



Natural Resources Conservation Service

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Alaska State Technical Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes

April 28, 2026

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

Attendees (45)

1. Amanda Cox - Fairbanks SWCD
2. Malia Acovak - Qutekcak
3. Ray Atwood – Asa'carsarmiut TCD
4. Kelsey Schober - The Nature Conservancy
5. Paul Slenkamp - Cape Fox
6. Laurie Stuart - Tyonek TCD
7. Malia Villegas - Afognak Native Corporation
8. Mitch Michaud (KSWCD & AACD) Forester
9. Richelle Plummer, Alaska Village Initiatives
10. Jason Pyron, Sitkinak Ranch
11. Ian Zacher (Feirme Bear Donn)
12. Andrew Tunnell – Doyon Limited
13. Deanna Snyder, Togiak TCD
14. Katie Herzner, Intertribal Agricultural Council
15. Kyra Wagner – Homer SWCD
16. David Kroto – Tyonek Native Corporation
17. Mary Martinez - Calista Corporation
18. Megan Andersen - UAF
19. Suzanne Little - Bering Sea Interior TCD
20. Joni Scharfenberg - Fairbanks SWCD
21. Margaret Adsit – Alaska Farmland Trust
22. Carly Pierson-- Kenai SWCD
23. Tom Harris – CEO, Knikatnu, Inc
24. Mark Weekes – Ahtna, Inc.
25. Kristi Tapio-Harper – Native American Fish and Wildlife Society
26. Amanda Cox - Fairbanks SWCD
27. Max Lyons – Kodiak Archipelago Leadership Institute
28. Kristina Peterson – NRCS West Technology Center in Portland
29. Karin Linnell - AITRIC
30. Jon Oestreich - NRCS
31. Beks Rumley - Chugach Regional Resources Commission
32. Tracy Robillard - NRCS
33. Jackie Kragel - NRCS

34. Austin Shero - NRCS
35. Chris Tcimpidis - NRCS
36. Michael Daigneault - USFWS
37. Mark Johnson - Unalakleet Native Corporation
38. Kelsey Stanboro - AITRIC
39. Nate Wilson – Alaska Division of Forestry
40. Josh Schrecengost - NRCS
41. Elizabeth Bezinque - NRCS
42. Ashley Novella - Anchorage SWCD
43. Wesley Jenkins - FSA
44. Helen Wiggins - AACD
45. Emily Becker - Anchorage SWCD

NRCS Programs Summary

Summary of Information Presented: Elizabeth Bezinque, Acting Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, gave a presentation about NRCS programs and the types of conservation practices that are commonly used in Alaska on various land uses. See presentation slides for details.

Review of Fall 2025 STAC Minutes

Summary of Information Presented: Josh Schrecengost read a summary of items discussed at the last STAC meeting in December 2025.

Comments/Discussion:

- Some agricultural producers at the last STAC said that they did not find the meeting valuable as some topics weren't pertinent to their operations. Farmers/landowners are not being paid to attend the meeting like other agency/organization staff. NRCS is looking into ways to get input from farmers and producers on the STAC in shorter sessions that are focused on a particular topic or practice relevant to them.
- Emphasis on Chief of NRCS's new priorities focused on conservation easements, IT/connectivity, One Farmer One File, Partnerships, and Outcomes-Based Conservation and Farmer Empowerment.
- NRCS is moving forward on the raised bed practice and has some producers working on adopting it this year.
- STAC is the appropriate place for partners to bring things to NRCS for consideration of an interim practice.
- Question: For a future meeting, could we consider discussing AI land management? There are AI tools available for landowners that can assist them in management, and the Alaska Farmland Trust is looking into this and could potentially talk more about this with STAC partners.

Local Working Group Reports – Homer/Kenai/Tyonek

Summary of Information Presented: Kyra Wagner with Homer SWCD gave a report on their local working group meeting which took place in February, in partnership with Kenai SWCD, Tyonek TCD, Salamatof TCD, and Chugach Regional Resources Commission. They had 30 people present. See the slide presentation with meeting outcomes.

