

State Technical Committee



Natural Resources Conservation Service

New Jersey State Technical Committee

200 Clocktower Drive, Suite 101, Hamilton Square, NJ 08690

Meeting Date: Wednesday, December 07, 2023

Meeting Location: Microsoft TEAMS

Evan Madlinger opened the Microsoft TEAMS at 9:05 am and welcomed everyone and thanked both employees and partners for their participation in the State Technical Committee. Those present included:

Anthony Zotynia	Janis Rega	Michael Kent
Antonia Arcadi	Jessica Henry	Michelle Pedano
Arelys Ortiz	Jill Ott	Mitch Mickley
Brian Schilling	John Cloutier	Morgan Devine
Bruce Eklund	Kaitlin Farbotnik	Nicole Ciccaglione
Christine Raabe	Katelyn Colon	Rachel DeFlumari
Devin Cornia	Kathy Hale	Robert Nyman
Donald Donnelly	Kimberly Dalton	Sandra Howland
Edwin Muniz	Kristen Adams	Sarah Lally
Elizabeth McShane	Lara Periard	Scott Snell
Evan Madlinger	Laura Tessieri	Sharon Petzinger
Fran DeFiccio	Lee Fiocchi	Tairi Colon
Gail Bartok	Lyla Kaul	Tara Walker
Hilary Trotman	Maria Iannuzzelli	Thomas Blake
Jacob Bailey	Maryann Tancredi	Tina Notas
Jacob Hamilton	Michael Flood	Uziel Torres
James Strehse	Michael Hart	

9:05 Welcome and Introductions, NRCS Acting State Conservationist – Evan Madlinger, NRCS

9:07 June 2023 Meeting Minutes review and acceptance – Morgan Devine, NRCS

Morgan queued up the Minutes from the June 2023 meeting on the TEAMS call to see if there were any corrections, additions, and revisions needed. None were referenced.

9:09 FY2023 Farm Bill Program Recap – Gail Bartok, NRCS

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2023, NRCS Programs closed two Wetland Restoration Easements (WRE); one located in Salem County and the other in Sussex County. Once an easement is closed, restoration activities begin. Since NRCS easements are in perpetuity, the funds available are used to maintain or repair existing practices on the closed easements. In FY23, they spent almost \$500,000 on restoration work on the newly closed easements or existing easements, with \$28,000 specifically obligated to new restoration agreements.

New obligations in FY23 include 3 WRE out of the Hackettstown Service Center and 1 new IRA ACEP WRE. National Headquarters provided the states with a layer that identifies priority areas for both ALE and WRE for the IRA program. IRA was run from Headquarters for FY23 and will continue being handled that way for FY24.

Next up Gail talked about the Hurricane Ida easements. NRCS NJ has 2.1 million dollars set aside to purchase 5 homes and 1 piece of property for the town of Cranford along the Orchard Brook. Also, the Town of Woodbridge has an application for 70 homes, 17 million dollars set aside on the Ramapo River. This application is not a Flood Plain Easement; this will go through another mechanism.

The overall spending picture for FY23 includes 311 contracts with 9.6 million dollars in implementation of practices (comprehensive nutrient management plans, grass waterways, irrigation systems, high tunnels, reduced till and no-till waste, waste storage facilities, and aquaculture activities). The fund pools included Agricultural Management Activities (AMA), Conservation Stewardship Program (CStP), and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Regular and IRA Funds. There are only 16 states that receive AMA money with NJ being one of them. AMA has three sub-accounts: Cropland with 4 contracts totaling \$68,850 in Financial Assistance (FA), High Tunnel with 8 contracts totaling \$181,60 in TA, and Risk Management Association (RMA)-High Tunnel with 2 contracts totaling \$269,650 in TA. CSP sub-accounts include Agricultural Lands – General with 4 contracts totaling \$147,300 in Financial Assistance (FA), Agricultural Lands – Beginning Farmer with 1 contract totaling \$13,300 in FA, and Non-industrial Private Forestlands – General with 4 contracts totaling \$40,780. For the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), NRCS covered 1 contract totaling \$183,354 in Protecting Source Water in the Raritan. Under EQIP, Conservation Activity Plans (CAPS) that had funding include the Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) with 9 contracts totaling \$111,545 in FA, Nutrient Management Plans (NMP) with 9 contracts totaling \$71,226, Forestry Management Plan (FMP) with 99 contracts totaling \$193,933, and Other (usually pollinator plants) with 12 contracts totaling \$47,645. In addition to the state fund pools listed above, NRCS also has National Initiative involvement with financial assistance. For Organic, 5 contracts were funded with a total of \$93,408, Energy had 0 contracts, the Golden-Winged Warbler had 2 contracts for \$59,787, and the National Water Quality Initiative with activity in Upper Salem and Upper Cohansey with 4 contracts for a total of \$385,252. EQIP State Initiatives had activity as well for FY23, including Livestock with 15 active contracts using 2.03 million, High Tunnel had 5 contracts totaling \$375,462, Soil Health had 4 contracts totaling \$94,853, Beginning Farmers had 17 contracts totaling \$340,641, and Socially Disadvantaged had 10 contracts totaling \$285,634.

Local Work Groups in the North EQIP Obligations had 2 contracts totaling \$87,557, Forestry had 4 contracts totaling \$11,795, and Wildlife had 4 contracts totaling \$149,768. Local Work Groups in Central had 4 contracts totaling \$65,580 and Forestry/Wildlife had 9 contracts totaling \$60,645. Local Work Groups in the South had 0 contracts and Forestry/Wildlife had 4 contracts totaling \$23,701. Please note that the reason many of the contracts and dollar values are lower this year than the previous is due to the Inflation Reduction Act; NRCS was able to fund a lot of contracts through IRA and not through EQIP funding. Additional EQIP FY23 obligations include the New Jersey Pine Barrens Joint Chief Landscape Initiative with 2 contracts totaling \$54,323, Organic Transition Initiative with 2 contracts totaling \$173,708, and Urban with 3 contracts totaling \$38,134.

