

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service South Dakota State Technical Advisory Meeting Minutes

April 21, 2026, | 9 a.m. Central Time

Hybrid meeting on Teams and in person held at the Capital Visitor Center, Pierre, SD

[NRCS SD STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE WEB PAGE](#)

Welcome and Opening Remarks:

- Colette Kessler, Assistant State Conservationist for Partnerships, welcomed attendees and announced her retirement effective April 30, 2026, with nearly 36 years' service with the USDA NRCS serving South Dakota.
- Jessica Michalski, Acting State Conservationist, revisited the purpose and vision of the STC and subcommittees and how they should be functioning for South Dakota. She spoke of Chief Bettencourt's priorities and how SD NRCS is centered on aligning state level actions while addressing local resource concerns and program demand.

Congressional Delegates Updates: Jim Selchert (Senator Rounds) and Reid Rasmussen (Senator Johnson) provided federal updates.

STC Steering Committee Updates:

- **Farm Service Agency,** Roger Chase, State Executive Director covered Farmer Bridge Assistance, disaster relief, Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) signups, and drought monitoring. Drought and Emergency Programs and assistance are ongoing with Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) activities and continued requests. Roger highlighted Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP) response to the December windstorm, with five counties participating in debris removal and restoration efforts.
- **South Dakota Conservation Districts:** Angela Ehlers, Executive Director updated district activities highlighting assistance with conservation program signups and eligibility checks, emphasizing partnership efforts to support producers, and conservation districts are busy with tree and grass seeding plans and planting.
- **South Dakota Department of Environment and Natural Resources:** Hunter Roberts, Secretary of Agriculture, provided updates on water quality assessments, buffer initiatives, legislative funding, and ongoing monitoring projects, including contract statistics and plans for water quality improvement, progress with the Riparian Buffer Initiative, and Legislative support through Senate Bill 222 providing one-time funding. Hunter noted the Conservation Commission's upcoming meeting with 15 grant applications and discussed drought conditions affecting southern hills and statewide water resources.

- **SD Game, Fish & Parks:** Kevin Robling, Secretary, addressed wildlife and habitat management specifically forest recovery efforts, wildfire responses, and big -game management considerations. His department staff highlighted expected increases in park visitation and continued growth in fishing and hunting license sales, reflecting strong public engagement. They reported that 1.65 million acres of private lands were enrolled in access programs last year.
- **Natural Resources Conservation Service:** Jessica Michalski, Acting State Conservationist, presented updates on NRCS staff numbers, new congressional correspondence procedures, producer roundtables for conservation practice feedback, and alignment with Chief Bettencourt's priorities, including partnerships and technical assistance.
 - **Staff:** Jessica stated that NRCS staff in South Dakota have 260 employees statewide. SD NRCS is working hard to maintain field office coverage with Acting District Conservationists.
 - **Producer Roundtables:** Jessica described the initiation of producer roundtables, with the first held in Redfield focusing on salinity and soil management, and a second scheduled for April 22 in Wall with practices related to pasture, hay land, and water management.
 - **Chief's Priorities:** Jessica emphasized commitment to Chief's priorities for strategic planning and highlighted ongoing partner collaborations for technical and financial assistance.
 - **Technical Assistance and Fire Response:** Jessica reported NRCS staff outreach to private landowners affected by recent wildfires, offering technical and financial assistance, and noted limited impact on privately owned land.

South Dakota USDA NRCS Department Reports and Subcommittee Updates:

- **Program Subcommittee Report:** Val Dupraz, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs presented a comprehensive overview of NRCS programs (EQIP, CSP, RCPP, ACEP), detailing funding pool structures, management practice payment changes, high priority practices, application statistics, and allocation processes, with extensive Q&A on project selection and operational efficiency.

The four primary NRCS programs—EQIP, CSP, RCPP, and ACEP—were explained for their purposes, eligibility, partnership opportunities, and conservation practice standards.

Val provided an update on the recommendations from the last meeting. There were four recommendations to implement in fiscal year 2026. They have been implemented as follows:

Updated internal language from small scale to specialty production to align with partner agency and simplify for customers. Additionally, the suggestion to rank

specialty producers in a separate fund pool was also adopted. Current year fund pools are very similar to prior years with the addition of the national Regenerative Pilot Program (RPP) receiving 25% of the state allocation per National instruction.

Management Practice Payment Changes: payments were reduced from five to three years for most pools, except RPP, to spread funds further and provide solid implementation experience and align with National priorities.

The 10 high priority practices were retained and are used in high priority areas.

Current Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) component of ACEP allows acceptance of 30-year offers as high priority prioritizes applications with Geographic Area Rate Caps (GARCs) to avoid appraisal requirements. This update saved NRCS time and expedited application processing.

Val provided statistics on allocation, applications and funding requests, noting significant increases in allocations, complex ranking and selection processes, and ongoing requests for additional funds. Participants questioned the low acceptance rate, criteria for project selection, and operational costs, with NRCS discussing ranking systems, technical assistance, training, and efforts to improve efficiency and reduce administrative costs.