Comments/Discussion:

- It was recommended to have farmers/producers split into a separate group or a separate meeting.
- There is a need to inform and educate people about salmon habitat conservation practices. One key practice would be to make sure landowners working with NRCS understand how their farm operation “fits” into salmon habitat in the watershed and the potential for salmon habitat conservation practices on their farm.
- Tyonek is working on their 16th culvert this year, opening 500-600 lake acres of salmon habitat. The formulas for EQIP payment scenarios need improvement. When calculating percentage of costs, NRCS funded about 50%, but it cannot be done without support from USFWS and NOAA. It’s a layered and complex situation.
- It’s important to consider single landowner projects for fish passage (such as Tyonek) vs multiple landowners, such as residents in Homer working across multiple land ownerships.
- If there is a fish passage issue, who applies? Typically, the landowner is the EQIP applicant. Don’t try to navigate the process on your own, reach out to NRCS field office early and often.

Local Working Group Reports - Fairbanks

Summary of Information Presented: Amanda Cox gave a report-out of the Fairbanks Local Working Group. Their focus was agricultural producers and farmers, not agencies. See slide presentation with meeting outcomes.

Comments/Discussion:

- No NRCS Field Office in Fairbanks – customers are confused and don’t know where to go for help. There is a general lack of awareness of NRCS in the Fairbanks SWCD boundary.
- Fish passage needs in the area are not on private lands and therefore are not always a good fit for NRCS programs.
- Fairbanks is such a large SWCD boundary; it’s difficult to reach everyone including on-road and off-road communities. The Nenana Ag area will need more assistance from NRCS.
- NRCS encouraged partners and landowners to continue coming to NRCS to request assistance. More demand overtime will help NRCS bring more staff to the Fairbanks Service Area.
- About 10 years ago, the FSWCD explored a potential trail project with NRCS in a rural community but there was miscommunication or lack of understanding to tie the project to a natural resources concern. Action Item: Josh Schrecengost and Elizabeth Bezinque will meet with Joni Scharfenberg to discuss this project in

more detail and see if NRCS can pick up this project.

Local Working Group Reports - Anchorage

Summary of Information Presented: Emily Becker gave an overview of the Anchorage Local Working Group. They held a series of technical sessions designed for producers/farmers. 38 people showed up and they were all producers. Emily recommends offering something valuable to producers such as a training course or workshop to help encourage participation. For example, tips for selling at farmers markets, backwards planning for Community Supported Agriculture, property tax exemptions for producers, low-footprint livestock (ex: quail) for backyard operations in the city environment.

Comments/Discussion:

- Who do we refer people to at the NRCS? Need to know more about the process so an SWCD can introduce landowners/producers to the NRCS and help brief them on the process.
- NRCS is working on providing training to our partners to help them understand how NRCS operates, our program process, eligibility, etc. so that partners can be more efficient in connecting producers to the NRCS and getting them started on the path.
- NRCS jargon is complex and like another language, so often SWCDs must make their producers needs/concerns “fit” into the NRCS programmatic structure.
- Ian Zacher shared that in Kodiak there was a lot of value in the SWCD staff and NRCS planners conducting field visits at the same time with farmers/producers on their farms.

Snow Survey Presentation

Summary of Information Presented: Daniel Fisher gave an update about Alaska snow survey conditions and data. See presentation slides for details.

Organic Presentation

Summary of Information Presented: Kristina Peterson with the USDA NRCS Organic Transition Initiative gave an update on support for organic farmers. See slide presentation for more information. STAC members were asked to work through their local field office rather than contacting Kristina Peterson directly.

Regenerative Pilot Program Overview

Summary of Information Presented: Austin Shero presented on the new Regenerative Agriculture Pilot Program and explained its emphasis on soil health testing which is new for Alaska. Fortunately, we already have some early adopters who have signed up this year. We expect this program to continue next year. See presentation slides for more detail.

