

USDA STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING

Neal Smith Federal Building - 210 Walnut Street, Room 693, Des Moines, Iowa
NRCS Hugh Hammond Bennett Conference Room/Microsoft Teams

September 18, 2025

1:00 P.M. – 3:00 P.M.

Minutes

Opening Comments – Jon Hubbert

- Welcome and call meeting to order.
- Introduction of attendees
 - Introduction of new member: Lisa Stark – Iowa Valley RC&D (IVRCD).
- Approval of minutes from June 12, 2025
 - No comments or corrections were noted by the committee.
 - Minutes from June 12, 2025, were approved as written.
- Review of Recommendations from previous meeting
 - EQIP Recommendation: Identify interested people to step into the role of Chair for the EQIP subcommittee.
 - No approval needed.
 - SWP Recommendation: Add one watershed for Osceola Rural Water System North which finished its plan this past year and have wells that are highly susceptible to agricultural runoff. This watershed is a total of 33,226 Acres and allows Iowa to remain under the 20% area limit.
 - Approved and added.
 - SWP Recommendation: Add Marty Braster as SWP subcommittee co-chair.
 - Approved and added.

Agency Updates – General

NRCS – Jon Hubbert

National Leadership Team Meeting Updates

- Chief Bettencourt's priorities.
 - Internet connectivity for all offices.
 - Iowa has 12 offices that have not been upgraded to Lumen. Any office not on Lumen by September 30 will be upgraded to StarLink.
 - Integrated Field Tools.
 - NRCS has 5 "trains" of tools to help workflow – further integration of these tools to ensure they are functional, not conflicting with other tools, and operating within the bandwidth available in the offices.
 - Process streamlining.
 - The Chief believes NRCS mission has become very wide, but not deep as it has started doing more things and collecting more ideas.
 - The Chief wants to provide a more narrow and deep focus for NRCS.
 - Looking more at what needs to be done from a statutory process and trimming processes that have led to our focus becoming wide and shallow.
 - Maximize and optimize work with partners.
 - Partners should be a "force multiplier" for conservation.
 - Beyond outreach to more "boots of the ground" conservation work and technical assistance
 - Giving credit where credit is due.
 - Giving credit to producers that are putting conservation practices on the land.

- Measuring benefits and looking at outcomes of the programs or the implementation of practices that are occurring.
- Precision Ag.
 - Modernizing NRCS and our innovations to work more closely with innovators in the agricultural world that are using precision ag and related tools.
- The political team that has been brought into NRCS has a strong production ag background.
- Chief Bettencourt wants to put the agency back in connection with the field more than in the past few years – working with producers, being on their land and helping them to understand conservation and implementing conservation.
- Chief Bettencourt also brought up the need for each state to have a strategic plan.
 - Iowa's previous strategic plan ended in 2024.
 - Need to focus on what is our goal in Iowa for putting conservation on the ground.
 - Will involve working with many stakeholders.
 - Jon will be looking to the STAC for feedback on our strategic plan and using feedback from local conservation work group strategic plans that have been developed over the last few years.

Other NRCS Updates

- Critical vacancy process
 - 4 critical vacancy positions were filled through this process – 2 were transfers from out of state and 2 were reassignments from in-state staff.
 - The 2 in-state reassignments created critical vacancies in the positions they left.
- Hiring freeze continues through October 15.
 - Current staff: 389.
 - The inability to fill critical positions is leading to some gaps in service to customers.
- Archaeology reviews are very backlogged and we are hearing about major service gaps from customers, contractors, and others. – currently have no archaeologist on staff.
 - We have gotten field assistance from archaeologists in Nebraska and Illinois, but the time they have available is limited.
 - We are in the final stages of developing an agreement with the University of Iowa, Office of the State Archaeologist.
 - Once this agreement is in place, it will help with the backlog of desktop review work.
- Engineering is another workload with major gaps in service.
 - Impacts staff down to the field offices and the ability to do design work on structural practices.
 - Iowa is continuing to do structural practices, but the work is delayed – some states have had to back out of doing structural practices as they don't have the staff to support it.
- Advisory budget allocation has been received.
 - This is not based on dollars that have already been committed, rather it is based on speculation.
 - We are not guaranteed the amount that is in the advisory allocation.
 - Dollars for EQIP, CSP, RCPP, and ACEP that are in the advisory allocation are relatively solid as they have been voted through with the reconciliation bill.
 - Amounts for these programs are above our normal Farm Bill allocation compared to previous years. Not as high as Farm Bill plus IRA in the recent past.
 - CRP and Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) were not part of the reconciliation bill and we continue to monitor their development.
 - CTA is the fund used for routine conservation planning, state cost share support, compliance, some watershed operations, and many other activities.
- *Johnson: will the archaeologist and engineering positions be transfers due the hiring freeze or are they open positions?*

