



State Technical Committee Meeting – Minutes

Date: December 10, 2025

Time: 9:02 AM – 1:39 PM

Location: Virtual (NRCS New Jersey State Office)

Attendance

Alexandra Guadalupe	Evan Madlinger	Michael DePalma
Allison Cooper (Pieffer)	Fred Schoenagel	Michael Kent
Amanda Camacho	George Wong	Michelle Pedano
Antony Tseng	Hilary Trotman Lane	Morgan Devine
Arelys Ortiz	Ines Zimmerman	Nicole Ciccaglione
Ben Casella	Jennifer McCulluch	Paul Califano
Ben Langey	Jacob Bailey	Rachel Deflumeri
Brian Cowden	Jill Ott	Rebecca Buzzy
Bruce Eklund	Julie Hawkins	Riley Blankenship
Caitlin Farbotnik	Kaitlin Farbotnik	Sandra Howland
Chris Miller	Kathy Hale	Sharon Petzinger
Christian Bench	Kelly Doyle	Stephanie Murphy
Courtney Davidson	Kelly Steimle	Stephen Grosch
David Clapp	Kimberly Dalton	Sylvia Kovacs
David Steinmann	Kristin Adams	Tairi Melchiorre
Donald Donnelly	Marc Virgilio	Tara Walker
Doreen Beruck	Maria Collazo	Tim Thomas
Edwin Muniz	Maryann Tancredi	Tina Notas
Elizabeth McShane	Matt Wasserman	Virginia Lamb
Eric Schrading	Michael Bonham	

9:02 AM – Welcome and Introductions: Evan Madlinger, NRCS

- Evan welcomed participants and conducted roll call introductions.

9:20 AM – Opening Statement: Julie Hawkins, NRCS

Julie thanked participants for their engagement and emphasized the importance of partner input in shaping conservation delivery. Key points:

NRCS Chief's Vision and Priorities

- **Farmland protection:**
 - NRCS is partnering with state and local governments and land trusts to protect farmland for future generations.

- The U.S. loses approximately 5,000 acres of farmland each day; protecting working lands is an urgent priority.
- Goal: keep agricultural land in production while maintaining strong conservation and resource standards.
- **Regenerative and precision agriculture:**
 - Expansion of regenerative practices to improve soil health and yields.
 - Integration of precision agriculture and digital technologies to increase productivity and profitability.
 - Emphasis on **whole-farm planning**, addressing soil, water, and natural resources holistically.
- **Technology and data modernization:**
 - NRCS is transitioning to a unified, cloud-based platform within 12–18 months.
 - Implementation of a “One Farmer, One File” system to streamline paperwork and improve efficiency.
 - Goal: free up staff time to be in the field with producers rather than in the office.

Third-Party Certified Conservation Plans

- NRCS will continue accepting third-party conservation plans that meet or exceed NRCS standards.
- Approximately 12 certification programs are recognized to demonstrate technical competency.
- 42 practices and activities are listed in the NRCS registry and recognized by the American Society of Agronomy, Certified Crop Advisor, and Certified Professional Agronomist.
- NRCS utilizes Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with certifying entities to streamline certification and recognition.

9:26 AM – June Meeting Minutes Review: Evan Madlinger and Tara Walker, NRCS

- June 2025 meeting minutes were circulated in advance.
- No corrections or objections were raised.
- Minutes were approved and entered into the record.

9:27 AM – NRCS Programs Update: Maria Collazo, NRCS

Maria reintroduced herself, reviewed 2025 accomplishments, and outlined expectations for 2026.

Easement Programs

- **2025 Allocations:**
 - Agricultural Land Easements (ALE): \$1,000,000 (farmland)
 - Wetland-related easements: \$632,000
- No obligations were made under ALE in 2025 due to delays in the state's new formula.
- Similar funding levels are expected for 2026, with an emphasis on encouraging new applications and partner collaboration.
- Two main practices completed on existing easements:
 - Brush management
 - Restoration of declining natural communities
- Easements are monitored annually to identify additional resource needs.

Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Buyout Program

- Designed to restore flood-prone properties impacted by erosion or watershed impairments.
- Requires working through local sponsors to purchase affected properties.
- Structures are removed, land is restored to open space, and landowners receive fair market value.

Active New Jersey projects (10 properties, approximately \$7.9M total):

- **Hurricane Ida – Cranford (Union County):**
 - \$4.8M obligated
 - 5 properties along Orchard Brook
- **January 9, 2024 Storm – East Hanover (Morris County):**
 - \$2.6M obligated
 - 4 properties along Pinch Brook
- **South Plainfield (Middlesex County):**
 - \$500K obligated
 - 1 property along Cedar Brook
- Next steps: continued collaboration with partners to generate new ALE and EWP applications.
- For additional information on EWP, contact **Hilary Trotman Lane**.

NRCS Financial Assistance Programs Overview

NRCS offers both technical and financial assistance to producers. Financial assistance provides direct payments for implementing conservation practices, distinct from land preservation programs.

Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA)

- **Applications received:** 46
- **Funding allocated:** \$248,000
- **Contracts awarded:** 3 contracts, 31 acres total
- **Primary practices:**
 - High tunnels (primary)
 - Cover crops (supporting)
 - Precision land forming (supporting)

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

- **Applications received:** 125
- **Funding allocated:** \$1.9 million
- **Contracts awarded:** 75 contracts, 7,476 acres
- **Practices contracted:** 464 total, 56 distinct practices
- Required categories: cropland contracts and forestry contracts to track conservation by land use.
- Most funding supported existing activity/resource concern payments.

Top CSP practices by dollar amount include:

Existing activity payments (land use and resource concern), minimum payment adjustment, tree/shrub plantings for wildlife and native community restoration, cover crops, brush management, and herbaceous weed treatment.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

- **Applications received:** 502
- **Funding allocated:** \$13.3 million
- **Contracts awarded:** 256 contracts, 36,673 acres
- **Total practices contracted:** 1,538
- **Distinct practice types:** 78

Top 10 practices by planned amount (count):

Cover crops, obstruction removal, tree/shrub establishment, forest management plans, brush management, fence, mulching, reduced-till residue/tillage management, watering facilities, pasture and hay planning.

Top 10 practices by dollar amount:

Cover crops, obstruction removal, lined waterways/outlets, high tunnel systems, mulching, roofs and covers, fence, soil carbon amendments, heavy use area protection, and waste storage facilities.

Top practices linked to key resource concerns include soil erosion, water quality, plant productivity and health, feed and forage imbalance, and reduced emissions.

Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)

Active projects in New Jersey:

- **Northern NJ Small Farm Food Link Conservation Project:** All financial assistance funds expended (\$224,133).
- **NJ Coastal Aquaculture Project:** All financial assistance funds expended (\$672,050).
- **Salem River Bog Turtle Protection and Restoration:** In progress, with one easement application.

2026 Program Allocations

- **EQIP:** \$9 million (remains the largest program).
- **AMA:** \$269,000 (still the smallest program).
- **CSP:** Significant increase reflecting growth and expansion.
- **ACEP (Agricultural Conservation Easement Program):** \$2 million total
 - \$1 million for ALE
 - \$1 million for WRE (Wetland Reserve Easements)

Easement funding is available for potential ALE and WRE projects. CSP continues to expand, and EQIP remains the cornerstone conservation program.

Signup Deadlines

- New national sign-up deadline for all programs: **January 15, 2026.**
- New Jersey's original deadline (October 17, 2025) was extended due to the federal government shutdown and delays at the National Office.
- Producers still have the opportunity to enroll before the new deadline.

RCPP Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO)

- A new NOFO is expected in late December or January.
- Application window will be short; project proponents should be prepared.
- Emphasis on “**shovel-ready**” projects with complete materials and plans.