Halfway through the fiscal year of 2023, NRCS NJ received an additional 1.3 million dollars in EQIP IRA funds. These funds allowed NJ to deliver reductions in greenhouse gases and increase carbon sequestration through practices such as cover crop, reduced tillage, and no tillage. The sub-accounts affected by the additional funds went to IRA Cropland and Pastureland for 40 contracts totaling 1.2 million and IRA Forestry for 4 contracts totaling \$24,707. These funds will grow until 2026, which at that time will cease and all contacts must be completed by September 30, 2031. Fun fact – last year NJ received 1.3 million in funding, this year we received 11.7 million.

The final slide Gail presented was the Top 10 Practices, by planned amount and by dollar amount.

Top Ten By Planned Amount for 2023	Top Ten By Dollar for 2023
1. Cover Crop	1. Heavy Use Area Protection
2. Brush Management	2. Cover Crop
3. Forest Management Plan – Written	3. Waste Storage Facility
4. Forest Stand Improvement	4. Bivalve Aquaculture Gear and Biofouling Control
5. High Tunnel System	5. High Tunnel
6. Tree/Shrub Establishment	6. Sprinkler System
7. Bivalve Aquaculture Gear and Biofouling Control	7. Agrichemical Handling Facility
8. Structures for Wildlife	8. Restoration of Rare or Declining Natural Communities
9. Mulching	9. Roof and Covers
10. Fence	10. Fence

9:27 FY2024 Program Update – Gail Bartok and Fran DeFiccio, NRCS

Fiscal Year 2024 Allocations include: Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) \$1.409 million, ACEP Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE \$246,098), ACEP WRE for Bog Turtle specifically \$246,098, ACEP WRE Stewardship, Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) \$250,000, Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) \$1.162 million, Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) \$7.416 million, EQIP National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) \$395,588, EQIP Golden-Winged Warbler (GWW) \$85,000, and Joint Chief's Landscape Restoration in the Pine Barrens \$135,000. In addition to the Fiscal Year fundings received, NRCS NJ also received funds through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which is the single largest investment in climate and clean energy solutions in American history. This funding will add an additional \$711,000 in CSP IRA and an additional \$11.76 million in EQIP IRA. Allocations for FY24 for New Jersey are just over \$22 million.

As of today's date, 621 applications have been entered into the system in EQIP only as this is the largest program and has the most funds associated with it. Through IRA, 55 practices that are listed on the climate, Smart agriculture and forestry mitigation activities list for the fiscal year 2024 and 101 CSP enhancements or activities include Livestock, Irrigation, Conservation Incentive Contracts (CIC), Organic, Energy, Aquaculture, American Black Duck, Beginning Farmers/Socially Disadvantaged, Bobwhite Quail, Urban, High Tunnel, and NWQI. Some of our more common mitigation categories are soil health with practices such as conservation cover, cover crop, residue, tillage field borders, filter strips and mulching, just to name a few. A new focus this year is tree mortality.

NRCS NJ is currently assessing rankings with over 600 applications (with more to come for EQIP AMA). The first application cutoff date ended on October 20th, but New Jersey decided to implement the program called ACT NOW through EQIP and AMA targeting practices that address soil health, forestry, wildlife, high tunnels, and conservation planning activities. The cutoff to apply for practices considered through ACT NOW will be January 26, 2024. ACT NOW does not necessarily mean that conservation practices will be implemented now, but rather contracts will be obligated at an accelerated rate, so applicants do not have to wait for all assessments and rankings, and no selective fun pools to be completed before NRCS can make funding decisions. This will help farmers plan for their 2024 growing season more efficiently. RCS has recently announced an application cutoff for the conservation stewardship program on March 29th.

One notable mention: CSP offers annual payments to maintain the existing level of conservation based on the land uses included in the contract and an NRCS assessment of existing stewardship at the time of enrollment and payments to implement additional conservation activities. Most participants will be eligible for a \$4000 minimum payment. During any year their total annual contract payment falls below the minimum payment amount.

9:45 Farm Service Agency Program Update – Sarah Fenwick, FSA

Sarah Fenwick provided a slide with updates to their Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Farm Service Agency (FSA) had quite a bit of a drop in CRP between June and December (mostly because contracts expire in October at the end of their fiscal year). Two highlights from the report include an increase in State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE), specifically an increase in acres for permanent introduced grasses and permanent native grasses. Also, Grasslands is a program that FSA doesn't get a lot of participation in because they must rank out nationally. Due to the nature of our small state and smaller farms, FSA usually can't compete with the bigger farms. However, this year FSA was able to have a contract in South Jersey that ranked out and it increased the acreage from approximately 60 acres to 500 acres. Below is an overview of their Conservation Practices, signup type, description, and total practice acres. Total number of active contracts with FSA is 269 and the average rental rate is \$78 per acre.

Conservation Practice	Signup Type	Practice Description	Practice Acres
CP42	Continuous	Pollinator Habitat	13.7
CP8A	Continuous CREP	Grass Waterways	129.3
CP15A	Continuous CREP	Establishment of Permanent Vegetative Cover (Contour Grass Strips)	0.6
CP21	Continuous CREP	Filter Strips	208.4
CP22	Continuous CREP	Riparian Buffer	193.2
CP38B-9	Continuous SAFE	Shallow Water Areas for Wildlife	1.7
CP38E-1	Continuous SAFE	Establishment of Permanent Introduced Grasses and Legumes	298.7
CP38E-2	Continuous SAFE	Establishment of Permanent Native Grasses	363.38
CP38C-3	Continuous SAFE	Tree Plantings (Softwood)	51.0
CP38E-4D	Continuous SAFE	Permanent Wildlife Habitat	58.7
CP38E-10	Continuous SAFE	Vegetative Cover – Grass - Already Established (Practice Was Available Before 03/14/11)	28.1
CP38E-12	Continuous SAFE	Wildlife Food Plot	1.5
CP38E-25	Continuous SAFE	Rare and Declining Habitat	53.3
CP42	General	Pollinator Habitat	6.7
CP88	Grasslands	Permanent Native Grasses and Legumes	583.7
CP87A	Grasslands	Permanent Introduced Grasses and Legumes - Livestock	153.70

Signup Type	Acres	Acreage Percentage
Continuous	13.7	1%
Continuous CREP	531.5	24%
Continuous SAFE	856.35	40%
General	6.7	1%
Grasslands	737	34%
Total CRP Acres	2145.6	100%

Number of Contracts 269 Average Rental Rate \$78/ac

Overall, in the next 5 years, FSA will have approximately 500 acres that will expire amongst 94 contracts but none of the contracts will expire during that time. In the CREP program, FSA has 197 active contracts currently with an average rental rate of \$162 per acre.