- *Hubbert: We are unable to fill these positions though normal hiring due to the hiring freeze and we are unsure if another critical vacancy process will be opened. The hope would be to bring in new staff for these positions once the hiring freeze is lifted.*
- *Papanicolaou: can New Solutions be used for hiring?*
 - *Hubbert: we have an agreement with New Solutions and would utilize them, but due to the hiring freeze, and a related executive order, we cannot add any new positions.*

FSA Update – Curt Goettsch

- Hiring freeze is impacting FSA.
 - Currently the Polk County FSA office in Ankeny is only open on Wednesdays – due to not being able to fill open positions.
- FSA offices are getting ready for year-end and close out of the fiscal year.
- A limited number of CRP payments will be issued on October 2 – very small number of contracts that were part of the Re-enrollment and Extension (REX) process from 15+ years ago.
- Most CRP payments will be issued beginning on October 16.
- ARC county payments (41 counties in Iowa) will begin being issued on October 8 – mostly northern counties for crop year 24.
- Ongoing Disaster Programs: Supplemental Disaster Relief Program (SDRP) and Emergency Livestock Relief Program (ELRP) for flooding and wildfire.
 - ELRP assists producers that had to purchase supplemental feed for crop years 23 and 24 due to forage losses in crop years 23 and 24.
- Marketing Assistance Loans start to process as producers start harvesting.
- Karen Rawson is still the Acting State Executive Director - Iowa is 1 of 3 states that has not named a new permanent SED.
- *Carlson: How do farmers know when offices are open or closed?*
 - *Goettsch: currently only the Ankeny office is impacted and they put out media releases and email blasts to all customers attached to that service center.*
- *Stark – what are hours for Polk County. office?*
 - *Goettsch: 8:00am – 4:30p Wednesdays.*
 - *Hubbert: NRCS desk in the Polk County office is still open for regular business hours, Monday – Friday.*

Local Workgroup Feedback – Dien Judge

- Planners have started the process and meetings have begun occurring.
- Webster, Wright, Kossuth Counties have completed their planning process.
- Worth County has an upcoming local workgroup meeting.
- Dien will be reaching out to have a follow up meeting with NRCS as the Local Workgroup process progresses.

Technical Topics

Minimal Effect Tool Pilot Introduction – Julie McMichael (see attached PowerPoint)

- Minimal Effect background overview.
 - Food Security Act of 1985 – provision stating there must be a compliance portion to protect wetlands.
 - Producers come to NRCS wanting to do “something” (tile, terrace, something to fix something on their land).
 - They would sign an AD-1026 form with FSA requesting to do “something.”
 - If the “something” is deemed to impact a wetland, this tool could be run to determine if that wetland activity would have minimal effect on the area.
- A minimal effect procedure was brought to the STAC in 2019 – it was not finalized.
- A National Bulletin was published stating that a minimal effect procedure is necessary.
- Iowa Compliance team hosted the national pilot for minimal effect training in 2024.

