

Tennessee State Technical Committee Meeting

(hybrid via Teams)

Tennessee State University (TSU) Farm Pavilion

1513 Ed Temple Blvd Nashville, TN 37208

Tuesday, May 12, 2026, 9:00 AM–12:30 PM (CT)

NRCS and Guest/Partners:

USDA–NRCS Tennessee

- Trevor Hunt, Assistant State Conservationist, Partnerships (Facilitator)
- Rossi Pedroza-Bertrand, State Public Affairs Specialist
- Jordan Edwards, Public Affairs Specialist
- Conor Fay, Public Affairs Specialist
- Harold Pettigrew, State Outreach Coordinator
- Fred Walker, State Outreach Coordinator
- Jamie Quarfeld, State Urban Conservationist
- Linda Ortiz, State Resource Conservationist
- Leslie Honicker, State Agronomist
- Robin Mayberry, State Biologist
- Garrett McFall, State Forester
- Daniel Jones, State GIS Specialist
- Garrett Morris, Assistant State Conservationist, Programs
- Vanessa Merriweather, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Manager
- Devin Ross, Regional Conservation Partnership Program, Manager
- Chris Wolkonowski, Assistant State Conservationist, Field Operations, Area 2
- Arthur Hawkins, Assistant State Conservationist, Field Operations, Area 3
- Jonjala Jackson, Acting Conservation Stewardship Program, Manager
- Ben Shamblin, Forester, Area 2
- Evan Laible, Acting Agriculture Conservation Easement Program, Manager
- Kelly Gupton, Acting State Conservation Engineer

Partner Agencies/Organizations

- Brittney Viers-Scott, Tennessee State Coordinator, Pheasants Forever/Quail Forever
- Jillian Tramel, Grazing Coordinator, Quail Forever
- Tyler Hand, Biologist, Ducks Unlimited
- Dharma Pitchay, Professor, Tennessee State University
- Sindhu Jagadamma, Assistant Professor, Tennessee State University

- Sherry Crudup, Research Assistance, Tennessee State University
- Katrina Seaman, Research Associate, Tennessee State University
- Karina Bynum, Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Water Resources, Nutrient Reduction Task Force
- Kaela Walton-Sather, Working Lands Division Manager, Cumberland River Compact
- Chase Hulan, Forest Conservation Specialist, Tennessee Wildlife Federation
- Brad Miller, Private Land Program Manager, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency
- Greg Pate, Conservation Impact Consultant, Tennessee Forestry Association
- Mary Pate, Conservation Impact Consultant, Tennessee Forestry Association
- Candace Dinwiddie, Executive Director, Tennessee Forestry Association
- Allana Funderbunk, Landscape Conservation Program Specialist, Tennessee Department of Forestry
- Emily Stefanick, Conservation Projects Manager, Panther Creek Forestry/Tennessee Forestry Association
- Heidi McIntyre-Wilkinson, Program Manager, Tennessee Department of Agriculture
- Dale Parker, Executive Vice President, Tennessee Cattlemen's Association
- Jacob Taylor, Precision Ag & Conservation Specialist, Quail Forever
- Dustin Boles, Biologist, US Fish and Wildlife Service
- Hosea Houston, Chief Executive Officer, Life Building Incorporated
- Sheena Marshall, Producer
- Ira Jones, Producer
- Kallie Renner, Producer
- Will Singleton, Producer
- Marlon Foster, Chief Executive, Knowledge Quest
- Mary Schmidt, Urban Orchard Manager, The Works Inc.
- Zachary Luttrell, Director of Agriculture, The Nature Conservancy
- Jeff Powelson, Conservation Delivery Coordinator, American Bird Conservatory
- Sarah Smith, State Conservation Program Specialist, Farm Service Agency
- Finis Stribling, Area Small Farmer Specialist, Tennessee State University
- Angela Warden, Technical Service Provider Soil Scientist, Angela Warden Consulting LLC

Agenda Overview (as delivered)

