



Alaska State Technical Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes

Dec. 17, 2025

Hosted virtually on Microsoft Teams and in-person at the NRCS State Office located at 800 E Palmer Wasilla Hwy in Palmer, Alaska.

How To Submit Comments: STAC members are encouraged to submit their feedback, input and suggestions on technical topics that were presented at the December 17, 2025 meeting, using the online form located at:

<https://forms.office.com/g/4ISNykkSjY>

Deadline to submit comments is Monday January 12, 2026.

Attendees (65)

1. Alan McBee, NRCS
2. Aleya Brinkman, Fairbanks SWCD
3. Amy Erfling, Central Council Tlingit and Haida Tribes of Alaska
4. Andrew Tunnell, Doyon Limited
5. Austin Shero, NRCS
6. Beks Rumley, Chugach Regional Resources Commission TCD
7. Billy Jean Stewart, Bering Sea Interior Tribal Commission
8. Blythe Brown, Kodiak SWCD
9. Carly Pierson, Kenai SWCD
10. Cary Restino, farmer in Homer
11. Charles Parker, Alaska Village Initiatives
12. Chris Rainwater, Alaska Association of Conservation District
13. David Kroto, Tyonek Native Corporation
14. Deanna Snyder, Togiak TCD
15. Elizabeth Bezinque, NRCS
16. Emily Becker, Anchorage SWCD
17. Erin Sturdivant, Farm Service Agency
18. Helen Wiggins, Alaska Association of Conservation Districts
19. Ian Zacher, Kodiak SWCD and farmer
20. Jackie Kragel, NRCS

21. James, Tuyurak Tribal Council President
22. Jamie White, Cape Fox Corporation
23. Jason Gubatayo, Sealaska
24. Jason Pyron, producer, Sitkinak Island
25. Jeff Smeenck, Palmer SWCD
26. Jess Kirby, NRCS
27. Jessica Hay, local producer in Wasilla
28. John Whissel, Native Village of Eyak / TCD
29. Josh Schrecengost, NRCS
30. Kaitlyn Demoski, Native American Fish and Wildlife Society
31. Karen Linnel, Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission TCD
32. Katie Herzner, Intertribal Agriculture Council
33. Kayleen Ward Peter - T'ee Drin Jik (Venetie) TCD
34. Kelsey Schober, The Nature Conservancy
35. Kelsey Stanbro, Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission TCD
36. Kiara Biggs, Native Village of Eklutna garden manager
37. Kristina Peterson, NRCS West National Technology Center
38. Kyra Wagner, Homer SWCD
39. Laurie Stuart, Tyonek TCD
40. Leanna Heffner, Northwest Boreal Partnership
41. Leslie Senden, Alaska Farmland Trust
42. Malia Acovak, Qutekcak Native Tribe
43. Malia Villegas, Afognak Native Corporation
44. Marja Smets – vegetable farmer in Southeast Alaska
45. Mark Gutman, Upper Susitna SWCD
46. Mary Martinez, Calista Corporation
47. Megan Anderson, University of Alaska
48. Mitch Michaud, Kenai SWCD
49. Monica Iglesia, Pacific Birds Habitat Joint Venture
50. Monica Kopp, Homer SWCD
51. Natalie Velez – Eklutna TCD
52. Nate Wilson, AK Division of Forestry and Fire Protection
53. Peter Olsen, Koniag
54. Quinn Aboudara, Shaan Seet, Inc.
55. Rachael Roberson, Bering Sea Interior Tribal Commission
56. Ray Atwood, Asa'carsarmiut (Mountain Village) TCD
57. Richelle Plummer, Alaska Village Initiatives
58. Suzanne Little, Bering Sea Interior Tribal Commission
59. Theo Garcia, Knik TCD
60. Tim Lorenzini, Ahtna Incorporated
61. Tom Harris, Cape Fox Corporation

- 62. Tom Zimmer, Calypso Farm and Ecology Center
- 63. Tracy Robillard, NRCS
- 64. Trevor Dobell, Alaska Division of Forestry and Fire Protection
- 65. Wesley Jenkins, Farm Service Agency

