



Natural Resources Conservation Service

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Minnesota NRCS State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) Meeting Notes

March 30 – April 1, 2026

St. Cloud, MN

Welcome and Introductions

- Minnesota NRCS State Conservationist Troy Daniell opened the meeting by welcoming attendees and emphasized their importance to NRCS carrying out its mission.
- Ryan Galbreath explained the purpose of the State Technical Advisory Committee and reminded attendees of the [STAC website](#), and the notes, operating procedures, and archived documents available there.
 - o Emphasized the committee as advisory and informal. From time-to-time NRCS may poll participants but never call for votes.
 - o Discussed the subcommittees that are active and invited to participate in one or more of them.
 - o Subcommittees are based on needs, not all active at once.

Growing Sugarbeet in Minnesota and North Dakota

Presenter: Thomas Peters, North Dakota State University and University of Minnesota Extension Sugarbeet Agronomist & Weed Control Specialist

- Sugarbeet production in the U.S. is concentrated in 5 regions. Minnesota accounts for 60% of the production. Starting with sugarbeet is different from other commodities. Sugarbeet production involves several challenges. The U.S. sugar program (policy) is contained in the Farm Bill.
 - o Starting sugarbeet farming requires membership in a cooperative, of which there are three in Minnesota. Growing sugarbeet starts with the purchase of shares in the cooperative, each share costs roughly \$4000 for 0.8-1 acre. Members of the cooperative are required by law to be actual producers.
 - o There are several challenges to sugarbeet production. Some of the most significant are sugarbeet stand, weed management, soil-borne and foliar disease control. The contributions to the challenges include plant emergence rates (around 72%) and limitations in weed control options. As a “million-acre crop” (about 1.1 million acres in production in the U.S.), companies tend not to invest in research and development.
 - o The trend is toward lower production due to decreased demand. Demand has decreased as the popularity of Ozempic, and other weight-loss medications have increased.
 - o More information: Thomas Peters, thomas.j.peters@ndsu.edu, [Presentation slides](#)

NRCS Conservation Programs

Presenter: Molly Mehl, MN NRCS Assistant State Conservationist – Programs, Acting

- Program delivery and the challenges to it in 2025 were summarized.
 - o Program delivery in 2025 was complicated by several factors. Travel, training, and purchasing were significantly curtailed. Appropriations from the Inflation Reduction Act were rescinded, and staffing was significantly reduced.
 - o EQIP: 881 contracts, 88,500 acres, \$61.6M; 3,936 applications received, 20-22% funded. CSP: 422 contracts, 273,000 acres, \$44M; Classic applications received were 1,947, 21-24% funded. ACEP: 1,125 easements. RCPP: 44 direct and 8 partner agreements, 5,000 acres, \$1.4M.

- o The top conservation practices by count of agreements incorporated included Brush Management, Cover Crop, Forest Stand Improvement, Grazing Management, and Nutrient Management.
- Program updates for 2026
 - o The challenges for 2026 include staffing and workload. NRCS partners provide assistance, for example to monitor easements.
 - o The 2026 CSP-Regenerative Pilot Program was explained. Requirements include whole farm assessment, soil health testing, primary practices (including Pest Management, mulching, Forest Stand Improvement), and 5-year contract.
 - o All easements must be monitored every year, 25-50% of them onsite. Due to current staffing limitations, partners will complete onsite monitoring for about 215 easements.
 - o In 2026, Minnesota will need to prioritize projects where partners will deliver much or all the technical assistance.
 - o More information: Molly Mehl, molly.mehl@usda.gov, [Presentation slides](#)

Ecological Sciences Updates

Presenter: Ryan Galbreath, MN NRCS State Resource Conservationist

- NRCS Payment Schedule and Conservation Practice Scenarios updates were presented.
 - o The practice scenario is a general description of practice application for a typical resource setting. All practice scenarios (~3,600) were nationalized. Scenarios were reviewed for selection in Minnesota based on several criteria including program applicability, cost, and redundancy.
 - o Certain activities use base-plus-variable pricing to determine total payment. This pricing is not common in ECS practices.
 - o Accessing and using the [Payment Schedules](#) were explained.
 - o More information: Ryan Galbreath, ryan.galbreath@usda.gov, [Presentation slides](#)

