

ND State Technical Committee Meeting – June 10, 2026 – Notes

Today's meeting was held at the North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives. The Facilitator for today's meeting was Mark Hayek, Assistant State Conservationist - (Partnerships Coordinator), USDA – Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Mark thanked everyone for coming and started with introductions around the room.

Dan Hovland, State Conservationist, USDA – Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), welcomed everyone to today's meeting. Dan gave a brief update on the ND State Tribal Advisory Council that met for the first time on June 09, 2026, at United Tribes Technical College. Dan discussed the FY '26 budget and how Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) applications remain strong. Dan mentioned that North Dakota requested an additional 45M in EQIP and CSP programs to help implement conservation across the landscape in ND addressing customer needs, addressing backlog and impacting resources on the ground. ND had a 37% and 46% acceptance rate respectively for each program. Dan mentioned that ND NRCS' staffing numbers are down to 200 from 300 and we are looking at doing more with less as it pertains to getting conservation on the ground. Dan also mentioned that Colton L. Buckley is the new Chief of NRCS and his goals center on protecting and sustaining working lands, modernizing NRCS's tools and services, ensuring strong technical support for farmers, and fostering partnerships that benefit both agriculture and the environment.

Brad Thykeson, State Executive Director, USDA – Farm Service Agency (FSA), gave an update on the reduction of staff and how they are maintaining staffing in 51 offices to continue to serve the producers. Brad mentioned that ND is one of two states that are piloting a new program called Geospatially Enhanced Acreage Reporting (GEAR) system. GEAR introduces mapped field boundaries and geospatial reporting as the new baseline for how crop acreage data is collected and shared across USDA programs.

Brent Gustafson, State Soil Health Specialist, NRCS, walked the committee through a new program called the Soil Health Economics Tool. The tool is designed to help planners and producers estimate the economic impact of adopting a soil health system through implementation of conservation practices 328 Conservation Crop Rotation, 329 No-Till, and 340 Cover Crop. Based on the data and selections, the tool will return an annual per acre estimate of the producer's return over direct costs under the planned soil health system compared to the return under benchmark conditions.

Richard Webb, State Resource Conservationist, NRCS, presented an update on General Manual Title 450- Technology, Part 401 – Technical Guides, Subpart B – Conservation Practice Standards and Supporting documents. The Waiver Policy outlines procedures for handling technical waivers to ND practice standards and specifications. This policy is intended to allow for consideration of practices that have been applied but do not meet ND standards and specifications. Technical waivers allow for consideration of good faith actions where a practice was applied that does not meet current ND standards and specifications; however, the practice must achieve the intended purpose of the relevant conservation practice standard for the life of the practice. Variance Policy outlines procedures for handling technical variances to ND practice standards and specifications. This policy allows for the evaluation of technology, materials, procedures, etc., that are not currently contained in practice specifications or technical notes found in the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG), but evidence warrants further consideration and evaluation.

Erica Althoff, Acting State Conservation Engineer, NRCS, provided an update on recent watershed projects, Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program, and Field Engineering overview. There were three watershed projects that were terminated or not feasible, four watershed projects that the planning has been completed, and seven dam rehabs projects and three ops (two dams and one irrigation) projects that the planning is still ongoing. EWP Program is assistance resulting from damage in the aftermath of a disaster, which poses an imminent threat to life or property. It starts with the Sponsor sending a request letter to the State Conservationist and cannot be used to fix problems that existed before disaster. Field Engineering provides technical and financial assistance to individual producers and works with EQIP and CSP programs.

Jennifer Vetter, Assistant State Conservationist (Compliance), NRCS, presented the feedback that was given from the State Technical Committee back in July 2025 and the first nine months of the 18-month interim period of the Wetland Minimal Effect Determination Process and Decision Matrix. Jennifer discussed the feedback that was given, clarify treatment of rare and unique wetlands, improve transparency in functional assessment threshold, and enhance producer engagement and training on procedures. Please provide any input on the National NRCS Wetland Minimal Effect Determination Process and Decision Matrix to Jennifer Vetter by September 30, 2026.

Jarvis Keney, Assistant State Conservationist (Programs), NRCS, explained what the Regenerative Pilot Program (RPP) is and its requirements. RPP is a farmer-first, outcomes-based approach to conservation designed to return the agency to its core mission, helping people help the land, by addressing whole-farm resource concerns through support for voluntary regenerative agriculture Conservation Plans. Regenerative agriculture is a conservation management approach that emphasizes natural resources through improved soil health, water management, and natural vitality for the productivity and prosperity of American agriculture and communities. RPP requirements include whole farm assessment, primary practices, soil health testing, and a minimum 5-year contract.

Jarvis Keney went on to give an update on North Dakota FY '26 CSP and EQIP data. CSP had 404 applications ranked with 187 applications preapproved, which 44 of them were funded under the RPP category using \$18,056,825. EQIP had 1,610 applications ranked and 602 preapproved with 62 applications preapproved under the RPP category using \$21,516,620, 16 applications preapproved under the AFO category using \$4,450,367, and 95 applications preapproved under the Wildlife category using \$5,591,406.

Dan Hovland and Mark Hayek thanked everyone for attending the State Technical Committee Meeting and providing feedback.

Questions asked/Concerns:

Concerns with the primary nesting season dates for haying during certain conditions (MOU or CRP Improvement Act).

Action Items:

Due by September 30, 2026, to Jennifer Vetter: Feedback on the Minimal Effect Determination Process and Decision Matrix Interim Process.

Next Meeting: TBD.