1. Opening remarks (Trevor Hunt, Assistant State Conservationist, Partnerships)
2. FY2026 Financial Assistance Allocation, Financial Assistance Obligation Progress, and FY 2026 Programmatic Calendar (Garret Morris, Assistant State Conservationist, Programs)
3. Conservation Practices, Revision, and State Adoption (Ecological Sciences: Linda Ortiz,)
4. Farm Service Agency Updates on CRP Enrollment and Payments (Sarah Smith, Conservation Program Specialist)
5. Quail Forever Precision Agriculture and Conservation (Jacob Taylor, Precision Ag Specialist)
6. Subcommittee Overviews:
 - Urban Agriculture led by Arthur Hawkins, Assistant State Conservationist, Field Operations, Area 3

- Wildlife led by Dustin Boles, Biologist, US Fish and Wildlife Service
 - Forestry led by Candace Dinwiddie, Executive Director, Tennessee Forestry Association
7. Partner acknowledgments and agency/partner updates (Trevor Hunt, Assistant State Conservationist, Partnerships)
 8. Final Comments (Trevor Hunt, Assistant State Conservationist, Partnerships)

1) **Welcome – Trevor Hunt, Assistant State Conservationist, Partnerships**

- Good morning. Thank you all for being here today. It is good to see each of you and thank you for those who have joined us virtually.
- Many thanks to NRCS staff for preparing in getting items ready for today's meeting.
- Welcome to our new State Technical Committee Members.
 - Tyler Hand, Ducks Unlimited
 - Patrick Dill, Ducks Unlimited
 - Alex Jackson, Tall Timbers Mid-South Regional Program

Tennessee State Technical Committee

- State Technical Committee (STC) and subcommittees continues to be a vital part of Farm Bill implementation. NRCS depends on your knowledge and expertise to implement Farm Bill programs that are locally led.

Operations-Staffing

- As of April 18, 2026, NRCS has **219 active employees** (excluding interns). We are converting some summer interns to permanent positions.
- We were able to utilize temporary promotions/details to fill in critical gaps across the state.

NRCS Priorities

- Producer Roundtables are being conducted to discuss our Conservation Practice Standards. Two roundtables have been completed, and preparations for a third are currently underway.

Farm Bill Programs

- **Regenerative Agriculture Pilot Program**
 - 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.
 - A total of \$18.6 million in RPP has been preapproved under EQIP, exceeding our target of 25 percent.
- **Easement Monitoring**
 - As of May 7, 44.8 percent of easement monitoring has been completed, representing a total of 176 monitored easements.
- **Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)**
 - TN received an additional \$8 million dollars for EQIP.
 - EQIP preapprovals are underway.

Emergency Watershed Protection Program

- Construction has been completed on 168 Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) sites, with 1 site under construction out of the 170 impacted by Hurricane Helene. Tennessee is recognized for strong EWP implementation.

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2) Program Updates & Funding – Garrett Morris, Assistant State Conservationist, Programs

- Tennessee received an initial allocation of \$78.7 million for mandatory programs: Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), and Agricultural Conservation Easements Program (ACEP).
- Additional funding was received: \$8 million for EQIP in April, \$15 million prior (with \$12 million to EQIP and \$3 million to CSP), bringing the total to over \$101 million for the year.
- Funding distribution: About 66% of financial assistance goes to EQIP, 25% to CSP, with RCPP and ACEP allocations based on project budgets and partner discussions.
- RCPP funding is stable, determined by five-year project budgets and partner input, not affected by additional state allocations.
- Pre-approvals for EQIP and RCPP are underway; CSP pre-approvals will start soon.
- EQIP funds must meet agency and statutory requirements: 25% for regenerative pilot program, 50% for livestock, 10% for wildlife, 5% for beginning farmers, and 5% for socially disadvantaged applicants.
- CSP has similar requirements, except no livestock or wildlife percentage mandates.
- Multiple requirements can be met with a single application (e.g., beginning farmer who is also a livestock producer and participates in the regenerative pilot program).
- Additional EQIP and CSP funds are largely directed to local working group pools, where conservation needs and practices are determined at the local level.
- CSP funds are split between agricultural land and non-industrial private forest land.
- Demand for specific practices (e.g., forestry) drives future budget adjustments; if demand exceeds budget, NRCS can request additional funds from national headquarters.
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- Encouraged local working groups input to shape funding pools.