- Previous NOFO materials are available online and remain largely unchanged.
 - RCPP point of contact: **Maria Collazo**.
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FY 2026 Program Improvements – IMPACT Initiative

- New agency initiative **IMPACT** aims to improve program applications and contract management across EQIP, CSP, and AMA.
- Focus on simplifying processes so staff and producers can concentrate on conservation rather than paperwork.
- Clarifying program identity:
 - **EQIP:** Fixed program for implementing conservation practices to address identified resource concerns.
 - **CSP:** “Next-level” program for producers who have already addressed concerns and want to further enhance conservation.

CSP Redesign

- CSP will function more similarly to EQIP, with key differences:
 - Producers receive **base payments** for meeting minimum thresholds.
 - “Enhancements” will be replaced with practice payments, requiring practices to exceed baseline standards.
 - CSP payment rates will increase to **75% of practice costs** (previously about 10%).
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Streamlined Ranking Pools & New Initiatives

- NRCS will reduce the number of ranking pools from 26+ to a maximum of 5.
- Each pool may include multiple categories, allowing applications to be ranked once but considered across several categories.
- This reduces administrative burden and improves consistency.

Draft ranking structure:

- Separate pools for CPA, DIA, and CMAS plans.
- Applications must meet minimum thresholds and be completed by TSPs or qualified individuals.
- Programmatic and landscape initiatives may be separate pools or categories under regional (North, Central, South) pools.

Landscape and special initiatives include:

- **National Water Quality Initiative:** Salem & Gloucester Counties
- **Golden-Winged Warbler Landscape Initiative:** Mt. Olive region
- **Aquaculture:** Now a dedicated category (previously covered under RCPP).
- **Air Quality Initiative:** New initiative targeting emissions reduction.

Regional service centers:

- **North:** Mt. Olive, Frenchtown
 - **Central:** Columbus, Freehold
 - **South:** Vineland, Woodstown
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WRE Program – Area-Wide Market Analysis

- The Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) program is finalizing its area-wide market analysis to determine per-acre payment rates.
- Process:
 - Appraisers review recent land sales in northern and southern New Jersey.
 - Values established for agricultural land, woodland, and restricted land.
 - NRCS sets a geographic area rate cap based on appraisal data.
 - Producers are offered **90% of appraised market value per acre**.
- Finalized per-acre rates will be used when making offers for WRE projects in covered counties.

Chat comment noted:

- Kathy Hale: The Raritan RCPP remains active and is still implementing practices.
 - Question from Ben Langey regarding Black Duck as a programmatic/landscape initiative:
 - Response: Landscape initiatives are set at the National Office level; state-level special initiatives can also be created.
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10:00 AM – Farm Service Agency (FSA) Program Updates: Doreen Beruck, FSA

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)

- **2025 sign-up:** Completed; contracts effective October 1, 2025.
- **Enrollments:**
 - 5.1 acres in CREP (Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program)

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

- 62.56 acres in SAFE (State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement)
 - **Current status (as of Dec 4, 2025):**
 - 241 CRP contracts
 - Average rental rate: \$75/acre
 - **Upcoming expirations:**
 - 33 contracts expiring September 30, 2026
 - 20 contracts expiring in 2027
 - Fewer expirations anticipated in 2028 and 2029
 - Awaiting Farm Bill guidance for future CRP sign-ups; current program authority ended September 30, 2025.
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10:03 AM – NRCS Field Operations Update: Arelys Ortiz, NRCS

Local Working Groups

- Local Working Group (LWG) meetings (subcommittees of the State Technical Committee):
 - **Deadline to host meetings:** March 31, 2026
 - **Deadline to submit minutes:** April 30, 2026
- Districts are encouraged to host and actively participate.

Staffing Updates

- Vacant positions:
 - District Conservationists – Frenchtown and Woodstown
 - Engineers – Frenchtown and Vineland

Several retirements and pending retirements have contributed to these vacancies.

10:07 AM – Resource Shop Update: Evan Madlinger & Kaitlin Farbotnik, NRCS

Conservation Planning Certification Progress

- Despite staffing reductions, New Jersey saw substantial growth in conservation planning certifications.
- Policy updates led to increased certification levels for both NRCS and partner staff.

