



Nebraska State Technical Advisory Committee

Meeting Minutes

March 5, 2026 — 1:00 – 4:00 pm

Hybrid meeting on Teams and 1121 Lincoln Mall - Tundra Room 3rd Floor – Lincoln, NE

ATTENDEES – James Huntwork, Conor Ward, Fred Stevens, Amy Miller, Allen Gehring, Jeremiah Schutz, Jami Thoene, Carlos Villarreal, Ritch Nelson, Riley Hackbart, Jana Ingwerson-Laws, Pat Lechner, Burdette Piening, Larry Hudkins, Andy Bishop, Tim Kalkowski, Andrew Tonnies, Matthew Smith, Mallory Jaymes, Kent Zimmerman, Elbert Traylor, Curt Becker, Steve Fairbain, Alexa Davis, Kristine Jameson, Sherry Vinton.

VIA TEAMS & PHONE: Aaron French, Heidi Borg, Brad Lubben, Brian Bruckner, Bruce McIntosh, Chandler Schmidt, Crystal Powers, Debbie Borg, Deborah Solie, Dustin Wilcox, Katie Hickle, Jacob Frinton, Josh Jelden, Jennifer Swanson, Kelsi Wehrman, Larkin Powell, Lyndon Vogt, Mark Brohman, Mike Fritz, Mike Crosley, Neil Moseman, Myles Lammers, Jenny Prenosil, Rachael Herpel, Mary Reece, Craig Romary, Shelly Kelly, Carter Smith, Wade Ellwanger, Rachael Whitehair

FUTURE MEETINGS:

- JUNE 4, 2026
 - SEPTEMBER 3, 2026
 - DECEMBER 3, 2026
-

Welcome & Opening Comments: *James Huntwork – NRCS Acting State Conservationist*

- Highlighted the challenges faced entering a new fiscal year with a shutdown due to a loss in federal funding. The transition to a new administration has been positive and some changes will be shared today.
 - There is a positive impact of new initiatives and processes to provide technical assistance and how we administer our programs which will benefit our producers across the state.
 - Our new structure of subcommittees will be shared. Shifting from a programs-based focus to resource concerns.
-

FSA Program Updates: Jana Ingwerson-Laws, Agricultural Programs Specialist – FSA

- **CRP Acreage**
 - Statutory cap: 27 million acres (set by 2018 farm bill)
 - Current national CRP acreage: 25.9 million acres
 - National expiring 9/30/2026: 1.5 million acres
 - Nebraska CRP acreage: 2,468,538 acres
 - Nebraska acres expiring 9/30/2026: 72,014 acres
- **Continuous CRP Signup 65**
 - Signup opened: February 12, 2026
 - First batching deadline: March 20, 2026
 - Offers processed first-come, first-served
 - All contracts start 10/1/2026
 - Optional deferral up to 6 months from COC approval
 - Conservation plans due: September 18, 2026
 - Payment details:
 - Max payment: \$300/acre
 - CLEAR30 max: \$380/acre
 - 20%/acre water quality rental incentive
 - PIP: 50% for new acres; 25% for reenrollment with new C/S approved = 25%
 - Enrollment types included:
 - Continuous
 - CLEAR30 (30-year contract; water quality focus; expiring CRP only)
 - FWP, HELI, SAFE (Upland Wildlife), CREP – Platte/Republican
- **General CRP Signup 66**
 - Signup window: March 9 – April 17, 2026
 - Competitive EBI ranking
 - Max payment: \$240/acre
 - Contracts start 10/1/2026
 - Conservation plans due August 14, 2026
 - Land Eligibility for General:
 - Planted to commodity 4 of 6 years (2012–2017)
 - AND one of the following:
 - Weighted EI ≥ 8 of the 3 predominant soils
 - Expiring CRP (9/30/2026)
 - Land in a Conservation Priority Area (CPA)
- **CRP & CLEAR30 Cost Share Docket Review**
 - State Committees are required to develop cost share policy per 2-CRP
 - Nebraska rates set by State Committee with NRCS cooperation
 - Cost share for seed not to exceed 50% of actual seed cost
 - Policy does not allow local County Committees to adjust cost share if State rates are not in line with current county average rates
 - CLEAR30 supports performing maintenance activities though the 30-year contract period at 75% of established rate
 - County Committees may adjust on case-by-case basis
 - All components aligned with NRCS payment schedules when possible

