Illinois State Technical Committee Meeting - March 5, 2026
MINUTES

Welcome and Introductions - Tammy Willis

- Matt Hardeke welcome,
  - Farm Credit covers 60 counties, works with and supports farmers
- Did not have the last State Technical Committee meeting due to shutdown
- Round Robin

State Conservationist Comments - Tammy Willis

Shared NRCS Chief's Priorities:

1. Preserve and Protect Agricultural Land
2. Modernize NRCS Infrastructure and Technology
3. Re-center Field Engagement and Technical Assistance
4. Strengthening Partnerships by Streamlining Processes and Accountability
5. Shift to Outcome-Based Conservation and Farmer Empowerment

NFWF IL River Basin Project - Thomas Christensen & Rich Duesterhaus

Presentation: Improving Water Quality Through Conservation Drainage in the Illinois River Basin

- Illinois has greatest opportunity to benefit from drainage water management (DWM),
  - 10M acres that are suitable
- Reasons why:
  - Improve crop health, production, and farm economic benefits
  - Improve water quality
  - Capitalize on aging systems, they need updating and this is a good time to implement these practices
- 4 practices:
  - Drainage Water Management (most improvements)
  - Denitrifying Bioreactors
  - Saturated Buffer
  - Phosphorus Removal System
  - Treatment trains – combo of these practices
- The Project
  - Effects 7 counties and City of Decatur and Lake Decatur
  - Timeline - 3 years, currently 6 months in
  - Outcome - design 100 conservation practices, on 6000 acres, 1.5 M lbs. of nitrogen and 44,000 lbs. of phosphorus reduction over 20 years

- Accomplishments – Promotion & Outreach:
    - ADMC animated video of drainage practices
- Accomplishments - Incentive Payments:
    - Pay producers $1000 for each practice design through ESE
    - Implementation is not required but need pursue installation in good faith
- Accomplishments - Staffing Support:
    - AISWCD contracting for full-time conservation planner for 7 county SWCD
- Accomplishments - Producer Participation to date:
    - 36 sites with remote assessments
    - 19 on site investigations
    - 12 complete designs
- Recommendations for IL NRCS:
    - Use EQIP with focused funding pools
    - More frequent ranking periods work better and streamline process
    - Need transparency with ranking Link DIA 164 with conservation drainage practice installation
    - Improve accuracy of payment scenarios
        - There have been payment improvements, but they are odd (ex: pipe weight)
    - TSP TA rates need improvements
        - The State Conservationist decides if they adopt
    - Need alternative project approaches
        - Turn-Key model is easier and streamline implementation of these practices

Q: Is there guidance on how long you keep boards in structures, how long to keep fields saturated from spring to fall?
A: There are automated systems to get precision water management, or you can manually remove boards when planting and harvesting and put the boards back after those events.

Farmer First Regenerative Pilot Program (RPP) - Tammy Willis

Video of USDA-NRCS Chief Aubrey Bettencourt explaining RPP. RPP focuses on NRCS core principles: soil health, water management, and natural vitality. RPP involves whole farm planning and soil testing at the beginning and end of the contract. Nationwide $700 M dedicated to programs producers are familiar with, $400 M EQIP, $300 M CSP. You can find the video here.

Q: Elliot Lagacy – what are the outcomes?
A: Qualified individual (QI) will sample soil and send to accredited lab for testing. Results will be sent to the producer. Producers determine how they will utilize their soil information.
Q: What does NRCS conducting a full farm assessment look like?
A: The producer determines what whole farm means to them (could be based on logistics, rental property, land use, etc.). The assessment must be done on what is determined to be the whole farm. The assessment determines the resource concerns which can lead to funding decisions.
Q: Is RPP different from other programs?