Recently FSA revised their SAFE program. As a result, the SAFE program is no longer divided into 3 sections (Development of Landscape Scale Agricultural Heritage and Habitat Conservation Plan, Grassland Habitat Restoration and Management, and Raritan-Piedmont Wildlife Habitat Partnership) and will combine into one. Numbers will fluctuate as the changes take effect where each of the 3 sections will reduce as they expire, and the one general will increase with

new signups. Currently, there are 107 acres enrolled in the new SAFE program. In the Grasslands, there are a total of 12 active contracts with an average rental rate of \$33 an acre, for a total of 737 acres. The final program Sarah discussed were the Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) and the Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP). The ECP is available in Warren, Hunterdon, and Monmouth counties because of tornado activity and excessive rain. Signup for ECP and EFRP have closed, and FSA is currently working on those applications.

9:49 Resource Shop Update – Morgan Devine and Kaitlin Farbotnik, NRCS

Kaitlin started her presentation with changes to CEMA216 Soil Health Testing. In previous years, this testing was complicated, but the changes implemented made it easier for all parties involved. First, National discontinued the No-Labor scenarios as well as the Soil Health and Dynamic Soil Properties scenario. Second, they continued offering the FY23 5 different soil health properties that could be tested. Third, they also added an additional suite (Three Indicator Soil Health Measurements), which includes 3 more/different soil health measurements as they are more common in the labs (soil organic carbon, carbon mineralization potential, and aggregate stability).

Last year, the 808 Soil Carbon amendment was reviewed as an interim standard and National turned that into an adoptable standard for the states. NJ has adopted this as 338 Soil Carbon amendment for the application of compost, or biochar, on 2 fields. Kaitlin does have a spreadsheet to help planners with application rates.

Another interim standard that NRCS was debating to adopt amending soil properties with lime. While the standard doesn't pay for the lime itself, it does pay for the transport and application of the lime, but it can also pay for soils that need lime that's affecting soil quality or water quality. Opinions are welcomed on this topic.

Morgan Devine shared the Climate-Smart Agriculture and Forestry Mitigation Activities List for FY24. This list will be distributed to the invite list for this meeting; feedback on future versions is welcomed as NRCS has opportunities to propose new practices for the list (with scientific literature as to why the practice would mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and/or sequester carbon). If you do not have the literature to back up the suggestion, let NRCS know, and they can work with you.

10:00 Engineering Standard Update – Hilary Trotman Lane, NRCS

Hilary started her presentation with an overview of updates to Engineering Standards. Background information on Engineering Standards: standards and criteria are developed, reviewed, and updated to incorporate improvements in construction methods, equipment, and material, as well as findings of research and experience. The standards are reviewed and updated in response to immediate needs or on a recurring basis, often every five years. National and NRCS discipline leads update the standards for states to adopt, then can add to or edit the standard to make the criteria more specific to their state. Changes made by the state can't be less restrictive than the criteria of the original national version. There were 15 standards updated in 2023, 10 of which were updated either in format or clarification (no technical updates). These standards include Clearing and Snagging (326), Constructed Wetlands (656), Dike and Levee (356), Diversion (362), Land Reclamation, Landslide Treating (453), Mine Shaft and Adit Closing (457), Stream Crossing (578), Subsurface Drain (606), and Vegetated Treatment Area (635). There were significant changes made to 3 standards: the Emergency Animal Mortality Management standard (368), Irrigation Systems, Surface, and Subsurface standard (443), and Pond (378). Emergency Animal Mortality Management was updated to provide more specifics about the operation and maintenance plan for burial and composting systems; the Irrigation Systems, Surface, and Subsurface standard (443) applies to the systems that deliver irrigation water by surface means to provide additional criteria for 0 runoff systems such as the ebb and flow systems and flood floor systems; Pond standard was updated to include improvements to technical clarity for the design of filter diaphragms as well as added instruction to indicate when NIC collars may be used for pipe systems in ponds.

There were 2 national standards adopted in NJ: Vertical Drain (630) and Water Harvesting Catchment (636). The Vertical Drain would be a well, pipe, pit, or a borehole in porous soil into which drainage water can be discharged without contaminating the groundwater. The purpose of this is to provide an outlet for drainage, water from the surface or subsurface drainage system. The Water Harvesting Catchment standard was adopted to support catchment systems for high tunnels in New Jersey. The standard applies to the collection and storage of runoff for use as a supplemental water source and to provide conservation benefits. The roof runoff structure standard will still apply to the collection of runoffs from new or existing traditional roofed structures. These new and improved standards can be found in the NRCS online and the field office technical guide.

10:15 Urban Ag – Morgan Devine, NRCS

2023 provided NJ the opportunity to have an Urban Funding Pool. NRCS ranked a total of 20 applications with 3 of them being chosen for funding through this fund pool specific for a total of \$38,134. For FY24, NRCS is offering the EQIP Urban

Funding Pool. Application and dollar value are unable due to timing. Stay tuned to the June State Tech meeting for updates. However, there is an RCPP Small Farm Food Link Agreement. This agreement is with the Urban Ag Co-Op out of Newark, NJ, but covers all of the northern counties and into Middlesex and Mercer counties as well. This agreement focuses on urban and small farms.