- **CLEAR30 Maintenance Payment Rates**
 - Covers required maintenance activities (burning, mowing, weed control, structure maintenance, etc.)
 - FY26 increases based on:
 - NRCS 2026 payment schedule
 - 2.7% CPI (Dec 2025) for the majority of components
 - Examples of FY25 → FY26 increases:
 - Prescribed burn (herbaceous fuel): \$28.86 → \$50.39/acre
 - Electric fence: \$1.53 → \$1.73/ft
 - Barbed wire fence: \$3.16 → \$3.56/ft
 - Culvert installation dropped from \$4.44 → \$2.24 per diameter-ft
 - Rock/concrete/geocell crossing slightly increased to \$10.29/sq ft
 - Animal protection devices: \$1.87 → \$3.00 each
 - **FY2026 ECP Payment Scenarios**
 - Program has used payment scenarios since August 2021
 - Improves implementation and payment speed
 - Based on NRCS technical practice standards
 - Components reflect typical requirements to meet practice standards at least-cost alternative
 - **Pat Lechner – Program Chief, FSA shared their State Committee Members**
 - Chairman: Scott Spilker (Beatrice)
 - Members: Crystal Klug (Columbus), Brett Robertson (Elise), Rylee Wagner (Winnetoon), John Walvoord (Waterloo)
-

NRCS Conservation Program Updates: *Conor Ward – NRCS Acting ASTC-Programs*

- **FY26 Subcommittee Participation**
 - Committee members encouraged to participate in FY26 Subcommittees
 - Deadline: March 13
 - Email interest to Conor Ward conor.ward@usda.gov and (cc: Amy Miller at amy.miller2@usda.gov)
- **NRCS Conservation Program Subcommittee Overviews**
 - **Soil Health**
 - Scope: Cropland sustainability, regenerative practices, urban/organic farming
 - Role: Technical, program, and producer-driven recommendations
 - **Wetlands**
 - Scope: Wetland conservation, federal compliance, easement alignment
 - Role: Align conservation/compliance needs with participant needs
 - **Grasslands**
 - Scope: Native rangelands, pastures, wildlife habitat
 - Role: Improve productivity, prevent invasive species, increase ecological/economic value
 - **Wildlife & Forestry**

- Scope: Habitat diversity, hardwood/pine systems, agroforestry
- Role: Strategies to restore and sustain NE forests & wildlife populations
- **Water Quality & Quantity**
 - Scope: Groundwater–surface water connectivity and sustainable use
 - Role: Address overuse and quality challenges through collaboration
- **Regenerative Pilot Program (RPP) Overview**
 - A farmer-first, outcomes-based approach by addressing whole-farm resource concerns through support for voluntary regenerative agriculture conservation plans.
- **RPP Requirements**
 - Whole farm assessment
 - Primary practices
 - Soil health testing
 - Minimum 5-year contract
- **Whole Farm Assessment**
 - EQIP Regen: Subset of land under customer control; planner & customer determine extent
 - CSP Regen: All land under operator control for 5 years must be included
 - Tribal guidance follows NI 440 307.14 and CPM 440 Part 53
- **Regen EQIP – to Qualify**
 - All land that encompasses the “whole farm” will be evaluated
 - All resource concerns evaluated
 - Minimum 5-year contract
 - **AND at least one land unit** in the assessment must meet the following:
 - One Primary Regen Practice planned or currently being implemented
 - Soil and Water RC thresholds are at met condition by end of contract
 - Soil Health Testing beginning and end of contract
- **Regen CSP – to Qualify**
 - All land under control for the life of the contract will be evaluated
 - All resource concerns evaluated
 - Meet CSP Stewardship Threshold Eligibility
 - *RPP Addition* - Soil and Water RC thresholds are at met condition by end of contract on at least one land use (of range, pasture, crop, forest)
 - **AND at least one land unit** in the assessment must meet the following:
 - One Primary Regen Practice planned or currently being implemented
 - Soil Health Testing beginning and end of contract
- **EQIP – FY26 Program Updates**
 - Ranking deadlines:
 - RPP eligible apps: March 6, 2026
 - All others: TBD
 - Updated guidance only allows for 5 resource-concern–based ranking pools
 - Water Quality/Quantity
 - Soil Erosion/Soil Health
 - Livestock Production Limitation
 - Pest Pressure