A: Assistance should not be different. Under general EQIP, the landowner does not have to take soil samples. Under RPP, soil must be tested at beginning and at end of the contract.
Q: Laura Lurkins- How much money is allocated for RPP in IL EQIP and CSP?
A: 25% of IL NRCS funds are directed at RPP EQIP and CSP.
Q: Is IL NRCS receiving more money for RPP?
A: No, IL NRCS use 25% of the allocated FY26 EQIP and CSP funds then reallocate the money to RPP.
Q: Elliot Clay – Is NRCS collecting the producer's soil sample data to make state profiles?
A: The soils sample data is only for the producer and should not be publicly shared because it is personally identifiable information (PII). However, NRCS may use the data to determine how useful these programs are.
Q: Stacey Zuber - Soil samples were supposed to be sent to a national database in CEMA 216 is that still a part of CEMA 216?
A: Post Testing analysis after laboratory results are supplied, participants may submit laboratory test results and sampling location(s) coordinates to SoilHealthTest@usda.gov. Laboratory test results will be used to improve and strengthen the Soil Health Assessment Protocol and Evaluation process, procedures, and results (Nunes et al., 2024). No identifying information or results will be publicly available. Appropriate waivers to release participant information may be used to grant permission for the QI, or NRCS field office to submit the test results.
Q: Kris Reynolds – Is there a list of QIs?
A: No, there is no list of QIs. CEMA 216 has specific qualifications to be a QI that many people have the potential to meet. The producer will have to hire a QI, that can fulfill all the deliverables in CEMA 216.
Q: For producers who already have a CSP or EQIP contract on file, what should they do to join RPP?
A: The Field Office (FO) should be working with the producer to help them understand RPP and talk about CEMA 216 for soil sampling.
Q: How is the FO being supported?
A: They are receiving national mandatory training for RPP and soil health training. On the local level there were several program training courses and FO received handouts and guidance documents with information.
Q: How is soil health testing connected to SWCD?
A: Soil health testing is not directly connected to SWCD through legalities. SWCD wanted to establish a soil health baseline and build a state profile to inform what areas need more resources and how to run programs at a state level. NRCS soil health and SWCD soil health are running tangent to each other but not directly related to each other.
Q: Will soil testing or soil testing results be used for future eligibility?
A: Not at this moment. However, soil testing could indicate potential improvements for the entire ag operation beyond CSP.
Q: Saw Contour Orchard and Other Perennial Crop on (331) on the primary practice list. Is there additional training for FO or partnership with other organizations to provide tech assistance? Savanah institute could potentially help through a partnership.
A: On training, NRCS always provides training when they are needed. The FO may not be well informed on this practice because it is not typically sought out, but when it becomes more apparent, we add training, we may need to do targeted training. The FO can also reach out to the State Forester with questions. On partners, NRCS collaborates with partners to address our mission and the customers' needs.

Financial Assistance Programs - Jamie Alderks

RPP General Facts:
As part of participating in RPP, producers must:

- Work with NRCS staff, partners, or technical service providers to conduct a whole-farm assessment
- Use at least one primary regenerative management practices (found here)
- Agree to perform soil health testing in the first and last year of the contract (at a minimum) to establish a starting baseline and to record the resulting changes

The whole-farm assessment includes all resource concerns, and it must meet NRCS planning criteria in the soil and water resource categories.

Soil Health Testing:

- Soil health testing helps producers understand what their land needs to function well
- Conservation Evaluation and Monitoring Activity (CEMA 216)
    - A financial assistance opportunity for participants to hire Qualified Individuals (QI) or Technical Service Providers (TSP) to provide quantitative testing of soil
- Qualified Individuals (QI)
    - A QI is a trained reputable, competent professional who helps farmers and ranchers carry out soil health testing

IL At-A-Glance for FY25 (Handout):
FY25, EQIP total overall $29 M, organic transition initiative not happening this year, landscape conservation initiative all four continue into 2026
Q: Eric Gerth – Did EQIP funding for livestock practices hit 50% last year?
A: No, however, IL NRCS was able to flex budget and allocate funds for Cropland.
Q: Liz Rupel - Why did it not meet 50%?
A: At the time IL NRCS funded 50%, but then applications dropped out, also additional funds were given to IL NRCS, but no funds were set aside for livestock per the approval Tammy received.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP):

Program	Application Deadline (National)	Ranking Deadline	Number of Applications by 1/15/26	Fiscal Year (FY) Initial Allocation
CSP	January 15, 2026	May 15, 2026	1,378	$20,683,000
EQIP	January 15, 2026	March 20, 2026	3,379	$16,767,000

NRCS continues to accept applications year-round. The FO is currently ranking applications.