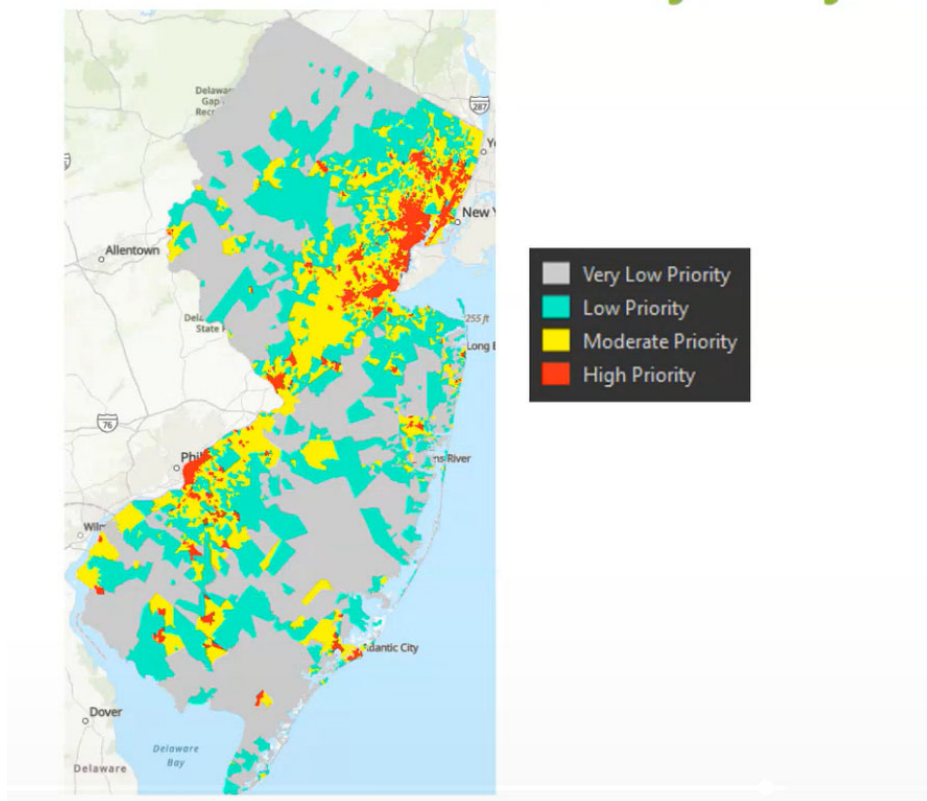
In 2022, NRCS offered the Agriculture Grant. However, there was a name change to the grant to Community Garden Grants in FY23. Additional changes for FY23 included an increase in applications (from 5 to 8) and an increase in funding (from \$35,000 to \$75,000). 5 applications were chosen for funding and includes a mixture of community gardens, pollinator plot projects, assisting with implementing irrigation and water, and rainwater harvesting systems.

Morgan shared some details about the Community Garden Grants. The focus is to address low food access, provide conservation education to urban communities, develop more pollinator and wildlife plots, and increase participation among historically underserved farmers and ranchers in NRCS conservation program delivery. This year NRCS hopes to increase the window of application to 60 days instead of the historical 30 days to allow for participants such as city governments, county governments, and municipalities an opportunity to sign up as they have been excluded from traditional EQIP programs in the past. Additional parties that can sign up include nonprofits, tribal governments, tribal organizations, private institutions of higher education, public and state-controlled institutions of higher education, special district governments, and state governments.

Next, Morgan showed the Urban Suitability Layer slide. New Jersey does not have a strict definition of urban, which can be exclusionary. For example, one could be a farmer 15 miles outside of Atlantic City, and not fall within the actual city limits of Atlantic City, but still be fighting food into that food system. NRCS needed a way to prioritize and rank the projects. The Urban Suitability Layer was developed in 2022-2023 by the NRCS State Soil Scientist Edwin Muniz and uses some of the following criteria: low food access, the definition of urban track, and EPA environmental justice screening tools.



NJ Urban Suitability Layer



Urban Technical Assistance is a big part of the NRCS urban delivery, including the use of the portable x-ray fluorescence for soil screening as well as aiding multiple municipalities and counties on urban forestry, pollinator, and community garden projects (not seeking financial assistance). Morgan participates in multiple committees across the state that are focused on Urban Agriculture. Soil Shops were big this year where NRCS goes to a green fair or the like, they bring the P-XFR, and handle outreach prior to people bringing their soil samples from home. These Soil Shops are often run with partners like EPA and ASDR where they can talk to someone about human health hazards and environmental hazards if that is an issue for them.

10:26 NRCS Field Operations Update – Arelys Ortiz, NRCS

Liz started her presentation with a thank you to the NRCS field offices as they facilitated the contracts and obligations.

Staffing is the topic of her presentation. Since June of 2023, the Columbus Field Office hired 2 new planners with more in the works to have a total of 5 planners. The Freehold Field Office is currently working on adding 2 new planners; The Southern offices are working on adding 2 additional planners; Hackettstown Field Office is in the process of hiring 2 additional planners; Frenchtown is in the process of hiring 1 additional planner.

10:29 Hazardous Tree Removal, Don Donnelly – NRCS

Don provided a brief overview of The Tree Mortality Mitigation Initiative that was rolled out recently through NRCS. The Department of Agriculture and The State Board of Agriculture have been receiving comments and complaints from NJ farmers that they need help managing dead trees. In researching this issue, other problems emerged, particularly in resilience and mortality from damage-causing agents (not just biotic things like pests or disease pathogens but from abiotic forces tied to climate like storm surge and saltwater intrusion causing Atlantic White Cedar decline, warming temperatures increasing proliferation in southern pine beetles). NRCS decided that there is a need to broadly think about how the agency can help with these events. NRCS came up with an idea that if an applicant comes in with concerns about managing an unusual number of dead trees that are beyond normal maintenance and concentrated in a way that makes it a challenge for them to continue their agricultural operation, NRCS may find a mechanism through IRA funding to reestablish trees. The idea is they're not going in and cutting down dead trees for the sake of cutting down dead trees but trying to ensure that we get a new group of trees for all the benefits that trees provide growing. The emphasis of this program is for farm situations where it's impacting the producer's ability to continue farming (in the forest settings, although NRCS allows funding from this pool to be used for it, it's not going to be of any benefit beyond what NRCS has already provided through EQIP).

