

Puerto Rico State Technical Committee Meeting Notes

Date: February 11, 2026

Location: USDA Forest Service International Institute of Tropical Forestry, Jardín Botánico Sur, Río Piedras, PR

Key Sections & Highlights

NRCS FY2026 Chief Priorities – Luis Cruz Arroyo

- **Farmer-First Approach** under Chief Aubrey Bettencourt:
 - Preserve agricultural land (ACEP easements).
 - Modernize infrastructure & technology (“One Farmer, One File”).
 - Recenter field engagement for direct technical assistance.
 - Strengthening partnerships (third-party certified plans).
 - Outcome-based conservation (measured by environmental improvements).
- **Major Initiatives:**
 - Regenerative Pilot Program (\$400M EQIP + \$300M CSP).
 - CART for program ranking.
 - Reduce administrative burden.

NRCS Programs FY2025 Recap – Frank Velazquez

- **EQIP:** 226 contracts, \$19.53M obligations, \$12.54M payments, 7,710 acres.
- **CSP:** 100 contracts, \$3.01M obligations, \$826,529 payments, 7,117 acres.
- **Active Contracts:**
 - 958 across Caribbean Area (e.g., Juana Díaz: 170; Utuado: 141).

NRCS Programs FY2026 Focus & Allocations – Frank Velazquez

- **EQIP Total:** \$14.07M
 - Key categories: Regenerative Pilot (25%), Socially Disadvantaged Farmers & Ranchers (SDFR) regions (38%), Wildlife & Joint Chief (10%), Water Quantity (8%), see slides for all categories.
- **CSP Total:** \$4.43M
 - Separated into two accounts (Ranking Pools): Nonindustrial Private Forestland (NIPF) and Agricultural Land, the latter with the following key categories: Socially Disadvantaged Farmers & Ranchers (SDFR; 50%), Regenerative Pilot (25%), Beginning Farmers & Ranchers (5%), see slides for all categories.
- **ACEP:**
 - Agricultural Land Easements (\$1M), Wetland Reserve Easements (\$1M), and Wetland Reserve Easements Stewardship (\$10K).
- **FY2026 Ranking Criteria – Javier Cruz**
 - Ranking Criteria consists of questions that help planners determine eligibility of an application for the different funding categories, these are ranked using a point system.
 - The FY2026 Ranking Pool Reports for [EQIP](#), [CSP](#), and [ACEP-WRE](#) may be found on the NRCS website.
- **Q&A:** Conservation practice payment schedules have been adjusted recently these may be found on the [NRCS website](#).

Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) for WRE – Javier Cruz

- Puerto Rico GARC: **95% of fair market value (FMV), NTE \$20,000/ac** for both 30-year and permanent easements.
- Land values vary widely in the Caribbean (e.g., Naguabo: \$28,888/ac; Fajardo: \$115,000/ac).

National Cooperative Soil Survey (NCSS) – Manuel Matos

- **Caribbean Area Soil Survey:** 4 Major Land Resource Areas, 9 soil survey areas, 2.3M acres.
- **Projects:** Virtual Soil Museum, Soil Health & Edge-of-Field Runoff Monitoring, Tropical Crop Productivity & Suitability Interpretations.
- **Available Crop Productivity & Suitability Indexes:** land classifications: cacao, coffee, and guinea grass (all three suitability); land management: plantain (productivity).
- [Soil Survey Interpretations](#) on the works include Dynamic Soil Properties Response to Biochar, Liquefaction susceptibility, and Plantain Productivity Index (Irrigated).
- **Connect with us** and answer the [Caribbean Area Cooperative Soil Survey](#)

Priority Watersheds Discussion

- Aligning NRCS priority watersheds with **DNER's 2022 Vision** for water quality: target impaired watersheds.
- NRCS classified watersheds with associated Crop Land Unites (CLUs) to identify the potential for mitigation at farms where farmers implement or may implement conservation practices.
- NRCS also started conversation with multiple partners in supporting water quantity and water quality projects.

Reservoir / Lake	Sub Basin	DNER Priority	Significance
Rio Grande de Loiza	Rio Gurabo	NPS + Vision	Major PRASA drinking water supply, metro area.
Rio Coamo	Rio Coamo	NPS High	PREPA water supply for irrigation.
Laguna Cartagena	Laguna Cartagena	N/A	Important project for USFW that would need investments outside of the wildlife reserve.