EQIP Categories and Budgeted Amounts:

Category	Estimated Budget %	Budgeted Amount
EQIP Initiatives		$1,744,929
Monarch Butterfly		$100,000
Northern Bobwhite Initiative		$750,000

Category	Estimated Budget %	Budgeted Amount
Mississippi River Basin Healthy Watersheds Initiative (MRBI) - Clinton Lake		$149,368
MRBI - Upper Macoupin Creek		$200,668
MRBI - Vermilion Headwaters		$298,640
National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) - Friends Creek		$119,673
NWQI - Money Creek		$119,535
NWQI - Panther Creek		$7,045
EQIP General		$15,022,071
Beginning Farmer/Rancher (BFR)*	5%	
Socially Disadvantaged Farmer/Rancher (SDFR) *	5%	
Cropland	3%	
Confinement*	50%	
Grazing*		
Forestland	1%	
Wildlife*	4-10%	
Regenerative Pilot Program (RPP) *	25%	
Livestock Conservation Planning Activities (CPA) and Design and Implementation Activities (DIA)	1%	
Cropland, Organic, and Misc. CPAs and DIAs		
Forest CPAs and DIAs		
Conservation Evaluation and Monitoring Activities (CEMA)		

*Required

Q: Kris Reynolds - Some practices have significant increases in payment, why is that?
A: Increases and decreases are due to changes to payment scenarios that are available, and a lot of changes in the units in the scenarios.
Q: Elliot Lagacy – Will we advise National to go back the other way with the units? The new unit calculations put a burden on the FO.
A: The reason we are using new units was a way to cut down the number of scenarios. States have expressed concern to NHQ.
Q: Ryan – Are the conversions that the FO use publicly available? It would be extremely valuable if they were made available.
A: The conversion calculations are not public, and they are not on the NRCS website. NRCS may make the software available for specific groups.
Q: Eric Gerth - Why did IL NRCS have a limited input on scenarios?
A: This is a new way of doing business to streamline business and cut down the number of scenarios. Resource Concerns (RC) have also been reduced. Partners may need to rethink how they do their cost lists.
Comment: TSPs, private contractors, and partners utilize these scenarios and it effects of conservation happening on the ground. These scenarios are important for the work we do.

Improving Management of Programs, Applications, and Contracts (IMPAC) for CSP and EQIP:
Objectives:

- Improving Customer Service to Farmers
    - Reduce program complexity and administrative workload
    - Ensure a farmer-focused and farmer-driven strategy in all aspects of program delivery

- Foundations:
    - Restoring Program Identity – Bring Clarity to Our Customers
    - Improving Application Management – Reduce Complexity
    - Effective Contract Management – Getting Conservation on the Land

- EQIP and CSP streamlining for our field offices:
    - Policy changes – ex. decrease in Area and State level review before obligation and removing several checklists
    - Reducing the number of ranking pools – goal to reinvent and streamline ranking with consolidation of prior ranking pools
        - Purpose to rank applications once and reduce partially funded applications. An applicant can be ranked in multiple categories. If funded in one category, all practices seeking funding will be included

- CSP IMPAC
    - No CSP Renewals - The renewal applications received will compete for funding with CSP Classic.
    - Activities - All enhancements and bundle codes will be removed. Only practice codes will be offered.
    - Existing Activity Payment (EAP) - Existing activity payment of $4,000 per year per contract.
    - Contract Limits for FY 2026:
        - $300,000 for individuals and entities (that are not joint operations).
        - $600,000 for Joint Operations (Business Type 2 or 3).

