

STAC Meeting Minutes

August 20, 2026

Virtual Meeting

Meeting Opened at: 9:30 AM

Introduction: Nick Vira, NRCS Acting State Conservationist

Attendance: 40 Attendees: Alicia McCarthy, WA State Dairy Federation; Andrea Cox, Washington Association of Wheat Growers; Angela Reseland, WDFW; Anna Lael, Kittitas County CD; Aubrie Hoxie, NRCS; Beca Hebron, Foster Creek CD; Caleb Gwerder, Farm Bureau, Cameron Stoflett, Spokane Tribe; Carlee Elliott, NRCS State Easement Program Manager; Chris Clemons, NRCS; Connor Thompson, DU and NRCS; Dan Larsen, Kitsap CD; Dani Gelardi, WSDA; David Rose, NRCS; Elaine Oneil, WFFA; Eric Nelson, Conservation Easement Liaison; Emmett Wild, Skagit CD; Heather Wendt, WACD; Joseph Theil, DNR; Kara Kaelber, Franklin CD; Katie Maneval, Makah Tribe; Kaitlin Davies, FSA; Kirk Pearson, Rural Development; Lacey Menasco, RMA; Laura Starr, NRCS; Levi Keesecker, SCC; Mary Root, USFWS; Mike Baden, Spokane CD; Naomi Gebo, JBLM Centennial Landscape; Nick Vira, NRCS; Nikki Aikman, Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe; Patrick Bell, FSA; Peter McBride, NRCS; Sara Gardner, Xerces; Shannon Curran, Foster Creek CD; Stan Hoffman, Department of Health; Stephanie Martin, FSA; Tami Stubbs, WSCC; Thomas Sexton, Benton CD; Tiffany Verdusco, NRCS.

Opening Remarks: Nick Vira, NRCS Acting State Conservationist

Roylene is currently on extended family medical leave, but has been returning periodically to keep things moving along.

NRCS has until the end of August as our new deadline to get contracts signed and approved; the state is currently ~85% complete.

CRP Updates with FSA: Stephani Martin, FSA

There has been severe damage across the state from wildfires. FSA initiated an emergency haying and grazing request to national headquarters. With the STAC meeting several weeks away and due to the urgency of the matter, and with concurrence from Keith Griswold, acting NRCS State Conservationist, FSA submitted the request to national headquarters before receiving STAC concurrence. The request was approved on August 5th, and FSA is actively offering that program to interested producers. Land enrolled in CRP that is used for emergency haying and grazing, as approved under this program, will not be subject to reduced payments.

CRP Update with NRCS: David Rose, NRCS Acting State Resource Conservationist

NRCS has been working with FSA on technical updates. Hot topics that are being discussed include:

- Plant Density for dry areas (<12")
- Two-year fallow period
- Two-year establishment period
- Seeding rates, methods and trials
- Grazing-specific windows by County

Plant density – current guidance is 0.8 plants per square foot. Still working on a discussion to reduce the density. **Two-year fallow period** – we can request up to 24 months. In some cases, that may not be enough time, but a further extension has not yet been granted. **Two-year establishment window** - NRCS or a TSP needs to conduct the site visit to determine establishment. **Seeding rates** – the guidance is very old. There is a request to lower the seeding rates based on the fact that newer seeding methods are more effective and exact at placing seed at proper depth. Seeding methods include: no-till drill, conventional drills, broadcast seeding, and drone seeding. The NRCS Plant Materials Center (PMC) is trialing these methods to better inform our proposal. **Grazing timelines** - will need to be revisited with changes coming from national.

Who do we reach out to about seeding rates with drones? Suggestions included: Kevin Davis, NRCS State Agronomist, Dr. Steven Lee at the NRCS PMC, and Nick George, Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

Washington State's Plan for RPP: David Rose, NRCS Acting State Resource Conservationist

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.

Regenerative Pilot Program Requirements:

- Whole Farm Assessment
- Primary Practices
- Soil Health Testing
- Minimum 5-year contract

Vision

- NRCS-WA boosts Washington's working lands by promoting regenerative agriculture to enhance soil, water quality, natural vitality, and lasting resilience.