ACTION ITEMS:

- NRCS Budget and Operating Costs Data: Obtain and share a breakdown of NRCS operating costs versus producer payments for South Dakota, including percentage of technical assistance dollars. **Update: This information is not readily available at the state level because leases are managed at the national level. If a partner would like to request this information please contact Jessica Michalski, Acting State Conservationist at Jessica.michalski@usda.gov and she will assist you through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) process.**
- Allocations for Fiscal Year 2026 for SD NRCS are as follows:

Program	Financial Assistance or Technical Assistance	Initial Allocation for FY2026	Additional Funds Received May 2026	Total
Conservation Technical Assistance	Technical Assistance	\$10,577,000		\$10,577,000
Agricultural Conservation Easement Program Wetland Reserve Easements	Financial Assistance	\$3,565,000		\$3,565,000
Agricultural Conservation Easement Program Agricultural Land Easements	Financial Assistance	\$1,810,000	Will request additional funds June 2026	\$1,810,000
Agricultural Conservation Easement Program	Technical Assistance	\$1,875,000		\$1,875,000
Conservation Reserve Program	Technical Assistance	\$11,418,000		\$11,418,000
Conservation Stewardship Program	Financial Assistance	\$17,707,000	\$1,800,000	\$19,507,000
Conservation Stewardship Program	Technical Assistance	\$3,421,000		\$3,421,000
Environmental Quality Incentives Program	Financial Assistance	\$31,883,000	\$18,805,753	\$50,688,753
Environmental Quality Incentives Program	Technical Assistance	\$4,581,000		\$4,581,000
Regional Conservation Partnership Program	Technical Assistance	\$5,274,600		\$5,274,600

- ACEP ALE funding request and ranking details for additional ACEP ALE applications considered for funding; include in minutes. (Jessica)
 - Response: SD Plans to request funds in the upcoming June fund assessment for the next four ALE projects for a total of \$11.5 million dollars.
- **Ecological Sciences Subcommittee Report:** Ryan Kruse Acting State Resource Conservationist discussed updates to technical guides and practice standards, based on input of the Subcommittee members. Changes include grazing management, fence, soil carbon amendment, nutrient management, and wildlife habitat practices, with input sought from subcommittee members and plans for biannual updates.

Technical Guide Updates:

- Range and woodland tech note- new tables for edible tree and shrub species and clarified the biannual update schedule for ecological science standards.
- Enhancements to wildlife habitat planting standards and the addition of remote scouting and mitigation requirements for pest management.
- **Engineering Subcommittee Report:** Jim Reedy State Conservation Engineer and the engineering team reviewed new national standards for controlling existing flowing wells, discussed evaluation requirements, water quality concerns, and livestock shelter structure standards, including anchoring and angle bracing requirements. He reported on Subcommittee discussion and recommendations.

Flowing Well Control Standard: Jim explained the adoption of national standard 352 for controlling existing flowing wells, requiring evaluation by licensed well drillers and compliance with state and local regulations. Jim recommended developing implementation requirements for job sheets, ensuring field staff and producers understand necessary steps and technical expertise involved.

Water Quality and Well Construction: Jim discussed water quality testing, construction standards, and recent changes to well standards based on producer roundtable feedback and state requirements.

Livestock Shelter Structure Standards: Jim described the adoption of standard drawings for livestock shelters, emphasizing the need for angle bracing and anchoring to meet wind load requirements, with ongoing review of vendor and field feedback.

ACTION ITEM: NRCS Well Evaluation Cost Estimate: Obtain and share an estimate or range for the cost of licensed well evaluation for controlling existing flowing wells. Jim Reedy will provide a report at the September meeting.

- **Tribal Conservation Advisory Committee (TCAC) Subcommittee Report:** Nathan Grueb, State Tribal Liaison, provided an update on the formation of a dedicated steering committee for the TCAC aiming for appointed representatives from each tribe to improve focused participation and education on ranking and program processes. Nathan is working to establish committee within the TCAC of appointed members from each tribe, targeting goal as July 1, 2026. A subcommittee meeting will be held this summer.
- **Local Working Groups (LWG):** Jessica, Angela, and Paul Lorenzen, SD DANR, discussed the reinvigoration of local working groups through training, steering committee formation, and outreach, emphasizing the importance of local meetings for resource concern identification, solution development, and project planning.

Jessica described recent training sessions led by Ray Ledgerwood, Board Works by Ledgerwood, for conservation district board members and employees, followed by the formation of a LWG steering committee to support local work group facilitation. Angela highlighted examples of local resource concerns, such as erosion control and pipeline needs, and the process of engaging diverse stakeholders in local work group meetings. The group discussed ongoing outreach with conservation districts, sharing information and encouraging participation, with a goal of establishing 23 local work groups by October 1, 2026.

Paul Lorenzen mentioned upcoming Conservation Commission discussions on prioritizing grants for local work group projects, and the potential for assistance from non-governmental organizations and partners.

ACTION ITEM: Local Working Groups Participation - Reach out to conservation districts that did not participate in recent trainings to encourage involvement in local working groups and provide necessary resources. (SD DANR, NRCS, SDACD with help from partners)

- **Partner Updates:** SD Grassland Coalition: Judge Jessop, SD Specialty Producers: Angela Jackson, Pheasants Forever: Matt Gottlob, and Ducks Unlimited: Bruce Toay
- **Closing and Future Meetings:** The group confirmed plans for continued program development, conservation practice standards evaluations, and preparation for future funding cycles. The next State Technical Committee meeting is scheduled for September 9, 2026, at Matthew's Training Center in Pierre, SD.