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP18) - Land Management and Rental (LMR):

- Application deadline 3/6/2026
    - 2724 – Lake Decatur Water Quality Initiative
    - 2727 – Improving Oak Ecosystem Health in the Great Lakes Region
    - 2734 – Unlocking Societal and Environmental Benefits in the Kankakee Watershed by Expanding Conservation Efforts
- Ranking deadline 4/24/2026

Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for 2026 coming soon. Most likely the timeframe between announcement of the NOFO and deadline to submit will be shorter. Interested partners can start conversations with Shannon Allen shannon.allen@usda.gov and Adam Wyant adam.wyant@usda.gov Co-RCPP Coordinators on the Financial Assistance Programs staff.

Agricultural Conservation Easements Program (ACEP):

Program	Application Deadline (National)	Ranking Deadline	Number of Applications by 1/15/26	Number of Applications Ranked by 2/6/26	Fiscal Year (FY) Initial Allocation
ACEP-Wetland Reserve	January 15, 2026	February 6, 2026	50	31	$3,727,000

Easements (WRE)					
ACEP-Agricultural Land Easements (ALE)	January 15, 2026	February 6, 2026	5	4	$1,245,000

Additional Easement Information:

- WRE and ALE funding decisions are pending.
- Wetland Reserve Enhancement Partnership (WREP) – Lower Wabash River
    - The boundary from FY 2025 was extended, which allowed IL to receive additional applications in the project area. We are requesting $2 million in WREP funds.
- Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) approved map distributed – thank you to the State Technical Committee for the input.
- Jamie Jones, Easement Biologist, accepted a position with the Critical Vacancies announcement and started on my staff August 25, 2025.
- Wetland Restoration Criteria and Guidelines (WRCG) – currently being updated. Will seek State Technical Committee's input in the future.

Q: Eric Gerth – What is the number of categories in the pool?
A:20 EQIP categories.
Q: Eric Gerth – RCPP are they doing anything to streamline that?
A: Not for this year, NFO will be similar but potential funding may be different.
Q: Jason – What is the timeline on 2734 – Unlocking Societal and Environmental Benefits in the Kankakee Watershed by Expanding Conservation Efforts.
A: This is the first year available in IL. NRCS is just taking signups for now. NRCS website has a map of all the areas involved. Indiana Dept of Ag is the lead partner.

NRCS Partnerships Agreements - Leadership Team

Tammy Willis - Vetting existing agreements in the state (extending, adding more funds, etc.). We have a data call and $15 M set aside for agreements. Funds to extend come from $15 M which is about $9 M, the rest which is about $6 M goes to notice of funding opportunity (NOFO). Point of contact (POC) for agreements will have conversation with tech committee, all agreements go to 5 years.
If we have an existing agreement with deliverables, those deliverables will not be in the NOFO. Moving forward this year all existing, new and NCE agreements must be approved by the Deputy Assistant Chief and the Assistant Chief first and then the Associated Chief before the Grant and Agreement Division approval.
Q: Katie Kauzlarich-Stockman – Pheasants Forever: There are rumors of new agreements going forward with 50/50 funding. Is that true?
A: We would like all agreements we are working on to be on a 50/50 match. We can add a waiver 75/25 to modify the funding but we have not tried to move one forward for approval yet. Things have changed and we don't know how the funding will shake out.
Q: Kris Reynolds- When extending existing agreements, do they still need to go through national?
A: Yes, they all must go to the Assistant Chief and the Deputy Assistant Chief first and then the Associated Chief before being approved by the Grant and Agreement Division.
The Chief wants to make sure all agreements are competitive.
Q: Kris Reynolds – Is there a way committees can help with IL NRCS workload?

A: Most work we need help with; we need certifications and training for. We are unsure if it can go in a NOFO. When creating agreements use the 5 priorities.

Local Work Group Comments - George Henshaw

For Local Work Group meetings, the SWCD mainly leads the meetings. NRCS will assist with the meetings. Tech Committee and Tammy (STC) will get feedback from those meetings to make decisions. By policy we are required to have a Local Work Group meeting every year. We will provide a summary.

