

Idaho State Technical Advisory Committee

February 10, 2026 @ 9:00 am – 12:00 pm (MST)

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Meeting notes:

- **Programs Updates and Funding Allocations:** Lori Kassib, Chelcey Larsen, Lindsay Markegard, and Tracie O'Neill provided a comprehensive update on Idaho's NRCS program accomplishments for the previous fiscal year, including funding allocations, contract numbers, and changes for fiscal year 2026, with emphasis on new priorities, application deadlines, and the impact of national directives on local program delivery.
 - **Fiscal Year 2025 Accomplishments:** Lori reported that Idaho contracted over \$43 million in Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) Farm Bill programs, with a breakdown of initiatives such as Joint Chiefs, Migratory Big Game, Sage Grouse, and the National Water Quality Initiative. The field processed 1,496 applications, obligating 522 contracts, and managed Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funds before an executive order paused further spending.
 - **Easement Programs Results:** Tracie confirmed that six easements were funded last year, with over \$8.5 million obligated, including successful allocation of IRA dollars and strong participation in migratory big game and state trails initiatives. The team expects to request additional funds for easements in the current year due to lower allocations.
 - **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) Project Overview:** Lori described current RCPP projects, highlighting a major partnership with the Southwest Idaho Forest Foundation for fuels reduction and forest management, and a habitat restoration project with the Nez Perce Tribe. The RCPP funding opportunity for 2026 has not yet been released, but participants were encouraged to prepare proposals in advance due to anticipated short submission windows.
 - **Application Deadlines and Policy Changes:** Chelcey explained that all programs, including easements, now share a nationally mandated application deadline of January 15th, with a second sign-up period for EQIP and CSP on April 24th if funds remain. The administration's priorities have led

to policy and procedural updates to ensure a farmer-first focus and greater clarity for customers.

- **EQIP and CSP Allocation Details:** Lindsay outlined changes to EQIP ranking pools, moving to a single application and assessment per contract, and described dividing the state of Idaho into five geographic areas for ranking and allocation. Idaho received just under \$40 million for EQIP, with required set-asides for beginning and socially disadvantaged farmers, and 25% allocated to the regenerative pilot program. Specific initiative funding amounts were detailed for Air Quality, Joint Chiefs, Water Smart, NWQI, Sage Grouse, and Big Game.
- **Regenerative Pilot Program Implementation:** Misty Beals and the Tech Services team introduced the new Regenerative Pilot Program (RPP), explaining its goals, eligibility criteria, required practices, and integration with existing EQIP and CSP programs, while addressing participant questions about soil health testing, contract requirements, and anticipated challenges in forestry and rangeland applications.
 - **Program Goals and Structure:** Misty Beals explained that the RPP aims to improve access to American-grown foods and promote healthy choices by bundling conservation practices into a single, holistic application process. The program is designed to be farmer-first and is implemented as a funding stream within EQIP and CSP.
 - **Eligibility and Practice Requirements:** RPP is available for crop, range, pasture, and forestry land uses. Applicants must include at least one primary regenerative management practice, which can be existing or planned, and agree to perform soil health testing in the first and last year of the contract. The contract duration is a minimum of five years.
 - **Soil Health Testing and Outcomes:** Participants are required to conduct soil health tests at the beginning and end of their contract to establish a baseline and measure changes. Misty clarified that there are no penalties if soils do not improve, as eligibility is determined upfront by demonstrating that planned practices will meet soil and water resource concerns.
 - **Challenges and Opportunities:** Lori and others discussed anticipated challenges in applying RPP to forestry and rangeland, particularly regarding eligible practices and qualified individuals for soil testing. The team emphasized the importance of spending allocated funds and adapting as clarification and interest grow among producers.

- **Snowpack and Water Supply Update:** Erin Wharton provided a detailed update on Idaho's snowpack and water supply, reporting record low snowpack levels, regional variations, measurement methods, and implications for reservoir storage and drought conditions, with projections for spring precipitation and water availability for agriculture.
 - **Current Snowpack Status:** Erin reported that Idaho is experiencing a record low snowpack, with the lowest levels recorded in 24 years. The Black line on the snow accumulation graph shows a sharp decline since January, and most snow measurement stations are below normal.
 - **Measurement Methods and Data:** Snowpack is measured using both manual snow course measurements and automated SNOTEL weather stations. These provide data on snow water equivalent, depth, air temperature, and precipitation, with a network of partners contributing to data collection.
 - **Regional Variations and Reservoir Storage:** Southern Idaho and the Panhandle are particularly affected by low snowpack, while some central mountain areas have above-normal levels. Reservoir storage varies, with the Boise system above average and other areas, such as the upper Snake system, below normal, impacting water supply for agriculture.
 - **Drought Conditions and Projections:** About 60% of Idaho is under official drought conditions, with the US Drought Monitor showing widespread moderate to exceptional drought. Erin projected that above-normal precipitation is needed over the next two months to recover, but current forecasts suggest continued deficits.
- **CRP Mid-Contract Management Activities Discussion:** Jenny Peirsol, with Farm Service Agency (FSA), led a discussion on Idaho's CRP Mid-Contract Management activities, reviewing current approved practices, considering proposals to include chemical and fertilizer treatments, and soliciting technical input from the committee, with plans to gather more data and revisit the topic at a future meeting.
 - **Current Approved Practices:** Idaho's approved CRP Mid-Contract Management activities include light disking, interseeding, prescribed burning, tree thinning and pruning, mowing in arid areas, and managed haying and grazing, with eligibility dependent on conservation practice and precipitation levels.