Mission

- Assist producers to enhance environmental results and increase farm profitability through comprehensive regenerative conservation plans for the entire farm.

Strategic Goals

- Goal 1 — Expand Regenerative Agricultural Planning Throughout Washington - Increase the proportion of NRCS assessments that meet regenerative agriculture criteria: 25% in FY26, 50% in FY27, 75% in FY28, 100% by 2030.
- Goal 2 — Strengthen Soil Health Outcomes - Use whole farm assessments and promote CEMA 216 soil health testing for producers to track changes in soil function over 5-year contracts.
- Goal 3 — Increase Producer Access & Participation - Simplify program applications, reduce barriers to program participation, including connecting producers with Qualified Individuals (QI) and Technical Service Providers (TSP).
- Goal 4 — Build Partnerships with Tribes & Local Organizations - Expand collaboration on regenerative agriculture with Tribes, Conservation Districts, Coalition for Organic & Regenerative Agriculture (CORA), and other partners across Washington.

Objectives & Supporting Activities

- Objective A — Build Staff & Partner Capacity - Provide training on regenerative practices and whole farm planning; update RPP guidance and tools. Continue efforts to build QI/TSP networks.
- Objective B — Improve Communication & Outreach - Share success stories, newsletters, webinars, and promote QI/TSP availability with partners and the public.
- Objective C — Enhance Program Delivery - Integrate soil health and regenerative agriculture fundamentals into conservation planning and practice implementation requirements (IR's).
- Objective D — Support Whole Farm Adoption - Conduct whole farm assessments for all regenerative agriculture focused EQIP/CSP applications and encourage adoption of primary regenerative practices.

STAC Recommendations Requested

- NRCS is requesting input to help refine the list of resource concerns and practices being offered and help identify the land use(s) that have the greatest need based on critical soil and water resource concerns.

Action Item: Submit input on resource concerns and practices being offered and land use(s) that have the greatest need based on critical soil and water resource concerns to [Nick Vira](#) by September 11th.

See WACD's webinar to learn more about TSP's - <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/state-offices/washington/nrcs-wa-regenerative-pilot-program-information>

Easements: Carlee Elliott, NRCS State Easement Program Manager

Wetland Easements – The basis for the compensation offer for an easement or 30-year contract enrollment will be the lowest of the following: the fair market value, the geographic area rate cap (GARC), or the amount voluntarily offered by the landowner. NRCS is consulting with STAC on

GARC. We offer the same as surrounding states (Idaho and Oregon). Perpetual easements are offered 85% of the individually appraised fair market value of the subject property, not to exceed \$5,000/acre, unless there are federal or state threatened and endangered (T&E) species present or if the site is considered essential habitat for species recovery. In those cases where T&E species are present, there will be a hold down of \$10,000/acre. (The \$5,000/acre figure is the maximum outlined in policy, unless the state establishes a justification for a higher amount). Compensation on 30-year easements and 30-year tribal land use contracts is 75% of the calculated 30-year value, capped at \$5,000 per acre.

Action Item: Review and submit comments on the geographic area rate cap (GARP) to [Nick Vira](#) by September 11th.

NRCS is looking at increasing Geographic Area Rate Caps (GARC) for FY28 based on feedback from DU partners; the percentage is not enough of an incentive for producers to participate.

Farmland Preservation – NRCS presented edits to the ranking criteria. ALE are permanent conservation easements. NRCS provides matching funds for the easements. NRCS ranks applications based on project merit. Before January 2026, rankings were created in state, with national guidance. There was an extra \$200 million, so there was a national sign-up offered in January 2026. The next state sign-up is scheduled for December 18th. NRCS is recommending adding three additional questions to the ranking.

- Lead entity has demonstrated performance; monitoring submitted?
- How fast does it take for the entity to close on the easement?
- Has the producer/landowner executed regenerative practices?

Pros and Cons:

- Pro - Highlight stewardship monitoring as priority
- Pro - Entice eligible entities to increase response/appraisals
- Pro - Become competitive nationwide in event of another national signup
- Pro - Align WA with national policy shifts and updates
- Pro - Consistency in documentation
- Pro - Strengthen oversight
- Pro - WA scoring defensible at national reviews
- Con - Be cognizant & maintain state priorities

Action Item: Review and submit comments on the proposed three additional ranking questions to [Nick Vira](#) by September 11th.