Q: Kris Reynolds - What discussions are different this year vs last year? Last year there was a much bigger initiative.
A: Policy dictates what happens in the meetings, there may be changes to the policy. Yes, there was a push for it last year to help Illinois and focus on conservation that participants want to get on the ground.

FSA Updates - Jamie Diebal

Year-End Statistics:

- Annual rental payments were made in mid-December due to being on furlough.
  - In Illinois we issued around $171 million in CRP payments to our producers.
- As of October 1, 2025, Illinois has
  - Over 769,900 acres in CRP
  - Over 72,250 active CRP contracts, Illinois is 2nd in number of contracts behind Iowa and 13th in total acres nationwide.
- We have 9,433 contracts set to expire 9/30/26 which represents 120,797 acres. Last year we had 7,400 contracts and 71,000 acres that expired.

Recap of last year's signups:

- General SU64 – We had 869 offers and 657 (76%) were accepted totaling over 7,700 acres.
- Continuous SU63 – We enrolled approximately 45,000 acres.
- CLEAR30 – This was originally a pilot program that Illinois was a part of but has now gone nationwide. It allows producers, with expiring eligible water quality CRP practices that are in compliance, the ability to enter a 30-year contract.
  - Illinois has a total of 398 contracts for 3,695 acres
  - FY2025 was the 6th year of this CLEAR30 program

SAFE:

- As of October 1, 2022 (FY23), we now have the IL Pheasant SAFE Initiative (Northeastern/Central IL) and the IL Quail SAFE Initiative (Western/Southern IL) which encompasses the entire state.
- FY25 was our third year for the whole State being eligible for SAFE.
- Around 44,000 SAFE acres. With the new SAFE in FY25 we enrolled 12,800 acres.

CREP:

- CREP reopened, signup began June 15th, 2022
- Current enrollment is around 44,500 acres. Most will expire in the next four years.
- Currently we have 43 approved contracts for 808 acres.

Continuous Signup 65:

- Continuous Signup will be very competitive this year. Continuous Signup 65 began on Thursday, February 12, 2026.

- Batching offers on a first-come, first-serve basis due to the limited acres available. 27-million acres cap. Currently there are only 1.9 million acres available for all CRP enrollments this fiscal year.
- First batch will end on March 20, 2026. If acreage remains available, FSA leadership will consider offers submitted after this date in subsequent batching periods.
- We are three weeks into signup and have 740 offers submitted for a total of 8,300 acres. Nationwide there have been 98,600 acres submitted.

General Signup 66:

- Opens March 9th, 2026, through April 17th, 2026.
- Competitive bidding process. Producers can offer larger acreages and a lower rental rate for additional points.

Other Updates:

Counties are extremely busy right now with another new program that was announced, the Farmer Bridge Assistance program. This program provides a one-time bridge payment to row crop producers in response to temporary trade market disruptions and increased production costs. This signup started February 23rd and closes April 17th. Disaster programs – It is spring season, there are storms, if anyone needs assistance they can contact their local FSA office.

Q: IDNR- There is a 76% acceptance rate. What percentage had to take a reduced rental cost to be accepted?

A: We are unsure at the moment.

Q: With the amount of CP2 expiring in next few years, can they be converted to SAFE?

A: Generally, they can use SAFE up to the 10-acre cap, or they can go back to the General.

NLRS Update - Trevor Sample (IEPA)

- NLRS Conference was held November 5, 2025
  - Presentations on conference IEPA website
- NLRS Data Portal went live in December 2025
  - Go.illinois.edu/NLRSPortal
  - Current data through 2022
  - Working on interactive maps
  - Now picking up 2023-2025 data and we will be uploading later this year
  - Executive summary documents will have updated data from 2023-2025
  - Moving forward, in 2027, we will have annual updates to the Executive Summary
- Policy working group
  - Held at IL Department of Agriculture
  - Monday March 9th – Agenda IEPA website
  - In-person only
- Agriculture Water Quality Partnership Forum - April
- Nutrient Monitor Council meeting - June
- USGS water year 2024 data should be finalized and published on the USGS website later this month

Other Items - Open to Group

Tim Hughes – Program Manager for Commercial Aviation Alternative Fuels Initiative (CAAFI) - Came to this meeting to understand the network here. This region has a lot of interest because of Chicago airport. We can use corn and beans for fuel in the airline industry. Our goal is to be sustainable. We provide opportunities for cover crops. We have seen producers get 3 crops in 2 years with proper management. We are looking into sustainability research. U of I is doing work with switch grass, short rotation woody species, etc. CAAFI.org has a lot of useful information and resources.