State Conservationist Remarks

- Alan McBee, State Conservationist for NRCS welcomed everyone to the meeting and encouraged comments and input from Committee members on all topics discussed today. New leadership appointments at national USDA and NRCS include
 - Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins
 - NRCS Chief Aubrey Bettencourt
 - NRCS West Region Assistant Chief Hans Hunt
 - NRCS West Region Deputy Assistant Chief Emily Fife
- Chief's Priorities include: Preserve and Protect Agricultural Land; Modernized Technology; One Farmer One File; Improve customer experience; Improve internet connectivity; Strengthen our partnerships across the state by streamlining processes and accountability; Shift to Outcome-based conservation and farmer empowerment
- New pilot program for regenerative agriculture announced this month to help producers improve soil health with a nationwide investment of \$700 million. This is part of the "Make America Healthy Again" agenda. Practices will include forest stand improvement, nutrient management, pest management, prescribed grazing, cover crops, reduced till, no-till, and more.
- There is growing interest in Tribal Conservation Districts (TCDs) in Alaska with 3 new TCDs pending review by the Secretary. Alaska now has 24 TCDs and counting and working with Tribes is a priority in Alaska and USDA.
- FY25 in Alaska was a historic year. NRCS obligated more financial assistance than ever before at \$28.9 million. This could not have been done without working together as a team with staff and partners. Of note, 95% of funding to Historically Underserved producers and 56% of funding to Beginning Farmers.
- This year NRCS celebrated its 90th anniversary. NRCS was founded during the Dust Bowl to reduce soil erosion and help farmers install conservation practices. NRCS continues the legacy of our founder Hugh Hammond Bennett.
- Jackie Kragel is our new Acting Assistant State Conservationist (ASTC) for Partnerships and Elizabeth Bezinque is our new Acting ASTC for Programs.

Review purpose of the STAC

Summary of Information Presented: Josh Schrecengost gave an overview of the purpose and function of the STAC. The STAC is the primary mechanism for soliciting input and comments from partners on technical matters and for getting feedback. Membership is by invitation and meetings are open to the public. Generally, the fall meeting will be technical in nature, and the spring meeting will be to gather recommendations from Local Working Groups (LWGs) to inform decisions for following fiscal year.

Local Working Groups are sub-committees of the STAC where local input is gathered by local producers and partners. LWG input is reported to the STAC and informs decisions made for the next fiscal year. NRCS would like to see LWG meetings held December through March with reports provided to NRCS by March 31st, 2026. Resources are available including:

- LWG Fact Sheet
- Resource Concern Checklist
- Trained Facilitators
- Your local District Conservationist

Comments/Discussion: None

Review of Fall 2024 STAC Minutes

Summary of Information Presented: Josh Schrecengost read a summary of items discussed at the last STAC meeting, November 14, 2024. Meeting notes from that meeting are available on the STAC website.

Comments/Discussion: None

Source Water Concerns Discussion

Summary of Information Presented: Josh Schrecengost gave a presentation and asked for feedback about how Alaska should determine priority areas for potential funding for source water protection. The Farm Bill mandates 10% funding to benefit public drinking water supplies and private wells. The current priority areas are based on HUC12 watershed/hydrological units. Feedback is requested on specific areas of concern that need to be prioritized.

Comments/Discussion:

- Concerns with melting permafrost and its impact on source water
- Concerns about berry collecting sites located near landfills, sewage lagoons, and water treatment facilities.
- Concerns about PFAS (per and polyfluoroalkyl substances) in well water in the Glennallen area.
- Concerns about Brownfield site contamination impacting groundwater

Wetland Conservation Determination Offsite Methods

Summary of Information Presented: Josh Schrecengost led a discussion asking for feedback about how NRCS conducts offsite Food Security Act wetland determinations. Any producer receiving program benefits from USDA must be in compliance with wetland conservation provisions, also known as swampbuster regulations. NRCS conducts technical determinations of a proposed project site, reviewing soil, plants and hydrology. There are instances when an in-field visit may not be necessary and a determination can be made using various data sources. But in some cases, if the presence of a wetland is questionable, NRCS staff must travel to the site to conduct the review in-person. NRCS is seeking feedback on Alaska State Offsite Methods and about what types of data sources to consider for making off-site determinations.