- Working with the Prairie Pothole Region (Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa) to be as consistent as possible with procedures.
- Overview of the National Template-NRCS Minimal Effect Procedure and Decision Matrix IA Interim Document. *(attached)*
 - Items in red are Iowa-specific – the rest of the document is a national template.
 - A national template was created so there is a level of consistency within the states.
 - The minimal effect procedure will need to go to the Federal Register upon adoption for public comment
- Walkthrough of the minimal effect procedures.
 - The procedure looks at what happened to the wetland and was the action important – how wildlife, water storage and connectivity are impacted.
 - If a wetland is removed, farmed, tiled, etc., are there other wetlands to perform the same functions of that wetland in the area.
 - Proposing a 2-mile radius to be used as the area of consideration around the wetland.
- *Palmer: Can you explain the term minimal effect?*
 - *McMicheal: If you have a wetland, is it ok to do something or perform an action and will the action affect the area, wildlife, water quality, or flood storage? If the answer is no, it won't affect these things, then it is ok to perform the action. A label or exemption will be put on that area with the Food Security Act of minimal effect.*
 - *Hubbert: Minimal effect is not acres driven, its function driven – not the number of acres of the wetland, but to the functions and values of that wetland.*
- *Isenhart: How does the minimal effect procedure interact with pending changes to the definition of protected wetlands under the Clean Water Act?*
 - *Hubbert: The Clean Water Act is separate legislation than the Farm Bill wetland compliance requirement. Minimal effect is not part of the Clean Water Act, only part of the Farm Bill.*
- *Isenhart: When you're assessing the impacts, an area does not have to be considered a water of the United States to be impacted?*
 - *McMichael: Minimal effect is for compliance purposes only. The producer would have to go to the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to determine if the wetland is also a waters of the US wetland. We do let the producers know that they need to contact USACE and the paperwork states that this does not clear the producer except for USDA compliance purposes only.*
- *Barnhart: Would the 2-mile radius make it easier or harder to get something done?*
 - *Hubbert: it depends on what is in that 2-mile radius.*
 - *McMichael: Pros and cons of the area size are in the presentation (see PowerPoint attached). Deciding on a 2-mile radius was somewhat arbitrary, chosen to hopefully capture some wetlands and be defensible to a degree – It's not too small and not too big. Having a set radius allows for simplified tools – put a 2-mile buffer at the center point of the wetland and see what is captured.*
 - *McMichael: Looking at parameters, like the 2-mile radius, is one purpose of having this as an interim procedure for a year. Data can be collected and look at if this is a usable factor.*
- *Stark: Is the 2-mile radius based on other states in the prairie pothole region?*
 - *McMichael: Yes, North Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin are all using a 2-mile radius and it was chosen based on recommendations from their STACs. To be consistent with neighboring states, Iowa has chosen to start with a 2-mile radius.*
 - *McMichael: Louisiana is the only state using HUC 14, and it has already been sent to the Federal Register. It would take time to develop HUC 14 areas for Iowa to run in the tool, but his process was started in 2019, so some groundwork has already been completed. One advantage of using HUC 14 is that once the tool is run, it's done. With a 2-mile radius, you must run the calculations for every project site.*
- *Palmer: In terms of the 2-mile radius, if this is going to be the value of that wetland in comparison to other wetlands in the 2-mile radius, or is it going to be based on what does the loss of that wetland means to the wildlife and flora and fauna? Has mitigation been investigated?*

- *McMichael: Minimal effect is looking at the wetlands as a whole in the area – can the function remain if one goes away.*
- *McMichael: Regarding mitigation – Mitigation is when a farmer has a wetland that is not minimal effectible, but they want to do the “something”. Mitigation is a tool that can be used to have that discussion. Iowa has been piloting a separate interim mitigation tool for the past year with great results.*
- Discussion on how to proceed and if more discussion is needed for the STAC to understand the tool.
 - A separate meeting will be scheduled for STAC members who are interested in learning more details about the Minimal Effect Tool.
 - **This has been scheduled for October 1, 2025, from 10:00am – 12:00pm.** If you did not receive an Outlook invite, please reach out to Keiko at: keiko.sampson@usda.gov.
- Julie is asking for the STAC to provide comments on the Interim Minimal Effect Procedure by October 31, 2025.
- After this comment period, (pending review of State Technical Advisory Committee input and State Conservationist approval) the Compliance team will start using the tool on an interim basis for 1 year. Once that year is complete, Julie will bring results back to the STAC for approval.

National Mitigation Tool Pilot Update – Julie McMichael (see attached PowerPoint)

- Julie presented a pilot for the National Mitigation Tool to the STAC in September 2024.
- Reasons to consider use of the tool:
 - Farmer First approach.
 - Best interest of the customer.
 - Required to have a tool per policy.
- Tool creates consistency both within Iowa and Nationally.
- Summary of the Mitigation Procedure testing results.
- Conclusions:
 - Creates consistency within Iowa and nationally.
 - Provides better communication with customers.
- Julie proposes the adoption of the mitigation tool for use.
- *Johnson: There are some producers that have fens – how could they access this tool if they have a fen?*
 - *Hubbert: this tool would only be used if they are trying to eliminate or remove the fen and are trying to find ways to mitigate it.*
- *McClure: This tool would not be enacted when trying to add an oxbow? Restoration of silted oxbow?*
 - *McMichael: No, this is only in terms of compliance if doing something to mitigate for compliance purposes.*
- Meeting will be scheduled for more discussion (within 30 days) and will hold on this topic until after this meeting.
 - **This has been scheduled for October 1, 2025, from 1:00pm – 2:00pm.** If you did not receive an Outlook invite, please reach out to Keiko at: keiko.sampson@usda.gov.