- Wildlife/Forestry
 - Many historical state pools have been added as categories within these 5 fund pools
 - Payment schedule changes (reduced scenarios, new base/implementation pairing)
 - Examples provided for irrigation systems, pipelines, underground outlets
 - Payment caps for certain practices in General EQIP and NWQI
 - No payment caps for RPP or wellhead protection areas
 - IRA modification funding extremely limited
- **CSP – FY26 Program Updates**
 - Allocation: \$19.6M total, with \$4.8M for RPP
 - 2 Ranking Pools (Classic and NIPF)
 - Ranking deadline: May 1
- **Changes to CSP**
 - No renewals in FY26; renewals will compete with Classic applications
 - If a producer has another CSP contract, expiring land should be modified into the active CSP contract.
 - NEW: newly acquired or newly eligible land can be modified into the producer's existing CSP contract. This new land cannot be enrolled in a new contract.
 - Activities changed from enhancements to practices
 - Practices with higher payment rates:
 - Resource Conserving Crop Rotation (RCCR) – CPS 328 – 150%.
 - Improved Resource Conserving Crop Rotation (IRCCR) – CPS 328 – 150%
 - Advanced Grazing Management (AGM) – CPS 528 – 150%.
 - Cover Crop – CPS 340 – 125%
 - All other offered activities – 75%
 - New EAP: \$4,000 per year
 - Contract limits for FY26:
 - \$300K individuals/entities
 - \$600K joint operations
- **RCPP – Regional Conservation Partnership Program Updates**
 - Notice of funding opportunities is expected soon. In clearance with office of management and budget.
 - Active Classic Projects:
 - Ogallala Aquifer & Platte River Recovery
 - Platte River & Playa Wetland Protection
 - Active AFA Projects:
 - Growing & Expanding Nebraska's Grassland Cores
 - Life from Soil: Ranching Sustainability & Viability Planning Network
- **Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)**
 - Active NE CRP:
 - 2.47M acres
 - 20,760 contracts
 - Top 10 CP Practices identified
 - Workload summary for FY25 (offers and acreage by category)
 - FY26 Signups:
 - Continuous Signup 65 (started Feb 12; batching March 20)

- General Signup 66 (Mar 9 – Apr 17)
 - Grassland CRP (announcement later this year)
-

Practice Standards Roundtable Review: *Jeremiah Schutz – NRCS State Resource Conservationist & Allen Gering – NRCS State Conservation Engineer*

- Nebraska to potentially receive a list of Conservation Practice Standards to review from national leadership
 - Hold roundtable meetings for an informal opportunity for our producers to provide their individual feedback and share information.
 - Develop a list of producers who recently have or are planning to implement practices
 - Organize meeting locations to achieve on-site engagement and field-based consultation
 - Provide a QR Code and URL for online customer survey opportunities
-