Comments/Discussion:

- Concerns about changes to the Waters of the U.S. rule and how that may impact wetland provisions under the Food Security Act. NRCS does not make wetland determinations for Clean Water Act, which has direct ties to the WOTUS rule. NRCS does not yet know how the WOTUS change will affect wetlands overall, but Food Security Act provisions and definitions have not changed. An idea was presented for mapping wetlands in Alaska that could be used as a tool for reducing potential interference by WOTUS, however landowner privacy must be protected which may prevent a statewide mapping effort; NRCS will look into this further.
- Discussion that any decisions made on projects impacting wetlands, especially wetlands within anadromous waters, must be coordinated with a diverse team of stakeholders to ensure appropriate ecological function.
- Question about if partners of NRCS can become certified to do wetland determinations on behalf of the agency. This is not authorized as NRCS has legal authority to perform these technical determinations.
- Concern about losing wetlands on the Kenai Peninsula due to warming weather trends and other factors, and suggestion that NRCS explore how wetland determinations could do more to protect wetlands in the region. For example, categorize by a ground water standard that is less than 12 inches.
- Impacts of coastal areas that were flooded and greater chance those areas will have LiDAR data updated. NRCS has an Alaska geotechnical mapping group spearheaded by the state and they are creating a repository across the state.

Farm Service Agency Conservation Reserve Program management activities

Summary of Information Presented: Erin Sturdivant and Wes Jenkins from Farm Service Agency asked the Committee for input about proposed management practices for Alaska that could be offered under the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). This is a voluntary program that encourages producers to convert highly erodible lands, or other environmentally sensitive lands, to vegetative cover such as natural grasses, trees, and riparian buffers, in exchange for an annual rental payment and cost-share assistance to establish the vegetative cover. CRP contracts are usually 10 to 15 years. There is an opportunity to recommend Alaska-specific management activities. NRCS and FSA proposed a list of activities for Alaska and requests feedback.

Comments/Discussion:

- Practices need to be suitable for subsistence agriculture, such as mechanical tree manipulation for moose browse, for example.
- CRP doesn't work for a lot of Alaska; consider opportunities to have a different ranking system just for Alaska; Alaska is mostly underserved producers and could be a strong justification for a state set-aside.
- Request for adding no-till management.

Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC)

Summary of Information Presented: Jackie Kragel asked for input about the possibility of changing or keeping the GARC rate the same for Wetland Reserve Easements in Alaska in FY2026. The GARC is currently set at \$5,200 per acre and this is a rate used to calculate payments made to participants who enroll in the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Wetland Reserve Easements (ACEP-WRE). That rate was set in 2021 and has not been updated since; however there are no applications for ACEP-WRE in Alaska and due to the parameters of the program it is difficult to find an eligible project in Alaska.

Comments/Discussion:

- Consider having multiple rate caps based on specific regions, boroughs, or census areas in Alaska because land value is highly diverse across the state. The current GARC is one state-wide rate. NRCS will look into policy and will follow up.
- Leave the GARC as-is and revisit it in the future should NRCS receive eligible applications.

Beaver Dam Structures

Summary of Information Presented: Josh Schrecengost presented on a conservation practice scenario adopted by NRCS Alaska under Restoration of Rare and Declining Natural Communities for Beaver Dam Analogs. These are man-made structures that can look different depending on the unique needs of the site. Their purpose is to restore ecological function. Beavers add a very diverse and broad riparian area and that is much more

functional and resilient. This is an available practice in Alaska and is of high interest to partners, particularly on the Kenai Peninsula. NRCS is interested in feedback about how and where this practice could be applied.

Comments/Discussion:

- High interest across the state; consideration should be made to not install beaver structures in areas where historically beavers were not present.
- Concerns that the structures may attract too many beavers and create other ecological problems, citing an effort in Utah to relocate beavers away from sites where these structures were installed.
- One Committee member has direct experience with these structures in Idaho through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners program and emphasized the need for conservation planning and considering maintenance of the structures.
- Consider using beaver dam levelers as a potential add-on to the NRCS practice, similar to a Structures for Wildlife practice.
- Recommendations for developing a companion program for beaver structures that would focus on planting vegetation to provide beaver food and habitat such as poplars and cottonwoods so that beavers would have a food source to stay and maintain their lodges. Request was made of NRCS to provide technical information regarding how much food beavers would require and food source types.
- Emphasis on the purpose of the practice being ecosystem restoration and recharging groundwater; not solely for the purpose of increasing beaver population, because flood plain connectivity can happen even without beavers on the landscape.
- Homer Soil and Water Conservation District is working on a project to install a beaver dam structure in a residential area; and Koniag, Inc. also has several examples of low tech restoration.
- Concern about how the Waters of the U.S. (WOTUS) and permitting may apply to beaver dam structures.
- Concerns that anyone installing a beaver dam structure must coordinate with diverse stakeholders as these projects have ecological impacts downstream and may have impacts to salmon habitat and anadromous waters.
- Knik Tribe expressed interest in hosting a Beaver Dam Structures workshop or training; multiple members on the Committee supported a training event and expressed interest in attending.