- Existing Projects Assessments

Reservoir / Lake	Sub Basin	DNER Priority	Significance
Rio Grande de Añasco	Rio Grande de Añasco at the mouth	NPS + Vision	Identified priority watershed with a significant number of farmers
Rio Grande de Añasco	Rio Prieto		Identified past priority watershed with a significant number of farmers in the mountain region
Rio La Plata	Comerio Dam	NPS + Vision	Major PRASA drinking water supply, metro area

- **Top National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) Candidate Watersheds:**

- Request NWQI Funds for Watershed Plans
 - Rio Gurabo

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- Rio Grande de Manati
 - Rio Culebrinas
 - **Other Initiatives**
 - RCPP with PLN in Rio Grande de Arecibo
 - WFPO for Rio Coamo (PREPA) and Rio Guanajibo
 - Joint Chief and Wildlife funds to support water quality goals adjacent to reserves
- **Key Observations:**
 - Highest agricultural density in western and central PR watersheds.
- **Next Steps**
 - Reestablish the STC Watersheds Subcommittee
 - Validate NWQI candidates.
 - Identify additional priority watersheds/reservoirs.
 - Strengthen interagency coordination (DNER, EPA, PRASA, FWS, TNC).
 - Establish FY2026-27 milestones for watershed-scale conservation.
- **Comment:** Collaboration potential – Dr. Walter Silva-Araya – Coordinate with the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez, and the Water Resources Institute to potentially conduct a sediment production analysis in the Culebrinas River Watershed, integrating previous studies and existing experience.

Partner Updates

- **USDA Forest Service (IITF) – Magaly Figueroa**
 - Forest Service priorities include active forest management, forest products (use forest for value added products), recreation (private and public forests), fire management and education.
 - Collaborators include Darien Lopez (DRNA), Puerto Rico Fire Department (Cuerpo de Bomberos), University of Puerto Rico, multiple NGOs, and local communities.
 - Currently developing Community Wildland Fire Plans with NGOs for Guánica, Yauco, Maricao, and for the East Corridor, considering cultural, environmental, and health factors.
 - Provided funds for the Puerto Rico Fire Department
 - While working throughout the southern area of Puerto Rico, they learned from a community member about the use of Aloe vera as a fire retardant – potential for a validation project in the future
 - New weather stations at Añasco, Guánica, Maricao, San Sebastián, Juncos, Salinas, and St. Croix (USVI).
 - Joint Chiefs Initiative projects (West: focused on bird species, watersheds and landscapes; East: focused on land surrounding El Yunque National Forest; and South: focused on species and water).
 - Working on a Private Forest Stewards Congress grant.
 - Forest School initiative to be worked on as an independent project with schools.
 - Restoration Practices Manual (developed by Envirosurvey) translation project.
 - Forest Service budget is in the process of being distributed among programs and priorities.

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- **USFWS Caribbean Wildlife Refuges – Silmarie Padrón**

- Agency priorities include enhancing operational efficiency and technology, refuge and fisheries division revision, visitor access, wildlife management, and strengthening agency relationships.
- Significant achievements related to NRCS agreements at Laguna Cartagena (Lajas) and Las Salinas (Cabo Rojo) wildlife refuges.
- Interested in strengthening the Río Encantado National Wildlife Refuge initiative, at the Northern Karst Zone of Puerto Rico.
- Working with Asekia to host students collecting data throughout the Lajas project site – JCI South potential collaboration.

- **Envirosurvey – Nidia Trejo**

- NRCS Conservation Innovation Grant [AgroforestryX](#) tool enhancement project is wrapping up, anyone may explore the tool, which provides guidance in designing multistory agroforests. They included Caribbean (PR & USVI) plant species in the tool; there is also a wildlife component.
- Delivered AgroforestryX training workshops for USFWS and DRNA. They are open to coordinating workshops with any interested agency, organization or group. There is also an explanation on YouTube on [how to use the tool](#).
- Caribbean shrubs guide presentation in April, potentially at IITF.
- The tool may be presented during the next STC meeting.