Comments/Discussion:

- Will soil health information be shared? Yes, NRCS can share general information on the RPP program in and end of year report. However details of individual soil health test results cannot be shared because it belongs to the landowner or operator. There will be a database that is voluntary and program participants can choose if they want to include their data.
- How does this program affect the likelihood of small-scale producers wanting a high tunnel or a low tunnel? The majority of applications for RPP this year were with high tunnel clients and small farms. There are many opportunities for small scale producers to participate in this program. Applications through RPP are a national priority for USDA and NRCS.

Discussion of Program Ranking Criteria

Summary of Information Presented: Elizabeth Bezinque led a discussion of NRCS program obligations over the last 12 years, current year applications and forecasting for FY2027 programs. Of note, last year, FY25, was one of our most successful years in Alaska. We funded 54 contracts and had an obligation rate of 96% for the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Nationwide, the obligation rate was 28%.

Ranking is important to understand. NRCS assigns an objective value to every eligible application to effectively rank and prioritize available funding. Information shared from the STAC and Local Working Groups allows NRCS to prioritize the projects that are identified as a specific need in the communities in which we work. Information on ranking priority is available on the NRCS Alaska website.

Changes for FY2026 – we get 5 fund pools per program. This is mandated for every state. There is also no obligation to meet livestock requirements. This year we received 96 applications, 79 of those are eligible. Each of the 4 “Teams” / regions in Alaska has their own geographic funding pool. This is new, as we have not had geographic funding pools previously.

NRCS will use the input shared today by the Local Working Groups to inform our resource priorities and program priorities for FY2027. We expect to keep doing Regenerative Pilot Program next year. We will continue to have geographically tied funding pools.

Comments/Discussion:

- Are there limitations on geographic funding pools? No. Funds not spent in a funding pool could be moved into other geographic areas.

- Payment scenarios were re-assessed nationwide in the fall of 2025 and a lot of changes were made. Unfortunately, the payments for trails and walkways were reduced, rendering some projects in Alaska economically unfeasible at this time. NRCS state leadership is pressing this issue with national headquarters and continues to advocate for increasing the payment rates.
- Concern was expressed that not enough partners/representation is on the State Technical Advisory Committee to represent all of Alaska especially off-road communities. All Committee members are welcomed and encouraged to suggest nominations for committee membership. Please submit names and/or entities to Tracy.Robillard@usda.gov or call 907-982-3436.
- NRCS gladly accepts input from Local Working Groups and those groups can be organized by a SWCD or a TCD, or they could also be organized within a community. For support about organizing a local working group in your community please contact Jackie.Kragel@usda.gov or call 907-982-5349.
- How would competing projects rank for funding, for example a high tunnel competing with a fish passage project? That would depend on the funding pool it goes into, and high tunnels are continuing to get funded consistently year after year. Applications go through a competitive process. Historically the competition in Alaska has not been steep. At times our funding outpaced our demand. Yet now we are in a situation where demand is outpacing funding.

Other Topics / Open Discussion

Comments/Discussion:

- How are STAC agenda items selected? There are required topics that NRCS must present to the STAC and request input based on policy. The spring meeting is focused on local working group reports and resource priority discussions to inform the next fiscal year's programs. The fall STAC can address interim practices or new technical standards. Josh Schrecengost builds the agenda and topics are based on input from NRCS leadership and input from the Committee. Committee members are welcome to suggest agenda items to NRCS.
- There was a request to include a TCD report at the fall STAC, with each TCD sharing an update to NRCS about their resource priorities. The TCD network has a monthly call which could be an opportunity for NRCS to facilitate a session using Mentimeter to poll the group and report back to the STAC.
- A new Office of Seafood within the U.S. Department of Agriculture was recently created. NRCS doesn't have any additional information about it at this time. Farm Service Agency works with farmed kelp and farmed oyster producers, but they don't work with wild-caught operations (NOAA does).

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