Raised Bed Interim Practice

Summary of Information Presented: Josh Schrecengost shared that NRCS Alaska has adopted a new interim practice for raised beds, based on feedback from Local Working Groups. This was piloted by NRCS in New Jersey, and Alaska is adopting their standard on a

trial basis. The practice allows for raised beds only on grounds where plants cannot be grown, for example on bed rock or contaminated soils.

Comments/Discussion:

- Consider soil temperature and using a raised bed in places where the ground is too cold to grow food, which is nearly all of Alaska. Soil temperature is addressed through high tunnels and low tunnels; the raised bed practice specifically targets soil suitability.
- Consider if raised beds could be built higher than the 24 inch height limitation currently listed in the interim practice standard to accommodate people with mobility needs and Tribal elders.
- Recommend bundling this practice with a low tunnel and potentially other practices to maximize conservation benefit and leverage NRCS capacity wisely.
- Consider requiring a minimum number of raised beds to receive NRCS assistance.
- Consider using metal for the raised beds instead of rot-resistant wood, based on experience at the Tyonek Grown Garden. Logs can be used as long as they are rot-resistant but still present some challenges compared to metal.
- Receiving raised bed assistance from NRCS may hinder an organization's ability to apply for other sources of funding for agriculture projects that support similar work.
- Could this be coupled with a new interim practice for establishing vegetable storage or root cellars? This type of project does not meet NRCS resource concern requirements but would be suitable for a Community Facilities Grant from USDA Rural Development.

Non-ungulate Grazing and Bale Grazing Interim Practices

Summary of Information Presented: Karin Sonnen, State Range Specialist, presented two new interim practices for grazing that would be available for Alaska on a trial basis. The first practice, 822 – Nonruminant Livestock Outdoor Management of Vegetative Cover, would provide NRCS assistance for producers using pigs, chickens, and other non-ruminant species to address a resource concern, such as building soil health, reducing sediment/nutrients moving to surface water or groundwater; or improving a productive, diverse plant community.

The second interim practice is 872 – Strategic Harvested Forage Management, also known as Bale Grazing. This practice allows livestock to graze on strategically placed hay bales on a field during the winter months, using electric fencing to control access to grazing areas. Bale grazing can improve soil health on the field, improve plant productivity and forage production, reduce farm energy inputs, and improve soil infiltration. Forage response rate on trials that have used bale grazing are significantly higher than hay land that was dry lot spread. This practice is an alternative to feeding hay in a hay lot.

Comments/Discussion:

- Consider using chickens to control invasive weeds
- Consider waste hay left on the field and its impact on forage production. Some waste hay is expected and positively impacts production; too much waste hay can either be dragged or eaten by animals and is generally not a problem.
- A bale grazing trial in Homer was mentioned and the producer noticed significant regrowth in the hay field after using this practice.

Other Topics / Open Discussion

- **Tribal Conservation District support:** There is a TCD Symposium January 14 – 16 in Anchorage, open to anyone interested in learning more about TCDs. Contact Laurie Stuart, Executive Director of Tyonek TCD at 907-278-1021 or email lstuart@ttcd.org
- **Regional Tribal Advisory Council:** Karen Linnel from Ahtna Intertribal Resource Commission is a representative for Alaska on the NRCS West Regional Tribal Advisory Council. In this role, she has a voice in making sure Alaska's needs are made known to agency leadership and can help advocate for changes to policy or programs. If your organization would like to connect with this Council, please contact Karen at 907-822-4466 or email karen@ahtnatribal.org
- **National Resource Inventory (NRI)** –NRCS is currently trying to get remote sensing active in Alaska. Alaska is the only state that does not currently have NRI. The last NRI report was in 2007. This is a work in progress. For more information contact State Soil Scientist Cory Cole at 907-761-7759 or email cory.cole@usda.gov.
- **Process for Introducing a New NRCS Conservation Practice for Alaska:** The STAC is the appropriate mechanism to introduce an idea for a new conservation practice. If the practice aligns with an NRCS resource concern and meets priority needs in the state, NRCS may develop a new interim standard that would go through a review process at the national office. It is a lengthy process, and ideas may or may not be accepted. Another option is that NRCS may adopt an interim practice that has already been introduced by another state. Interim practices are done on a trial basis so that stakeholders may offer feedback and determine if it should be permanent practice.

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