Status of Farm Bill Programs

Programs Report – Sam Adams

- See report (attached with agenda).
- A list of acronyms is included with the Programs report.
- Sam provided an overview of the easement closing process.
- Batching dates: ACEP – October 31, EQIP, CSP, RCPP – October 10.
- Will be needing input from EQIP, CSP, and ACEP subcommittees on the changes for FY2026.
- *Stark: Have the 10 resource concerns been identified?*
 - *Adams: The 10 resource concerns will be going back to the traditional SWAPA (Soil, Water, Animals, Plants, Air) system.*
- *Aker: Any updates on payment scenarios?*

- *Adams: Looking to identify payment scenarios that are not being utilized and eliminate them, but no guidance has been given to the states yet.*
- *Hubbert: Likely more changes to payment scenarios in 2027.*
- *Johnson: Does the national office have a definition for regenerative ag?*
 - *Adams: Have not received an official definition in writing. Sometimes an official definition is not stated – small-scale agriculture is an example.*
 - *Hubbert: It does involve soil health and what we are putting in and taking out and making sure we're balancing the system. Looking at how we are focusing on long-term production and sustainability as opposed to just a production goal.*
- *Johnson: Will precision ag tools be part of regenerative ag?*
 - *Hubbert: Precision ag is also a priority for the agency and the Chief. It is possible that it will be folded into regenerative ag, but it won't be the only aspect of it. Precision ag might be a component of regenerative ag and a component of CSP enhancements.*
- *Palmer: What would be a good process for stakeholders or customers of a Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to provide suggestions for helping to define regenerative ag?*
 - *Hubbert: Not looking to define it and tell NHQ how to do it. But if you have thoughts and want to share those thoughts, please share them with Jon.*
 - *Adams: SWCDs are a great advocate to send ideas on behalf of.*
- *McClure: Is every state defining regenerative or will there be a single definition?*
 - *Hubbert: We will be told what we are working with for FY26 by NHQ, beyond that, we don't know. Likely that Iowa won't have a definition different from a national definition if one is given.*

Partnerships update – Scott Cagle

- *See report (attached with agenda).*
- *McClure: There is concern regarding CPA-52s being required for all Advancing Markets for Producers (AMP) programs prior to implementation of cover crops in the Farmers for Soil Health program. If this comes to fruition, it will eliminate any cover crops signups for the fall of 2025 because the form will not be filled out prior to cover crop planting this year.*
 - *Cagle: Partnership for Climate Smart Commodities, is now AMP. This is not an NRCS program, so we can't answer.*
 - *McClure: This is going to go through the NRCS planner and approval portal. Will follow up with Todd Sutphin.*
 - *Hubbert: The requirements may not be something we have control over, but we will work with AMP sponsors and agreement holders. The CPA-52 process is generally not a hard process – a few things will trigger a closer look, but it's easy to take existing cropland and add cover crops.*
 - *Palmer: Wouldn't it depend on if there is an extension of cover crop planning date? If it were extended until December 1, would that give enough time to fulfill the AMP agreements?*
 - *Hubbert: Date of cover crop seeding wouldn't make much difference. The AMP point of contact, Nicky Williams, can move through them quickly once received.*
 - *McClure: What is the value of the CPA-52 and cover crop on row crop land? You're not disturbing the soil any differently.*
 - *Hubbert: Correct, the soil isn't being disturbed differently but need to watch for places where new ground is breaking into production and cover crops could be a practice.*
 - *Adams: The CPA-52 is necessary because there is a federal action and NEPA is documented through the CPA-52.*
 - *Carlson: Will Nicky Williams do field visits if needed for the AMP CPA-52s?*
 - *Hubbert: NRCS only does a desk review and the local sponsor is required for anything beyond a desk review.*

CRP Report – Curt Goettsch

- *FSA has accepted 1.78 million acres into CRP this year.*

- <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/news-events/news/09-17-2025/usda-accepts-nearly-18-million-acres-2025-cons...>
- 810,000 acres in grassland CRP, 203,000 acres in general CRP, 789,000 acres in continuous CRP.
- Iowa accepted offers – not approved contracts:
 - Grassland: 484 acres from 10 accepted offers
 - Continuous: 118,226 acres – 103, 757 re-enrolled, 14, 470 new
 - General: 4916 acres from 299 accepted offers.
 - Total: 8954 offers for 123,626 acres accepted for enrollment.
 - Net loss of about 29,414 acres.
- Authority to have CRP signups ends on September 30 and will need to be reauthorized by lawmakers.
- Iowa leads nation in total contracts and total offers accepted for CRP.