Even where there is uniformly distributed mortality at moderate amounts, NRCS is not recommending going in and cutting down the trees as there's not a lot of conservation benefit except for a few situations. Where producers have high concentrations of trees that are dead in a forest, NRCS could use some of the heavy density opening practices with the idea of also making the site not only safe to enter and use equipment to get the site prep done but to reduce the amount of competing vegetation to allow for tree planting at the appropriate density.

Funding for this comes from IRA. By utilizing this initiative, NRCS is addressing several resource concerns (such as degraded plant health, pest pressure, and water quality), but really to be able to trigger using this IRA funding pool, one of the primary benefits that were calling out is carbon sequestration and storage. Therefore, NRCS is using this as a supporting practice or a facilitating practice, meaning the obstruction removal will just facilitate the ability to replant trees. Tree planting is required under all these contracts. It is important to note this does not apply to shrubs because the agency is looking to try and qualify that there's an equal carbon benefit at some point from trees being replaced with trees rather than shrubs.

NRCS developed a fact sheet as to what the program is trying to achieve. If you want a copy, please reach out to Don Donnelly.

10:40 Aquaculture – Kristin Adams, Ocean County Soil Conservation District

Kristin began her presentation by talking about NRCS programs that offer aquaculture practices. First, EQIP encourages two most popular practices: restoration of rare or declining natural communities for reef restoration and bivalve aquaculture gear and biofouling control. Reef restoration is a practice through Practice 643; these scenarios are for leaseholders, clam or oyster farmers who obtain recycled clam, oyster, or conch shell. Farmers cure the material they transport out to their lease and plant the material on the bottom of the water column. This is used to provide a suitable substrate for oyster habitat and also to build up the vertical relief of the reef and is done using a barge with high-pressure fire hoses. This practice is used in areas where the substrate is not suitable in those areas; farmers can put down a layer of bare shell.

If there is natural recruitment of native oysters in areas that need a boost to the substrate and are lacking native oysters, NRCS can also provide funding for a layer of spat on shell which are juvenile oysters to be added on top. Typically, this practice is done on a larger scale and is paid for by the acre. The other popular practice, both in the Delaware Bay and on the Atlantic Coast, is bivalve aquaculture gear and biofouling control. Up until now, only oyster farmers have participated in this program. This is a management practice where farmers can air dry (or clean) their gear bags in a location where the biofouling will not reenter the watershed. This requires a change in the farmer's current management practice to address the biofouling and ultimately water quality for clams. Bivalve aquaculture is being used now for the first time and farmers will be paid by the acre of predator screens that they use.

A newer practice in New Jersey, and new for shellfish nationwide, is fish raceways and tanks. NRCS is open to different innovative approaches for growers that have a land-based aquaculture system to upgrade or enhance their system when the focus is on restoration. This could include setting tanks that are used for oyster spat on shell, or raceways for clams. Again, those oysters and the clams for restoration. The program can potentially pay to upgrade or enhance failing equipment or supporting elements such as pipelines and pumps if a resource concern is being addressed.

Additional practices available through EQIP include Rack Replacement for Wildlife. This was popular a few years ago mostly on the Delaware Bayshore. There was a new regulation for growers to have to raise their oyster racks a little bit higher for the movement of nesting horseshoe crabs. Most growers in that area have already upgraded their gear, so that hasn't been as popular in recent times, but it is still available. Another practice available is Streambank and Shoreline Protection, where growers that have a land-based property that may have erosion issues of failing bulkheads, have erosion control problems, or have some wetlands that they want to protect.

Another programs available for aquaculture producers is The Coastal Project, which is an RCPP project. The funding for this program is made possible through NRCS. The Ocean County School District is the lead and has partnered with 14 other entities on the project. This is a pilot project focusing on one conservation project in a specific region. All shellfish aquaculture producers on the Atlantic Coast of NJ are eligible to apply. Priority will be given to producers in the Barnegat and Great Bay regions. These producers will be contracted through NRCS to raise a specific amount of oyster spat on shell on their lease for one growing season before being planted on a restoration reef. The reef locations are restoration leases held by Stockton University. These include The Tuckerton Reef and Mill Creek Reef, both of which are located in the southern portion. The goals of the project are to build aquatic habitat, improve water quality, and also support the shellfish aquaculture industry. There is an environmental monitoring component, also paid for through NRCS. Researchers from Stockton, along with Kristin, will be assessing water quality and aquatic habitat on the farmer's leases and the restoration reefs. The hope at the end of this four-year pilot project is that this version of practice 643 can be adapted into EQIP and used statewide.

Funding available includes \$961,228 total of grant awards, with \$672,859 available for producers from NRCS and \$93,000 available for producers from partners. In total, there is approximately \$191,464 available to producers per year. Project partners include academia, nonprofits, and government including (but not limited to) Ocean County Soil Conservation District, Rutgers, NJ Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), Barnegat Bay Partnership, Parsons Seafood, Barnegat Oyster Collective, NJ Department of Agriculture (State), Stockton University, NJ Aquacultures Association, Cape Atlantic Conservation District, Forty North Oyster Farms, Township of Long Beach, JETTY Rock Foundation, The PEW Charitable Trust, The Nature Conservancy, and ReClam the Bay. They all provide some combination of technical assistance, outreach, assistance monitoring, and/or project advisement.

10:56 Partner Report – Rural Development Updates –Maryann Tancredi, RD

Maryann provided an update on her agency Rural Development (RD). There are 3 mission areas under RD: Rural Business Cooperative Service, Rural Housing Service, and Rural Utilities Service. The mission of RD is to assist rural communities in creating prosperity so they become self-sustaining and can economically thrive through investments that create ladders of opportunity, build regional resilience, and support the growth of emerging markets. There are more than 50 loan grants and technical assistance programs available to support economic development in rural communities. RD invests in agriculture and food systems but also invests in water and sewer projects, senior and childcare education projects, clean energy and energy efficiency projects, as well as business expansion and affordable housing. Their business programs provide financial backing and technical assistance to stimulate business creation and growth. These programs work through partnerships with public and private community-based organizations and financial institutions to provide financial assistance, business development, and technical assistance to rural businesses and agricultural producers. Additionally, these programs help to provide capital equipment space, job training, and entrepreneurial skills that can help start or grow a business.