- **Proposal for Chemical and Fertilizer Treatments:** Jenny shared a proposal from the Northern District to reevaluate and potentially include chemical and fertilizer treatments as mid management activities, citing practices in Washington state and differences in primary nesting seasons.
- **Technical Considerations and Committee Input:** Committee members discussed the potential benefits and drawbacks of chemical applications, including impacts on plant diversity, landowner responsibilities, and the need for site-specific evaluation. The group agreed to gather more information, consult with Washington conservation specialists, and revisit the discussion at the next meeting.
- **Federal Legislative and Appropriations Updates:** Darren Parker from Senator Risch's office and Craig Quartermann from Representative Simpson's office provided updates on federal appropriations, permitting reform, the Fix Our Forest Act, and the status of the farm bill, while offering to facilitate future discussions on streamlining hazardous fuel reduction projects with Alliance Partnership and NRCS program specialists.
 - **Appropriations Status:** Darren reported that Congress has passed six out of twelve appropriations bills, including USDA funding, with remaining debate focused on DHS. Appropriations for FY26 are complete, and work on FY27 requests will begin soon.
 - **Permitting Reform and Legislation:** Discussions around permitting reform, which could affect NEPA and ESA processes, have stalled in the Senate but continue in the House. The Fix Our Forest Act, focused on forest management, is expected to be considered by the Senate next month, potentially streamlining wildfire prevention efforts.
 - **Farm Bill Outlook:** Darren and Craig addressed questions about the Farm Bill, noting that hearings are ongoing in the House, but passage during an election year is unlikely. The most probable scenario is action on the Farm Bill next year.
 - **Alliance Partnership Collaboration:** Darren proposed future meetings between Alliance Partnership and NRCS program specialists to discuss streamlining hazardous fuel reduction projects, particularly under RCPP, EQIP, and CSP. Lori confirmed interest, noting that existing agreements may limit changes for current RCPP projects.

- **Open Discussion and Q&A:** Lori facilitated an open roundtable for additional questions, addressing topics such as dairy project opportunities under the Regenerative Pilot Program, fund allocation flexibility, and the importance of conservation planning in aligning programs with producer resource concerns.
 - **Dairy Project Opportunities:** Emily from Idaho Dairymen's Association inquired about dairy-related projects under the Regenerative Pilot Program. Lori responded that while applications are still being processed, there are opportunities for dairy producers, particularly through nutrient management solutions, and more information will be available at the next meeting.
 - **Fund Allocation Flexibility:** Lori clarified that program funds can be moved between pools based on application types and needs, ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently as applications are reviewed.
 - **Conservation Planning Emphasis:** Lori emphasized a shift towards conservation planning, focusing on individual producer resource concerns and goals, with programs selected to fit those objectives rather than a program-specific approach.

Follow-up tasks:

- **CRP Mid-Contract Management Activities Review:** Gather more information on Washington's implementation of chemical and fertilizer treatments as CRP mid management activities, including types of stands, regions, associated practices, and success/failure rates, and present findings at the next meeting for further discussion. (Jenny)
- **CRP Mid-Contract Management Activities Review:** Invite Amber Brocke and Pamela Pavek from the NRCS Moscow Office, or other relevant specialists, to participate in the next meeting or a subcommittee for a more detailed discussion on CRP Mid-Contract Management activities after research is gathered. (Lori)
- **AGI Exemption Form Clarification:** Clarify and confirm which FSA form should be used for AGI exemption for equip and CSP programs and communicate the correct form to the team. (Chelcey)
- **RCPPI Proposal Preparation:** Encourage interested parties to begin preparing RCPPI proposals using last year's template and reach out to Josh Miller, RCPPI Coordinator, for guidance prior to the release of the Notice of Funding Opportunity. (Lori)
- **Alliance Partnership Coordination:** Coordinate a meeting between EQIP, CSP, and RCPPI program specialists and Darren Parker and members of the Alliance

Partnership to discuss streamlining hazardous fuel reduction projects and program delivery. (Lori)

- **Dairy Projects in Regenerative AG Program:** Compile and provide a list of dairy-related projects or potential applicants for the Regenerative AG program to Idaho Dairymen's Association once application and funding information is available. (Lori)