Subcommittee Reports

CSP – Cynthia Farmer

- No recommendations were made by the subcommittee.
- Rubyana Neely provided the subcommittee a Programs update
 - All Program goals were met, even with the loss of IRA funding.
 - Funds were spread well across the categories this year.
 - Over 1000 applications were submitted for FY25 – only 318 are obligated or selected for funding.

EQIP – Nick Baumgarten

- See report
- **Recommendation: Approve Paige Frautschy as the new chair of the EQIP subcommittee**
 - **Jon approved Paige Frautschy as the new chair.**

ACEP-WRE – Kelsey Fleming

- See report
- **Recommendation: Utilize the Prioritization Tool for FY26 – provided the high selected projects collectively represent the four wetland classes in proportions consistent with the Iowa Wetland Restoration Criteria and Guidelines.**

ACEP-ALE – Sam Adams for Ryan Smith

- No recommendations were made by the subcommittee.
- Discussed capacity for ALE applications and the challenges of monitoring.
- Subcommittee discussed working through applications and making sure that those entities can meet the obligations of the ALE application because they are holding a conservation easement that has a lot of value.
- Moving ALEs to having surveys done due to the number of issues with ALE applications following common land use (CLU) boundaries that are not accurate.

CRP – Curt Goettsch

- Did not meet

SWP – Christina Murphy

- Did not meet

Urban Ag –Tim Palmer

- See report
- No recommendations were made by the subcommittee.
- Subcommittee discussion focused on nexus points to combine school lunches and community growing/production.
- *Isenhardt: Previously suggested engaging the Iowa Food Systems Coalition in the subcommittee, has there been any movement or contact?*
 - *Palmer: Will investigate that recommendation.*

Reports from Other Committee Members

- Dave Petty – Thank you to Nick Baumgarten for his leadership on the EQIP subcommittee.

Guest participation

- None

Closing Comments – Jon

- Thank you everyone for attending.
- An additional meeting will be scheduled for the 2 compliance technical topics presented today.

Future Meeting Dates

December 18, 2025

Attendance

In-Person

Jon Hubbert, NRCS
Dien Judge, CDI
Kelsey Fleming, IDNR
Sam Adams, NRCS
Will Myers, IDALS
Rubyana Neely, NRCS
Jessica Downey, NRCS

Julie McMichael, NRCS
Scott Cagle, NRCS
Keiko Sampson, NRCS
Susan Kozak, IDALS
Regan Davis, CDI
Jaia Fischer, NRCS
Patrick Chase, NRCS

Virtual

Curt Goettsch, FSA
Angela Barker, INSGA
Bruce Barnhart, LICA
Todd Bogenschutz, IDNR
Ben Lehman, Rodale Institute
Jeff Jensen, Trees Forever
Cameron Aker, Trout Unlimited
Marty Braster, Regional Rural Water Association
Sharyl Bruning, IFBF
Joe McClure, Iowa Soybean Association
Josh Divan, Pheasants Forever
Thanos Papanicolaou, NLAE
Mark Heckman, Iowa Renewable Fuels Association
Paige Frautschy, TNC
Joan Flecksing, Meskwaki Tribe
Dan Paulsen, NRCS
Oliver Lincoln, FWS
Heather Jobst, INHF
Tim Palmer, NACD
Catherine DeLong, ISU
Cora Fox, Ducks Unlimited
Shawn Richmond, IFBF
Sarah Carlson, PFI
Keegan Kult, Agricultural Drainage Management Coalition

Dave Petty, Iowa River Ranch
Wendy Johnson, Climate Land Leaders
Ashley Utt, Pathfinders RC&D
Chuck Isenhardt, Dubuque Area Land & Water Legacy
Cynthia Farmer, Center for Rural Affairs
Jeff Lucas, IAWA
Nick Baumgarten, IDNR