In FY23, following the Pandemic Assistance that RD offered in 2021 and 2022, they are now working to transform our

nation's food system to create more options for producers and consumers and improve the resiliency of our food supply chain. The success of American agriculture hinges on research and innovation and the development of new markets. Investments in New Jersey during FY23 to further those efforts include over 6.5 million in Rural Energy for America grants through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). RD also deployed \$233,000 in rural business development grants to nonprofits, towns, and municipalities, and \$309,000 in value-added producer grants. In total, 4 applications were funded and all of them were either beginning farmers or socially disadvantaged farmers.

Completed projects during FY23 include Moon Shot Farm in Mercer County, Stony Hill Garden in Morris County, and Sussex County Community College. Moon Shot Farm was awarded the REAP grant in 2022 (under 25%, which has since been increased to 50%). They recognized the return on their investment within 30 days and allowed for them to grow year-round as well as gain entryway to the most famous farmers market in NYC. Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) funds can be used to install energy-efficient lighting, upgrade refrigeration systems, improve insulation ductwork, windows, doors, and other building upgrades can be used to lower heating and cooling costs with ventilation and air conditioning upgrades, and to install solar panels or wind turbines and to purchase anaerobic digesters. Utilizing the Value-Added Producer Grant in 2021, Stony Hill Garden created an apple wine from apples that fell to the ground and otherwise would have been discarded and unsellable. Sussex County Community College utilized 3 of RD's Rural Business Development Grants related to the creation of the McGuire Technical Education Center in Newton. Rural Business Development Grant project types are technical assistance type projects, business incubators, and workforce training (which can also be feasibility studies and marketing plans). For FY24, RD has made strengthening existing partnerships and creating new partnerships a priority.

Janis Rega from RD joined the presentation to provide extra information. RD is trying to coordinate with sustainable New Jersey and the utility companies (as well as other stakeholders in the energy space) to be able to pull projects together and outreach together to combine our funding resources as well as our technical resources. There may be times when RD may reach out to everyone on the call who has a relationship with them to also be at the table to support the amplification and advancement of what we're all trying to do with regard to topical areas such as stormwater management, mitigation of impact on climate change and improving the energy efficiency of our small business space, our community and public partner arena and our with our agricultural producers.

11:09 Cape May Plant Materials Center Update – Scott Snell, NRCS

Scott Snell is the Study Lead at the Plant Materials Center (PMC) for NRCS. The mission of the Plant Materials Program for the PMC is to assemble and test plant species for use in conservation programs to solve natural resource concerns. The vision for the PMC is to serve as the plant experts for NRCS, to fully integrate and coordinate with technical and field office staff, and to develop and deliver vegetative solutions and conservation technology for NRCS customers. The PMC is guided by the State Plant Materials Committee, which identifies and prioritizes local plant issues, concerns, and product needs through the Plant Materials Needs Assessment. The committee may be made up of SRCs, technical specialists, PMC personnel, and other partners as determined by the committee to serve as advisors. It is important to note that the Plant Materials Needs Assessment is the document used to develop the PMC business plan (which dictates what the PMC is going to work on and how the employees spend their time). Once needs are identified, they are addressed through the development of plant materials program products. There are 3 categories for these products: presentation and training sessions, conservation plant releases, and published documents.

The PMC has been tasked with addressing two primary resource concerns: coastal shorelines and critical area planting. Scott shared a map of the southern portion of the state with a pin where the PMC is located. Their location at the northern end of the Cape May peninsula shows how they are ideally located to address those resource concerns. 4 activities the PMC has been working on include developing a bushy bluestem conservation plant release, hydroponic salinity tolerance screening trials, saltmeadow cordgrass variety trials, and a collaborative saltwater intrusion study with universities and the Maryland PMC. The bushy blue stem conservation plant release development was identified from the needs assessment in which the need was asking for the development of a wildflower seed mix for establishing pollinator habitat and salt marsh environments specifically where a grass species component of the mix does not aggressively spread or crowd out the flowering Forbes. Unfortunately, there are not many commercial sources of seed for the species, so the goal is to develop a bushy bluestem conservation plant release that has been selected for seedling vigor and has documented salt tolerance. The PMC completed a greenhouse seedling bigger study looking at 34 accessions of the species and has a final study report in draft and under review. The salinity tolerance screening trials were the next activity and the preliminary trials looked at the effects of varying saltwater treatments on plant materials and program releases. The purpose of this is to improve plant recommendations for establishing buffers on marginal farmland that's been impacted by saltwater intrusion. So far, they have looked at 2 species, the first being Prairie cordgrass and the other saltmeadow cordgrass, both native perennial warm-season grasses. During the study, they monitored plant conditions, but primarily they were looking at biomass production after the saltwater treatments. The results so far have shown that there's an

effect of the saltwater treatments to biomass production for both species, with the Prairie cordgrass being more greatly affected than the salt medic cord grass, thus confirming that the methods the PMC used for this screening tolerance are valid, useful, and validates the saline tolerance of the species. This validation leads to the bigger picture of the project, which is to repeat the trial with other plant materials, programs, and conservation plant releases. The goal is to establish a basis for salinity tolerance comparisons between species and varieties by looking at relative biomass after salinity treatments. The PMC hopes to use this information to make better and more informed plant recommendations for saline environments. The next study was a salt meter cord grass variety study, which looked at primarily the biomass production of three saltmeadow cordgrass releases from the Plant Materials Conservation program for mitigation options for farmland where saltwater inundation is a growing issue. Scott shared some background on the history and production of saltmeadow cordgrass. This cordgrass has been widely produced and managed as a crop, especially in South Jersey as recently as the 1970s. There are still 30 producers harvesting around 14,000 acres and includes a wide variety of uses and applications for the products that they produced from those harvests. The PMC finished the third year of data collection this past season and are in the process of assessing the data to formulate a final study report. So far, results have shown significant differences between the varieties for multiple plant attributes and most of those differences have been consistent from year to year.