Audubon Wings Over Working Lands

Presenter: Dale Gentry Ph.D., Conservation Director, [Audubon](#)

- To reverse the serious decline of birds in America, Audubon's "Flight Plan" includes conservation strategies in the ranching world. Studies suggest that grassland bird populations have decreased by more than 53%.
 - o The Wings Over Working Lands Initiative focuses on regenerative land management practices, public recognition or certification for bird-friendly management, and market-based conservation strategies.
 - o Market-based conservation identifies products grown or created with environmental standards for the benefit of consumers who are conservation-conscious. This includes the Bird-Friendly Maple program. Adding public recognition or certification for bird-friendly management essentially turns consumers into conservationists through the power of their purchase.
 - o Audubon Conservation Ranching (ACR) program partners with land stewards to stabilize grassland bird populations through a combination of habitat management, animal health & welfare, environmental sustainability, and regenerative grazing. ACR earns a Certified Bird Friendly Seal, which then invites the participation of conservation-conscious consumers.
 - o NRCS Conservation Innovation Grants offer technical and financial assistance in support of bird-friendly conservation practices such as Fence, Livestock Pipeline, Brush Management, prescribed fire and hay planting.
 - o More information: Sarah Hewitt, sarah.hewitt@audubon.org, [Presentation slides](#)
Dale Gentry, dale.gentry@audubon.org

Agriculture Production in High Organic Soils

Presenter: Peter Imle, Cultivated Wild Rice Farmer

- How does one farm “in the middle of a swamp?” This Clearwater County farmer and his family have been doing it since 1972. They started with 40 acres of wild rice. Fast forward to today, their farm is 5,000 acres, rotating wild rice with potatoes, soybeans, and yellow peas.
 - o The soil on their farm is high in organic matter (OM) - 70% and has a neutral pH. High OM soil takes care of crops and equipment, but it is challenging in that it holds frost. The hydric soil makes tillage challenging and water management critical.
 - o The production cycle rotates wild rice (4 years) to potatoes (1 year) to soybeans (3 years or yellow peas year 3). Production currently includes 2,000-2,700 acres wild rice, 450 acres potatoes, 1,600-2,000 acres soybeans, and up to 400 acres yellow peas.
 - o The crops in the rotation naturally work together to meet fertility needs, reduce disease, and reduce pesticide applications. Their water needs are different, so water management is necessary. To manage the water, they use trenched tiles, gravity flow outlets, and electric pumps to pull water from the river. Water management requires the use of retention ponds and water use permitting and monitoring.
 - o Harvesting wild rice requires the use of 6 combines. The combines are modified to handle the wet condition. Tires are replaced with wide tracks; enhanced reels replace the ones the factory builds due to the tall nature of the wild rice.
 - o More information: Peter Imle, peter@pinelakewildrice.com, [Presentation Slides](#)

USDA Wetland Determinations, Minimal Effect Exemptions

Presenter: John Tix, Senior Compliance Specialist

- NRCS may grant a USDA participant an exemption (exempt from ineligibility for program benefits) when he or she converts a wetland through an action that has a minimal effect on the functions and values of the wetlands in the area. Exemption criteria are determined by law: 7 CFR Section 12.5.
 - o The producer must first formally request a minimal effect exemption before NRCS completes one.
 - o Several factors are considered and evaluated in completing the exemption. Findings will be applied to a decision matrix to make the final decision.
 - o New changes for 2026 include the following: No longer capped at 2 acres; similar actions authorized by NRCS in the 2-mile radius will be considered; average size of future authorizations may be affected by data collected this year.
 - o More information: Paige Guetter, paige.guetter@usda.gov; [Presentation Slides](#)
John Tix, john.tix@usda.gov