CEMA 216: *Carlos Villareal – NRCS State Soil Scientist*

- **Soil Health & Regenerative Agriculture**
 - Soil health = the *continued capacity of soil to function* as a living ecosystem.
 - Regenerative agriculture = managing for soil health with holistic thinking.
 - In-field assessments help determine soil's capacity to function.
 - Key soil functions:
 - Regulate water
 - Support plant growth
 - Provide habitat for organisms
 - Respond to intentional management
- **Principles of Soil Health**
 - Keep soil covered
 - Minimize disturbance
 - Maximize biodiversity
 - Maintain living roots year-round
 - *Matching indicators to each principle helps target conservation actions.*
- **Conservation Evaluation & Monitoring Activity (CEMA)**
 - Designed to inform participants about resource conditions.
 - Supports adaptive management and site-specific practice installation.
 - Conducted by Qualified Individuals (QIs).
 - Available in all FA programs.
- **CEMA 216: Soil Health Testing**

- **Basic Indicators**
 - Wet aggregate stability
 - Soil organic carbon
 - Soil respiration
 - Labile carbon
 - Bioavailable nitrogen
 - Texture & pH
 - **Advanced Indicators**
 - PLFA (microbial biomass)
 - Enzyme activity (C & N cycling)
 - **QI Requirements**
 - Must be CCA/CPAg/CPSS/ASSS, TSP (CPA 116 or DIA 162), or hold relevant degree + 2-year experience.
 - **Sampling Strategies**
 - 3 samples required for CEMA 216.
 - Stratified by soil type, whole-field/random (SSPOT), or targeted problem areas.
 - May incorporate cropland or rangeland in-field assessments.
 - **Deliverables**
 - Cover page
 - QI self-certification
 - Participant acknowledgment
 - NRCS concurrence
 - Notes/correspondence
 - Maps/diagrams
 - Evaluation & monitoring results
 - *NRCS is not involved in QI-participant financial transactions*
 - **Key Takeaways**
 - CEMA 216 is required at start and end of RPP contracts.
 - Available in all programs/initiatives.
 - Regenerative agriculture aims to restore ecosystems through improved soil health.
 - Soil health improvement is an ongoing journey—baseline and follow-up data are essential.
-

Partner Updates:

- **Alexa Davis - NDWEE**
 - **Nitrogen Usage Efficiency Program** accepting applications at local NRDs until May 15
 - For producers that are at or below nitrogenous efficiency threshold at 1.0 or below

- Receive payment of \$18.00 per acre
 - Requirements for soil and water samples
 - Work with local NRDs
- **Andrew Tonnies – Center for Rural Affairs**
 - March 26th – Buffer Strip and Field Border Webinar – online. See our website: cfra.org/events
 - Field days coming this summer
 - **Tim Kalkowski – NE Grazing Lands Coalition**
 - Working on Grassland Initiative
 - We do regenerative transition, have burn coordinators, do mentoring and education
 - We partner with a lot of organizations
 - Very excited for RPP & roundtables. The roundtables could be a game changer for how we look at conservation at a federal and state level.
 - **Sherry Vinton – NE Dept of Agriculture**
 - Ag Week = week of March 16
 - April 16th application deadline for NE Ag Youth Institute
 - Open to high school junior or senior
 - Weeklong event hosted by UNL Ag Department
 - Working though implementing changes in the Endangered Species Act
 - **Conor Ward – NRCS Acting Programs Manager**
 - Local Work Groups will still happen this year. Shifting to mid-summer which allows us to evaluate the work we did for this fiscal year.
-

Questions and Wrap Up: *James Huntwork – NRCS Acting State Conservationist*

- Please help communicate that our programs are a continuous process. Signup dates doesn't mean the work stops for that year. The opportunity to come in is ongoing. The best time to engage with our office is when the producer has the time to come meet with us.
- We appreciate the positive feedback around conservation practice standards round table. When we receive our assignment, we will be in touch with you for help in getting the right people there for feedback at multiple sites.
- RPP is a priority with the Agency and at the cabinet level for USDA & the Department of Health and Human Services. This developed at the department level that goes to the cabinet members. It has a lot of energy being put forth from this level.

- Last plug for subcommittee participation. Beneficial structure with the 5 groups. Deadline is March 13.
- Thank you for your engagement at STAC to deliver the best we can. You are taking time to be here to help us do the best job we can with delivering a technical and financial assistance program.