Migratory Big Game Initiative Subcommittee Plan: Nick Vira, NRCS Acting State Conservationist

Western states are integral to the health of big game species. NRCS is working with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Tribes to determine priority areas. They are working on a strategy to move programs across big game habitat. Through coordination, they are hopeful to protect big game habitat. The committee has been looking at

programs and priority areas that most benefit these species. For EQIP, they are looking at fencing improvements to not restrict game movement, removal or replacement, as well as biological management practices. In forested areas, they are looking at reduced wildfire risks, promoting high-quality summer forage on rangeland, reduction of invasive species, and restoring climax communities. Easements are looking for adjacency to wildlife corridors. They are also looking at identifying elk areas. This subcommittee is seeking to create program application ranking points that will benefit this objective. The team also identified required and supporting practices, as well as a whole host of supporting practices. At the next STAC, they will provide a briefing on the strategy plan.

Wildlife Subcommittee Update: NRCS Peter McBride, State Biologist

State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) breaks out species by ecoregions. Ecoregion boundaries vary markedly from NRCS field offices, so they are not well aligned for use by field office staff. A workgroup was formed – starting a pilot project with the Palouse Team (Spokane and Whitman counties) to identify species of greatest conservation need (SGCN) in that area.

Farm Service Agency Update: Kaitlin Davies, FSA State Outreach Coordinator

FSA has wrapped up the county committee nomination period and is reminding people to come out and vote in the fall. FSA has also made some updates to payment eligibility and payment regulations. We will now count some LLC's as pass-through entities. This will not have a large impact on how NRCS does business, but producers may be redoing their structure with FSA to take advantage of the new payment limitations. FSA also changed some elements to the adjusted gross income form; that form still exists; however, for certain disaster and conservation programs, producers will have the option to certify that 75% of their income comes from farming, ranching, or silviculture, making them exempt from the \$900K AGI limitation. Programs affected by this change include: Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-raised Fish; Livestock Forage Program; Tree Assistance Program; Non-Insured Crop Disaster Assistance Program; Conservation Reserve Program; Conservation Stewardship Program; Environmental Quality Incentive Program; Agricultural Conservation Easement Program; and more.

You can now book with FSA online. FSA is working on approving CRP contracts. All contracts need to be approved by the end of September. FSA has wrapped up assistance for specialty crops; \$43 million was disbursed, with another \$1 million needing to be disbursed. FSA extended the deadline for the supplemental disaster relief program. So far, they have disbursed \$365 million, and applications are still coming in the door.

Additional assistance for livestock producers includes the Livestock Forage Program, Livestock Indemnity Program, and the Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-raised Fish Program. The deadline for these programs is March 1, 2027.

Crop programs include the Non-Insured Crop Disaster Assistance Program and the Tree Assistance Program. The Tree Assistance Program applies to Christmas trees but not to timber.

Additional conservation programs include the Emergency Conservation Program and the Emergency Forest Restoration Program. NEPA and cultural resources are required for these programs if ground-disturbing activities are planned.

Emergency loans will be available once an emergency declaration is made. Loans up to \$500K or the actual amount of the loss. Sign-up period is 8 months from when the declaration is made.

NRCS Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program – waiting for declaration and for first responders to be done with their work. Then they will send a team out to gauge feasibility. EWP webinar for potential project sponsors will be in early September. Once that is established, Nick will send out a notice.

Closing Remarks: Nick Vira, NRCS Acting State Conservationist

Thank you all for attending. Roylene wants to keep you informed so that you can help provide guidance to our agency. We look forward to seeing you at the next STAC in November, when we expect updates on details on the USDA reorg and staffing, update on Emergency watershed program (EWP) activities, Local Work Group (LWG) annual reports, and migratory big game initiative state plan rollout, as well as prescribed burning implementation, to be considered as a practice for EQIP.

Next STAC Meeting – November 19, 2026, virtual meeting

Tribal Session begins at 1:30 pm today.