The Plant Materials Center has been working with several universities, including the University of Maryland, the University of Delaware, and George Washington University, along with the Maryland Plant Materials Center, to collaborate on a project where the objective is to field test conservation plants to assess value for coastal riparian buffers and improve plant recommendations where saltwater intrusion is a growing threat to crop production. The role in this project, along with the universities, the PMCs, and the private landowner, has been to provide technical assistance in the way of species recommendations and materials, program conservation techniques, and to assist with planting establishment and data collection. 6 species were included in this study, 4 of the 6 are NJ PMC releases and 1 is an MD PMC release (Avalon saltmeadow cordgrass, Mid-Atlantic Germplasm Florida paspalum, eastern gamagrass, High Tide Germplasm prairie cordgrass, and Atlantic coastal panicgrass. No formal publications have come from this study yet as planting took place only a few years ago. Data has been collected and analyzed and some of it was even presented at last year's Eastern Native Grass Symposium. There should be some publications forthcoming from the partner universities.

11:23 FY2023 Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) and Regional Conservation Partnership Programs (RCPP) – Evan Madlinger and Gail Bartok, NRCS

Evan Madlinger started this sections' presentation. In FY23, NRCS NJ had roughly \$400,000 available for the Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) program with 7 applicants. Once NRCS receives applications for CIG, they build a team of technical staff from NRCS and partners to review. CIG is capped at 5% of regular EQIP budget, which created some tough decisions as to who should be funded. 3 of the 7 applicants received funding, with one of the chosen being Conserve Wildlife Foundation. They are coming up with innovative techniques such as camera trapper of bog turtles (to help with survey efforts). Another chosen applicant was a private farm in South Jersey where the farmer is looking to trial different methods to grow spartina patens native grass, which is important to coastal restoration species. The third and final applicant chosen was with Rutgers' University and they are looking at heavy metal uptakes in crops, particularly leafy greens and other plants that are being grown in urban sites. NRCS is looking to offer CIG for FY24 to help cover the backlog. However, there is no official decision.

Gail Bartok jumped on the call to provide an update to RCPP. There was a notice of funding opportunity that went out in May of 2023. Proposals were due in August of 2023 and the funding opportunity notice was advertised as \$500 million available, half of which was IRA funds. Headquarters received a tremendous turnout of good projects and funded 81 projects at 1.1 million dollars in FY23. For FY24 and FY25, Gail believes National will combine them and offer 1.8 billion dollars. In FY26, which is the last year NRCS is obligating funds, the projected value will be 2.5 billion dollars. NRCS NJ received several projects for RCPP in FY23. One project that was funded by headquarters was from the Musconetcong Watershed Association, and it's a Mind Brook Gorge Dam removal where NRCS will assist the partners in removing two dams in that stretch of stream with 1.8 billion dollars.

There are two different types of RCPP: classic and alternative funding arrangements. The classic RCPP is like EQIP and regular easement programs where NRCS is doing most of the technical work on eligibility, contracting, and implementation. The Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA) is where the partner leads more, the partner accepts applications, the partner will do the outreach, and does most of the legwork for contracting and implementation. The difference between the farm bill-funded projects and the IRA-funded projects is the projects that are IRA-funded must include activity conservation activities that mitigate the impacts of climate change; those contracts through the IRA or RCPP must expire on September 31, 2031, as that is when the funding authorization expires.

A new notice of funding opportunity is expected in January of 2024 for FY24 and FY25 for a combined opportunity of 1.8

billion dollars. NRCS had two applicants that were not as successful last year, and NRCS is going to continue to work with them to tweak their project and make it the best that it can be. NRCS has already started scheduling meetings and other activities on those two. Also, they have received some interest from new partners for new projects. Evan and Gail are entertaining meetings for anyone who has an idea and needs it to be discussed. Please reach out, even before the funding notice comes out so that NRCS can have more time with the participants.

NRCS NJ will be advertising for an NRCS RCPP coordinator for New Jersey, and that should be happening before the end of the calendar year and that will be on Gail's staff. NRCS is looking forward to getting someone with agreement management skills on board as they will be a nice addition to the program staff, especially with all this RCPP and the CIGs that Evan was just talking about.

11:34 ManureLink Demonstration – Sandra Howland, NJDA

Sandra started her presentation with a ManureLink slide. NJDA has a 2022 Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG), Where to Find What Feeds Your Fields. New Jersey's unique landscape of small acreage farms presents some unique challenges. A lot of the smaller farms cannot handle their manure on farm, especially the equine industry. There is a need to address the transport of nutrients to fields that need them and getting manure to composters and bringing this material into our urban areas. This project also helps to address the DEP Global Warming Response Act 80 x 50 report that identified agricultural wastes leading to be handled. In addition to the website, which is to provide a forum for minor generators to connect with composters and producers, NJDA also seeks to adapt educational material for composting, manure handling, and nutrient management to our small New Jersey farms, as well as hosting webinars and hands-on educational field days to make producers help producers be more comfortable with composting. There is a pot of cost-share funding to assist with the implementation of these practices. In developing ManureLink, NJDA partnered with Rutgers for website development as well as the New Jersey Compost Council for education and outreach assistance.

Sandra showed a live demonstration of the ManureLink, which is still available for testing. If you go to the link and test it, please provide feedback. The link provides a map of NJ where the user can zoom in and out, click on listings, and view details. In addition to the manure, the map also provides available compost, and resources (which are broken down into categories like assistance opportunities, NRCS-specific programs, and how to compost). One key component is the hauler section, where haulers can submit their information for listings. Additional information included in the link is basic information about compost, quantity availability, what feedstock is in the compost, what type of compost is being completed, is the compost stored with or without covering, how you want to pick it up, and contact information. You can also upload compost test results as well as carbon and nitrogen ratios, was the compost temperature monitored, is the compost certified organic, and how long the compost has been stored or curing.