Farm Service Agency (FSA) Updates

Presenter: Kurt Blomgren, MN FSA State Executive Director

- FSA reported on the status of their workforce, CRP enrollment, CRP sign-up dates, Farmers Bridge, and emergency programs & current authorities.
 - o There are 66 county service centers and 47 county directors.
 - o Enrollment in CRP according to the latest data available: Nationwide 26,317,011 acres, with a statutory maximum 27M. Minnesota has 948,972.13 acres enrolled in CRP. This is over 3.6% of the acres nationwide.
 - o Nearly half of the CRP contract acres will expire in the next 5 years.
 - o Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP) was implemented in several counties in 2025: North St. Louis, South St. Louis and Lake Counties for wildfires in May; Several counties around and including Beltrami for the “Bemidji blowdown,” in June.

- o The Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs is temporarily authorizing emergency haying and grazing of CRP acreage in Minnesota to be donated to support livestock producers in Nebraska adversely affected by wildfires there.
- o More information: [FSA Local Service Center](#), [Presentation slides](#)

Partner Updates

There was informal general discussion on several issues, projects, and announcements.

- William Fitzgerald, MN Department of Agriculture, MAWQC Technical Unit, described the Climate Friendly Agricultural Practices (CFAP) incentive payments.
 - o Payments are being offered through the Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program.
 - o Applications are currently being accepted for the incentive payments. Producers can receive up to \$10,000 to implement a selection of sustainable agricultural practices with known, quantifiable greenhouse gas emission reductions.
 - o More information: William Fitzgerald, William.fitzgerald@state.mn.us; [CFAP-IP overview](#)
- Todd Rexine, Conservation Director, Great River Greening, announced upcoming demonstrations for biochar. An onsite biochar kiln demonstration will be held June 10, 2026, in Melrose; another June 12 in Brainerd.
 - o More information: Todd Rexine, trrexine@greatrivergreening.org, [Biochar Initiative](#)
- Josh Pommier, Minnesota Private Lands Manager, Pheasants Forever, shared the importance of fire in maintaining healthy wildlife habitat. Anyone interested in controlled burns should contact a Prescribed Burn Association (PBA) for assistance.
 - o More information: Josh Pommier, jpommier@phasantsforever.org; [MN PBA](#)
Jason Andersen, jandersen@pheasantsforever.org
- LeAnn Buck, Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD) encouraged involvement with SWCDs. There are 88 offices in the state, each having a Board of Supervisors. Anyone interested in being a part of an SWCD is encouraged to get on the ballot. The election filing period for this year runs from May 18 through June 2.
 - o Save the Date: The 2026 MASWCD Annual Convention Nov. 30 through Dec. 2.
 - o More information: LeAnn Buck, leannbuck@maswcd.org; [Election Information](#)
- John Jaschke, Minnesota Water & Soil Resources Board, emphasized the importance of engaging policymakers in conservation efforts.
 - o There are a variety of resources, organizations and events to engage policymakers. Minnesota Duck Summit was March 27-28 in Nicolett, MN; University of Minnesota Soil Health Symposium, April 8, 2026
 - o Reference was made to The Minnesota Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program ([MN CREP](#)), Regional Conservation Partnership Program ([RCPP](#)), and the watershed approach to improving water quality.
 - o More information: John Jaschke, john.jaschke@state.mn.us
- Aaron Field of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership ([TRCP](#)) shared news on recent conservation legislation developments. [The Habitat Connectivity on Working Lands Act](#) has been introduced in the U.S. Senate. Expands voluntary efforts to improve wildlife habitat, including big game migratory habitat, on working lands.
 - o More information: Aaron Field, afield@trcp.org

Minnesota Nutrient Reduction Strategy (NRS)

Presenter: Matt Drewitz, Research Scientist MN Pollution Control Agency

- High levels of nitrogen, especially Nitrate, and phosphorus in our waters can result in toxicity to aquatic life and unhealthy drinking water. The Minnesota Nutrient Reduction Strategy

([NRS](#)) aims to improve water quality locally and downstream (the Gulf, Lake Winnipeg, and Lake Superior).