3) Conservation Practice Standards – Linda Ortiz, State Resource Conservationist

- Tennessee currently has about 119 conservation practice standards in the Field Office Technical Guide, reflecting 91 years of conservation work in the state.
- The main role of these practices is to protect natural resources, improve operations against climate changes, and ensure sustainable, productive farming.
- National Office creates or updates conservation practice standards, then requests input from states (internal review), followed by publication in the Federal Register for public comment.
- States must adopt new or revised standards within a year, either as-is or with state-specific modifications.
- Tennessee typically publishes updated standards on October 1 to start the fiscal year with a fresh set, minimizing confusion for field staff.
- The State Technical Committee is involved in reviewing and providing feedback on state-specific adaptations, with a 30-day input window.
- In April, Tennessee completed internal review of 19 conservation practices; new sets are expected monthly, with the next batch due May 15.

- There is significant movement in updating and creating new practices this year, reflecting a push for more practical, effective, and locally tailored standards.
- The process for requesting new standards or adapting national standards to Tennessee is open, especially during comment periods.
- NRCS is prioritizing "farmers first" by holding producer roundtables in West, East, and soon Middle Tennessee to gather direct input on conservation practice standards.
- Each roundtable focuses on specific practices relevant to the region and producer type (e.g., row crops, poultry, cattle, stream restoration).
- Input from these roundtables may be shared with the State Technical Committee, pending approval.
- Producer and partner feedback is actively sought to ensure standards meet local needs and conditions.
- Linda Ortiz is the TSP coordinator for Tennessee, encouraging subject matter experts to become TSPs to help NRCS implement planning, design, and conservation practices, expanding capacity to address resource concerns and deliver Farm Bill programs.

4) Farm Service Agency Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Update – Sarah Smith, State Conservation Program Specialist

- Over 91,000 CRP acres enrolled in Tennessee, with annual payments totaling about \$9.8 million. Most CRP acreage is concentrated in West Tennessee, but expansion into East Tennessee is occurring.
- CRP enrollment is broken down into general sign-up (whole field practices), continuous sign-up (water quality and wildlife practices), HEL (Highly Erodible Land), and Clear 30 (30-year contracts for specific practices like riparian buffers and bottomland hardwoods).
- Clear 30 contracts are relatively new, with about 77 acres enrolled; these provide 30 years of conservation for eligible practices. Expressed appreciation for NRCS/TSP planning support.
- Grassland sign-up supports working lands for grazing and hay production, with average payments of \$14 per acre. This is intended as an incentive for better land management while allowing continued farming.
- General sign-up has about 70 offers awaiting ranking, with an expected total of 700 applications needing technical support.
- FSA relies heavily on NRCS and Technical Service Providers (TSPs) for conservation planning and implementation, especially given the high volume of applications.
- FSA encourages producers to use Farmers.gov or visit county offices for information and assistance.
- HEL (Highly Erodible Land) initiatives are available for land with higher erosion risk, providing targeted conservation support.

5) Precision Ag & Conservation – Jacob Taylor, Precision Ag & Conservation Specialist, Quail Forever

- Quail Forever has expanded its team in Tennessee to 15+ staff working with private landowners, focusing on both wildlife and farm profitability.
- Encourages producers to use precision ag data to identify opportunities for conservation and connect with programs like CRP, EQIP, and CSP.