11:44 Urban Pollinator Planting Project with NRCS – Devin Cornia, NOFA NJ

Devin started his presentation with an invite and reminder that The Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Jersey (NOFA NJ) is willing and able to provide resources, host webinars, follow up on projects to increase producer familiarity, and share materials at events to name just a few.

There have been quite a few projects that NOFA has partnered on. NOFA worked on the South Jersey Urban Native Species Installations for pollinator health, food security, and education with NRCS. Second, there was a climate-smart project with the Pennsylvania-based Sustainable Agriculture Association (PASA) to support producers in implementing conservation practices. Additionally, NOFA partnered with CROPS, NJ Isles in Trenton, and the Center for Environmental Transformation to buy pollinator plants, edible plants, and beautiful plants and put them in the ground at two different planting sites: a community garden in Egg Harbor City and a community garden in Atlantic City. There are plans for a spring planting on those sites with a third site chosen in Camden (The Center for Environmental Transformation). Additionally, North Camden Collaborative Gardens was highlighted for their work. A member of the organization, Jacqueline, is using tires that are illegally dumped on the property to build raised beds.

NOFA is hosting their winter conference on January 27, 2024, at Rutgers's.

11:50 Open Discussion – Morgan Devine, NRCS

Morgan opened up the meeting to general discussion and asked if any partners wanted to provide an update. Sharon Petzinger from the New Jersey Fish and Wildlife Endangered Nongame Species Program went first, followed by Michael Flood from the Department of Environmental Protection (EPA), and then over to Laura Tessieri with Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D).

11:56 Sharon Petzinger, NJFW

Sharon is a wildlife biologist who specializes in songbirds. She works closely with NRCS and their EQIP Working Lands

for Wildlife for Golden Wing program. This is a forestry program and NJFW provides a lot of technical assistance on this program. She also works on global biodiversity crises, mass extinction, the 3 million bird decline, and ways to recover the bird population decline to name a few.

USFW is heading up a lot of the recovery efforts, population goals, and habitat objectives to try to recover umbrella bird species like The Golden Wing Warblers and species of the forest and birds that need the young forest habitat. Other species targeted include the Cerulean Warbler, which is a forest bird that needs more open canopy forest but is not quite as open as golden wings, as well as the Wood Thrush, which needs forest canopy gaps and robust shrub layers. NJFW has set these three species for population objectives to recover these birds in Northern New Jersey alone, approximately 2500 acres per year. There are concerns about achieving these goals due to the red tape they keep running into and request thoughts and ideas to help move the needle. Participation is key, especially with private landowners.

12:09 Update –Michael Flood, EPA

The Nonpoint Source Program, along with all regional offices, has been working on updates to the Nonpoint Source Guidelines for states and territories on how to use the Clean Water Act, section 319, specifically the language about working in agriculture lands and agricultural demonstration projects. This update happens every 10 years and is currently open to the public for comment. If anyone has any questions, please feel free to contact Michael.

12:10 Update – Laura Tessieri, North Jersey RC&D

North Jersey Resource Conservation & Development (RC&D) hosted their annual meeting of Regenerative Farm Network on the 5th of December 2023, on World Soil Day. Approximately 60 people were in attendance with a panel of farmers. As a reminder, RC&D has a regenerative farm network that is open to the state of NJ. Northern NJ has received some technical and financial assistance through the network.

Laura also wanted to note that RC&D has renewable energy assessments available across the state. They have a focus area of northern NJ, but the assessments are useful when applying for rural development programs, as discussed earlier in the presentation.

Last, RC&D has a grazing initiative, which is open through the end of calendar year 2023. This initiative has incentivized payments based on actual receipts. North Jersey RC&D will be studying the practice installations and the carbon sequestration aspect.

12:12 Update – Michael Kent, Cape Atlantic SCD

Local Work Group efforts include a meeting on January 16, 2024, in Cape May County, with another one being held on January 18, 2024, in Atlantic County. There is no specific focus, but people from all backgrounds are invited and encouraged to participate. Some people who participated include NGOs, politicians, farmers, and aquaculture farmers to name a few. These meetings are treated like a round table where everyone gets to discuss a resource concern. This year, Cape Atlantic Soil Conservation District is inviting high school students to participate as a way to outreach and get the youth involved and talk about conservation.

The National Conservation Planning Partnership (CPP) has created a guidebook, available on their website. This guidebook is geared towards people doing local work groups or if you need assistance with sample agendas, people you should include on invite lists, how invites should be sent out, and how to get new people to be part of the local working group. This guidebook was updated a little in FY22 and is available to partners, NRCS staff, and districts. If anyone has any questions, please reach out to Michael Kent.

Question from Christine Raab from the Ocean County Soil Conservation District – regarding the Emergency Watershed Program, is that strictly for municipalities with eligible applicants for those programs? Are there things, such as partnerships, that are involved in the physical work?

Hilary stated that the applicant or the sponsor needs to be some sort of government. In NJ, this tends to be municipalities, but there can be branches of the state that can be a sponsor as well, like a conservation district. It is not often a district will be a sponsor because of the contributions they need to make to repairs. NRCS covers 75% of the construction cost while the sponsor covers the remaining 25%. Often, districts do not have those funds available. It would be good for emergency responders to be present at the meetings so they are aware and can make recommendations to affected personnel after a storm.

Question from Christine Raab from the Ocean County Soil Conservation District –Are there things, such as partnerships, that are involved in the physical work? For example, Brick Township – Ocean County Parks Land Trust wants to assist

with volunteering to do some repairs and planting. Is that part of the opportunity of the program?

Hilary stated that NRCS tends not to work directly with the partners but works with the municipalities to do implementation.

Morgan let everyone know there is an NRCS Urban Agriculture subcommittee meeting on January 17, 2024, virtually.

12:14 Adjourn, Morgan Devine, NRCS

Morgan thanked everyone for their participation and ended the meeting.