- o Excess nutrients from agricultural runoff, wastewater treatment, urban stormwater runoff, and leaching from cropland to name a few.
- o The first NRS came in 2014. NRS was updated & revised in 2025; made possible by several contributors, including NRCS. The 2040 goals are nearly the same but added elements (new programs & funding, new metrics and technologies for tracking) and developed new tools to support the state's watershed approach to improve water quality.
- o Progress has been made as recommendations have been implemented with the increasing support from updated science, the Legacy Amendment, universities, private sector and non-profit, and local landowners and practitioners.
- o The next steps of the NRS roll out include focus areas, reduction and tracking practices, and connections to conservation work.
- o Conservation practices to reduce nutrients, landowner and technical assistance, and including nutrients in local planning efforts.
- o More information: Matt Drewitz, matt.drewitz@state.mn.us, [Presentation slides](#)
Corrie Layfield, corrie.layfield@state.mn.us

Women in Conservation (MNWiC)

Presenters: Burke Murphy, [MNWiC](#) State Coordinator, and [Renewing the Countryside](#) (RTC) Executive Director Jan Joannides

- MNWiC, a project of RTC, works to increase women's knowledge, understanding, and use of conservation, climate smart practices and NRCS programs. Objectives include connecting women land stewards to each other and to conservation professionals to develop custom conservation plans and assisting them in applying for federal farm program assistance and funding.
 - o To meet the objectives, a variety of learning circles, webinars, field days, and making connections with local experts are facilitated by four regional coordinators.
 - o A group of women land stewards were introduced to demonstrate a shared passion for taking good care of soil, water, and wildlife. Through their participation in the MNWiC project, they are connected to the resources and relationships to achieve their stewardship goals.
 - o Regenerative grazers, Christina Kollman, Anoka County, 5th generation beef farmer, and Stephanie Zetah, McLeod County regenerative farmer, shared their stories and their experiences with NRCS in reaching their conservation goals.
 - o Equipping women land stewards is increasingly important. According to the most recent USDA Ag Survey, 11,722 women producers manage more than 9.63 million acres of Minnesota farmland.
 - o More information: Burke Murphy, burke@rtcinfo.org, [Presentation slides](#)
Jan Joannides, jan@rtcinfo.org

Conservation as a Business Builder

Presenter: Hannah Bernhardt, Owner/Operator, [Medicine Creek Farm](#)

- From growing up on a farm and considering farming to be akin to "gambling for a living," to purchasing a farm considered by a potential creditor to be "too risky," today's Medicine Creek Farm is a great success story. At the center of that success is conservation.
 - o A microloan from the Farm Service Agency provided the animals and infrastructure to get started. This infrastructure proved inadequate in the winter. NRCS financial assistance through EQIP was used to purchase perimeter fencing and water lines; that proved "life changing."

- o Direct marketing of beef was bolstered by customers who valued transparency, animal welfare, and environmental conservation. Direct marketing was further enhanced by a sense of community which was built through hosting events on the farm.
- o The addition of “farm stays” with a goal to educate the public added diversification. People were eager to give their kids a farm experience. This opened the door for those people to get involved in conservation and learn about NRCS.
- o NRCS’ investment in the business is now being returned in a big way. The farm and its outreach have inspired other farmers to use conservation practices, which have served to produce healthier land, wildlife habitat, and increased bird populations. Birds now take the place of the insecticides that were once put on the cattle to control pests.
- o The support NRCS gives to small farmers creates a safety net for them and ripples out to benefit the greater economy.
- o Conservation can be the difference between land being a “magical place,” like Medicine Creek Farm, and a “dump.”
- o More information: Hannah Bernhardt, hannah@medicinecreekfarm.com, [Presentation slides](#)

