panel]	How beneficial are farm visits and easements by someone who knows programs available?
Greg Pale, Tennessee Forest Association [to panel]	The forest practices the gentleman said he had completed, many without government help, why did he do this without government assistance?
Garrett Morris, ASTC Programs Natural Resources Conservation Service [to panel]	What hurdles can NRCS remove in our processes/ documents to help meet your goals?
Emily Stefanick, Panther Creek Forestry Conservation, Program Manager [to Tennessee Cattleman's Association]	Are there other watershed organizations that do similar work?