- **USFWS – STC Wildlife Subcommittee – Iván Llerandi**

- Interagency Agreement with NRCS on pause, DOI personnel would meet with USFWS to determine funding distribution.
- May potentially work with NRCS on the WRE GARC determination to consider the reality of property values.
- Manuel Matos: NRCS has been collaborating with local and federal agencies to develop the Water Resources Registry (EPA led) in the Caribbean, an application to identify wetland areas and wetlands with restoration potential. Also working with Ricardo Colón-Santiago on National Wetlands Inventory updates.

- **Caonilla Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) – Etzel Costales**

- Recommendations for NRCS:
 - Provide conservation technical assistance and practice workshops for mountain region farmers at least 1-2 times per year.
 - Consider the bona fide farmer certification as part of program rankings. (NRCS response: NRCS program application rankings cannot be used to distinguish between farmers who are certified vs those who are not.)
 - Develop a detailed EQIP workshop, focused on conservation practices that may be implemented locally.



- Share bulletins about the NRCS programs offered for SWCDs and farmers. Or have staff (from the different agencies) visit the new Utuado Regional Office to provide services for local farmers.
- Interested in having Forest Service assess recreation conditions of the Tres Picachos State Forest.
- **DRNA – Darien López Ocasio, State Forester**
 - Received funding for a Private Forest Stewardship Program focused on strengthening the team workforce to offer technical assistance to forest landowners and develop management plans.
 - Capacity building for forest biologist – there is interest in capacity building throughout the different agencies.
 - Directly support IITF projects and priorities.
 - USDA priorities are aligned with the DRNA Puerto Rico Forestry Action Plan.
- **RAFI – Jaimie McGirt**
 - Cooperative Agreement with the NRCS Partnerships Division for the past 4 years, it is ending at the end of March 2026 and there are no plans to renew. However, local partners from the Agricultural Alliance plan to continue to engage with farmers on the island.
 - Alliance for Agriculture Technical Service Provider Norysell Massanet has provided technical assistance to over 140 farmers throughout the project life and hosted on-farm conservation practice training workshops, including related to soil health and testing.
 - Hosting soil fertility building and water pump workshops.
- **Coastal Management Zone Program (DRNA) – Magaly Massanet**
 - Supporting the National Wetland Inventory project led by EPA's Ricardo Colón, there are plans to provide funding for it in the future.
 - Completing a Coastal Wetland Management Plan to be completed in a few months, the Estudios Técnicos company was contracted for the development with NOAA funds.
 - Will be contracting a Biologist soon to develop a workplan for coastal wetlands management.
- **Coccoloba – Christian Torres-Santana**
 - Working on a tree list project with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Institute Regional Conservation in Florida, they assessed 75 trees to update their status, and some entered the Endangered Species List.
 - Interested in learning about the status of the Puerto Rico endangered tree species regulations and policies, and in collaborating if there are plans to work on a revision.
 - Symposium on International Plant Health Day – May 12, 2026 – location TBD
 - Caguas Municipality Urban Forest event – April 10-11, 2026
 - There are trees from an urban agriculture project available.
- **The Nature Conservancy – Tania Metz**
 - NRCS Collaborative Agreement to support and catalyze the oyster industry in the Caribbean.
 - Focusing on multiple mariculture projects, the data resulting from the NRCS Coastal Zone Survey is a useful tool for this purpose.

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Natural Resources Conservation Service

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

- Multiple water supply projects, they are working with the East SWCD for project implementation, reaching out to agricultural landowners to promote runoff management conservation practices.
- There is a project that will start soon focused on Rio La Plata Watershed, this will be done in collaboration with Protectores de Cuencas.
- Funding and collaboration opportunities for priority watershed efforts.
- **Protectores de Cuencas – Jeremy Velazquez**
 - Has collaborated with NRCS on multiple projects, such as the development of management plans for the La Plata, Añasco and Prieto rivers.
 - Collaborative project at the Rio Grande de Patillas Watershed, where the organization is providing technical assistance and conservation practices implementation, they are developing a management plan.
 - Collaborative pilot practice implementation project to determine the feasibility of the concrete strip pavement (*placa huellas*) in coffee farms, in Maricao.
 - Working on a validation project for different biochar treatments on tree planting.