- Quail Forever employs a large conservation delivery staff, with a precision agriculture program aimed at integrating wildlife conservation as a business tool for farmers, improving their financial outcomes while establishing beneficial habitat.
- Farmers use precision ag technology (yield monitors on combines) to collect geospatial yield data every second during harvest, and mapping productivity across fields. Discussed expanding landscape-scale wildlife habitat connectivity.
- Quail Forever helps producers analyze this data to identify marginal/problem areas where crops consistently underperform, often due to environmental factors like soil type, moisture, or proximity to tree lines. Responded to monitoring question: site checks ongoing; larger-scale monitoring may be added.
- Financial analysis is performed to calculate losses in these areas, guiding decisions to repurpose them for conservation practices

6) Subcommittee Updates

Wildlife – Dustin Boles, Biologist, US Fish and Wildlife Service

- Provides feedback to NRCS on wildlife-related application of EQIP, CSP, and other programs.
- Major updates to conservation practice standards for FY26, including hedgerow plantings, upland wildlife habitat management, seasonal water management for wildlife, wetland restoration/enhancement.
- Improvements to guidance documents, implementation requirements, and scopes of work.
- Recent meeting was held on April 28 on practice standard updates, payment scenarios, training for mussels/fish.
- Anticipated further streamlining and reorganization of wildlife practices in FY27 by headquarters.
- Payment Scenarios: Noted improvements for riparian herbaceous cover, but challenges for streambank stabilization (especially for banks over 10 feet tall due to rock requirements).
- Aquatic Organism Passage: Identified need for a Tennessee-specific manual to assist conservation planners; Georgia's guide cited as a useful resource.
- Levi Morgan (NRCS-funded biologist) will lead summer training for Area 2 staff on freshwater mussels and fish. Members and NRCS staff are encouraged to send topics/issues for review; new members welcome.
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Forestry – Candace Dinwiddie, Executive Director, Tennessee Forestry Association & Greg Pate, Conservation Impact Consultant, Tennessee Forestry Association

- Increase forest management and positive agricultural practices, streamline procedures, improve communication, and ensure timely payments for landowners and Technical Service Providers.
- Aimed to increase forest management participation.
- Promoted the Accredited Forester Council and searchable forester directory.
- Agreed on value of compiling resource lists for landowners.
- Improve Technical Service Providers' fee schedules and payment processes.
- Review and provide input on forestry-related practice standards.
- Strengthen partnerships and develop training opportunities with NRCS, Division of Forestry, consultants, and accredited foresters.

- Online tool connecting landowners with accredited foresters (BS in forestry, SAF school, 5+ years' experience, code of ethics, continuing education).
- Landowners can search by county, service interest, or use direct connect.
- Aim to expand TSPs from accredited forester list.
- Positive feedback received; NRCS cooperative agreement supports this initiative.

Urban Agriculture – Arthur Hawkins, Assistant State Conservationist, Field Operations, Area 3

- Reported on outreach efforts for small-scale/urban producers.
- Support urban and small-scale producers, inform them of resources, and provide feedback to NRCS/State Conservationist.
- Biannual meetings will have a hybrid format, hosted at urban farms; the meeting will include updates from State Conservationist, Urban Conservationist, Program Specialist, Ecological Sciences, and Partners (e.g., Tennessee Department of Ag, Xerces Society, Extension, FSA, RMA). Outreach on state technical committee information, local workgroup opportunities, and technical guides.
- Promote new practices (e.g., raised beds, low tunnels, pollinator habitat).
- Assess and utilize regenerative pilot program for urban/small-scale producers.
- The last meeting was held in Memphis at The Works, featured presentations from nonprofit leaders and urban farm CEO, focused on regenerative agriculture and outreach.
- All are welcome to attend meetings or share resources for urban agriculture producers.

7) Partner & Agency Updates

Tennessee State University – Dharma Pitchay, Professor

- TSU reaffirmed its commitment to partnership with NRCS, highlighting ongoing collaboration in teaching, research, and extension focused on sustainability, nutrient management, water use efficiency, and conservation stewardship.
- TSU highlights 75 scientists working on sustainability and conservation stewardship, and extension agents in 66 counties.
- TSU invited NRCS and partners to collaborate further and utilize their resources for joint projects and workforce development in conservation.