Sentinel Landscape Regional Conservation Partnership Program Success Story

Presenter: Bob Perleberg, Private Forester and Landowner, Morrison County, Minnesota

- Forestry is a 200-year goal. So says the owner of 480 acres of mixed forest types in Morrison County Minnesota. For 34 years, he has worked to have something to pass down when he passes on. This requires such management goals as a healthy, diverse forest in which the soil & water and wildlife habitat are protected, sustainability in the long-term, and free from development.
 - o A partnership with NRCS and the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) has made this forest a success story. Accomplishments include invasive species control, nest box installation, pollinator habitat, and lowland brush shearing.
 - o A variety of federal and state programs have been leveraged to manage this forest: Timber management, timber stand improvements (such as 40 acres of buckthorn control, 40 acres of tree planting), regeneration (such as >25,000 seedlings planted, improved diversity and structure), controlled burning, soil and water protection (such as erosion control, road management, culvert installation, 3 miles of access trails), and wildlife habitat.
 - o Maple tree sap, healthy wildlife for hunting, and apple trees are just a few of the rewards enjoyed by taking care of the forest.
 - o Ongoing forest management challenges include pests and overmature trees threatening forest health, weather, economic factors, and invasive species. Property fragmentation and development can be controlled by permanent conservation easements. Economic factors such as high land prices coupled with timber income vs. property taxes preclude some younger people from taking over the management of forests.
 - o More information: Bob Perleberg, forestryfirst@gmail.com, [Presentation slides](#)

Subcommittee Reports

Presenter: Jess Weis, State Biologist, Wildlife/CRP Subcommittee

- Jess was introduced as the State Biologist who came onboard in the fall of 2025. The latest role is a part of a career in Federal service of nearly 22 years. Jess reported on wildlife related conservation practices, involvement in NRCS programs (EQIP, CSP, RCP), and changes forthcoming.

- o Total EQIP obligations for wildlife related wildlife conservation practices: \$2,983,669; the top practices by obligation amount, Wildlife Habitat Planting (420) and by acres, Upland Wildlife Habitat Management (645).
- o National Practice Standard 645 - Wildlife Habitat Management is under review. Minnesota updates needed include the Implementation Requirements for Hedgerow (422) and Wetland Restoration (657). Future needs include updating the See Calculator, Tech Note 31, and Nesting Dates.
- o More information: Jess Weis, jessica.weis@usda.gov, [Presentation \(slides 1-9\)](#)

Presenter: Jeff Duchene, State Grazing Specialist, Grazing Subcommittee

- Jeff discussed the format and objectives of the Grazing Subcommittee. He also reported that treatments and lifespan have been adjusted for several conservation practices.
 - o Brush Management and Herbaceous Weed Treatment: Species eligible for 3 treatments in practice lifespan, 10 years and 5 years, respectively.
 - o Brush Management (314): Several species added for three treatments.
 - o Additional brush and herbaceous species have been added.
 - o Several updates are being made to Conservation Practice Standard 528, Grazing Management.
 - o The report also included information on National Practice Standards under review, EQIP allocations for grazing-related practices, grazing enhancements, and the Regenerative Pilot Program.
 - o More information: jeff.duchene@usda.gov, [Presentation \(slides 10-23\)](#)

Presenter: Kaitlyn Miller, Easements Program Manager

- Kaitlyn presented most of the easement related reports in the Conservation Programs section above.
 - o The Minnesota ACEP-WRE Geographic Area Rate Caps (GARC) was explained as one of two ways to determine the value of an easement. This involves the state being divided up into five districts. Rates within each district are predetermined as “Not to Exceed” (NTE).
 - o The other option to determine value is appraisal. In some cases, appraisals are required.
 - o More information: kaitlyn.miller@usda.gov, [Presentation](#)

Closing Comments

Ryan Galbreath concluded the meeting. There were several comments from attendees who found the meeting very informative and to have enjoyed attending it. It is anticipated that the next STAC meeting will be held this fall.