Ryan Arch – LICA – There will be 3 drainage water workshops in Illinois. Denitrifying bioreactors, saturated buffers, DWM, and constructed wetlands on June 24th in Freeport, July 9th in Decatur, and August 5th in Noble. The target audience is landowners and contractors.

Greg Goodwin – annual farmer reporting season, operate with PepsiCo, work with producers who cover crop, no till for nitrogen reduction, Peoria hired a new person to serve that area.

Eric Gerth – IL Farm Bureau – Nutrient Stewardship Grants: 2026 17 projects, 26 FB Counties, Past 10 years awarded $1.75 M to 192 county led projects, Pollinator Conservation Grants: 2026 17 projects, 24 FB Counties, Past 5 years awarded $165,000 to 45 projects, Partnering with US Fish and wildlife for wetland restoration projects, 2nd year investing in program, Educational video series – Weeds with Karla integrated weed management, Field Days: March 19th, Will County - Soil Health & Economics, March 21st, Montgomery County - Cover Crops, Weed management, and other Conservation Opportunities, April 3rd, Jo Daviess County – Benefits of Integrating livestock into row-crop operations

Katie Kauzlarich-Stockman – Pheasants Forever – Wrapping up burn planning season, switching to status reviews. A lot of outreach for CRP sign up. We are putting ads in small town newspapers, IL soy podcasts, social media, In January yearly annual meeting. Fully staffed for NRCS but have one position open for Precision Ag & Conservation Specialist.

Elliot Lagacy – IL Department of Agriculture – eligibility and verification checks for CPRG program, Held I-COVER RCPP last year had a sign up but had to scrap it, new sign up soon for I-COVER, SWCD and soil health guidelines came out this winter, local SWCD in charge of coming up with local soil health assessment inventory, adopted STAR program a few years ago for soil health assessments when accepting state cost share dollars

Elliot Clay- SWCD - Trying to obtain funds. The annual conference is moving to East Peoria, Embassy Suites. I'm trying to get out to Local Work Groups and Land Use Council meetings in person.

Stacy Zuber – IL Soybean Association - April 30th 3-6 pm cover crop open house at SIU Belleville

Jill Kostel – Wetland Initiative – There will be a live fire demo with pheasants forever for a constructed wetland, participants need to complete virtual portion first. smartwetlands.farm

Justin – CREP closed first season since 2015, numbers of CREP participants will fall because new agreements require easements. Working on 26 additional easements. Continue SWCD and IDNR agreements.

Kris Reynolds - Multi state RCPP, 2nd year of supporting farmer-led advancements. There are groups in the state where farmers come together to identify resource concerns. Sign up now till April 10th.

Liz Rupel – Illinois Stewardship Alliance – Soil Health Week this week March 2nd -8th. Events found on website (ilstewards.org).

Jason Bleich– US Fish and Wildlife – FWS Leadership team worked with Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife on increasing CPA 52 Private landowners on restoration that would fit for producers who do not fit into farm bill, interested in partnerships

David Webber – IL NRCS – Hosting CPS Round Table meeting in March, in Springfield. The goal is to invite landowners (10-20) and come up with new ideas and discuss technical issues. Illinois has 7 practices to review.

Q: Do you need help getting farmers there?
A: The first one is all set up but maybe in the future.
Q: Eric Gerth- Is this the same effort that the Chief mentioned?
A: Yes.

Closing Comment - Tammy Willis

The next meeting will be July 16, 2026. Location: IL Soybean Association, 1108 Trinity Lane, Bloomington, IL 61704.