Cumberland River Compact – Kaela Walton-Sather, Working Lands Division Manager

- The Cumberland River Compact's Grazing School program, which educates the best management practices of rotational grazing, has a class on May 18th in Lawrence County. The next class is slated for September 2026, looking for a host farm in West TN. This program has helped improve management over 12,000 acres in Tennessee.
- Farmers who attend the Grazing School are eligible for Cumberland River Compact's cost-share program to install exclusion-use fencing along creeks and streams. The program can cover up to 80 percent on the cost of supplies. This funding can be paired with NRCS funding for other practices.
- For farmers using regenerative practices (not just livestock-specific) that prioritize soil health and protect water quality, are encouraged to apply for the River Friendly Farms certification through the Cumberland River Compact. It is a free certification that provides marketing benefits to help

amplify these farmers' businesses. Currently there are 22 certified farms in Tennessee and are looking to certify another 30 farms over the next two years.

Tennessee Dept. of Agriculture (TDA) – Heidi McIntyre-Wilkinson, Program Manager

Agricultural Resources Conservation Fund (ARCF)

- FY27 Round 1 application period closed April 15; ~\$5M in allocations now being determined.

Section 319 Nonpoint Source

- Grant FY25 award letters sent week of May 11,
- Environmental Protection Agency issued FY26 allocation notice on May 5, 2026,
- FY26 proposals accepted until December 1, 2025; review and ranking done April 2026.

Gulf Hypoxia Cover Crop Project (GHP)

- All FY26 funding is allocated to eligible Soil and Water Conservation Districts.
- Two more years of funding remain for eligible counties.

Tennessee Riparian Incentives Program (TRIP)

- Provides \$3,000/acre (up to 5 acres) as an add-on incentive for CP-22 or CPS 391 riparian buffers.
- Now available statewide; funded by Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC).
- Participants apply via Farm Service Agency/TDA forms Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) or TN 391 Incentive Riparian (IR)+ TDA Form AG0811 Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP).

New Programs in Development

- Tennessee Farmland Preservation Act: ~\$25M program in development to support permanent conservation easements; public hearing held February 2026.
- Living Waters Edge: New Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation-funded program supporting streambank repair using bioengineering; \$5M over 5 years, including engineering/design support.

Tennessee Department of Forestry - Allana Funderbunk, Landscape Conservation Program Specialist

- The [Forest Legacy Program](#) is a federally funded competitive grant program that funds conservation easements to protect eligible working forests at risk of conversion to non-forest uses. This program is currently accepting application through May 22, 2026.
- The [Hurricane Helene Agricultural and Timber Relief Fund](#) is part of the TN Disaster Recovery Block Grant Program funded by the USDA, and is now accepting applications through July 21 to support farmers and forestland producers who experienced economic impacts from Hurricane Helene.

Action Items

- Confirm permissibility of sharing roundtable feedback with State Technical Committee (STC) (Linda Ortiz & Trevor Hunt).
- Evaluate adoption of Conservation Practice 624 (phosphorus removal system) (Linda Ortiz).
- Create list of forestry resources and programs (Forestry Committee).
- Collect/post subcommittee minutes (Trevor Hunt).
- Consider developing quail habitat monitoring protocol (Jacob Taylor).
- Identify producers for Riverfront Farms certification outreach (Cumberland River Compact).
- Contact Heidi for assistance with streambank design (All partners).

Adjournment – Trevor Hunt, Assistant State Conservationist for Partnerships

- I want to thank all the presenters today and, again, thank you all for attending today's meeting.
- At this time, are there any announcements to make from individuals in the audience or on the call?
- We will have meeting minutes and presentations posted to our website within 30 days of this meeting. The recording will also be available from today's meeting.
- Our next meeting is scheduled for August 11, 2026.