NRCS Employees:

- January 2025 baseline: 46 active planners; 22% at Level 3.

- Current status: 32 active planners; 38% at Level 3.
- Full certification typically requires about three years of experience.

Major achievement:

- First-ever Level 4 (“area-wide”) planners in New Jersey:
 - **Craig Chianese**
 - **Xanvith Sabouathone**
 - **David Schaaf**

Partner Employees:

- January 2025 baseline: 9 active planners; 22% certified.
- Current: 8 active planners; 78% certified.
- Highlight: **Riley Blankenship (DelAtlantic District)** achieved Level 3 certification.

Overall, **97% of NRCS employees** are now certified at Levels 1–4.

New Jersey Planting Guide Update

Original guide (2001):

- Comprehensive planting reference spanning grasses, forbs, trees, and shrubs.
- Widely used by NRCS and partners to address multiple resource concerns.

2024–2025 update effort:

- Initially intended as a minor revision; expanded into a major overhaul based on field and partner feedback.
- Technical updates are complete; staff are finalizing formatting, consistency, and the table of contents.
- Release is targeted before the end of 2025, with a draft “sneak peek” available.

Key contributors: Chris and Scott (PMC), Betsy, Don, Kaitlin, and Evan (NRCS), with Kass and Olivia (Xerces).

Highlights by section:

- **Section 1 – General Overview:**
 - Updated pure live seed and native seed guidance.
 - Added dormant and frost-seeding guidance.
 - Modified planting dates to align with the updated plant hardiness zone map.

- **Section 2 – Seed Mixes:**
 - New Pine Barrens mix (also suitable for acidic, sandy soils).
 - Continued expansion of mixes, including inter-row cover and coastal area mixes.
- **Section 2 – Upland Herbaceous Conservation Plantings:**
 - Updated cultivar and selection recommendations to emphasize local and commercially available sources.
 - Reduced reliance on rare or difficult-to-source varieties.
 - New Pine Barrens mix presented in a detailed table.
- **Section 4 – Tree and Shrub Plantings:**
 - Revised spacing and density charts.
 - Planting dates updated for new hardiness zones.
 - Duplicate tables removed and replaced with cross-references.
 - New tables summarizing tree/shrub tolerances for flooding, drought, compaction, and deer browse.
- **Section 4 – Natural Regeneration:**
 - Expanded from a brief mention to detailed planning guidance.
- **Sections 5 & 6 – Streambank/Shoreline and Wetland Plantings:**
 - Comprehensive technical review and updated species tolerances.
- **Section 7 – Pasture & Hayland Plantings:**
 - Added grazing species preference tables for grasses, legumes, and forbs by livestock type.
- **Section 8 – Cover Crops:**
 - Old single chart replaced with multiple charts covering general characteristics, grazing/forage attributes, soil health benefits, weed management, environmental tolerances, and establishment/termination.
- **Section 10 – Agroforestry (New):**
 - New section on riparian buffers, windbreaks, alley cropping, forest farming, and silvopasture.
 - Includes spacing, density, and species selection guidance.

2025 Engineering Standards Updates

Minor formatting and typo corrections (3 standards):

- Watering Facility
- Animal Mortality Facility
- Pond Sealing

Significant technical updates (3 standards):

- **Irrigation Pipeline:**
 - Added surge protection criteria for high-density polyethylene pipe.
- **Fish and Raceway Tank:**
 - Expanded purpose to include effluent treatment prior to discharge.
 - Added waste management provisions.
 - Clarified applicability to all aquatic organisms (not just finfish), including clam and oyster operations.
- **Phosphorus Removal System (new national standard):**
 - Removes dissolved phosphorus from surface water, runoff, ditches, and subsurface drains using aluminum/iron-based sorption media.
 - Media lifespan: greater than or equal to 3 years; structural components: greater than or equal to 10 years.

New Jersey-specific revisions (3 standards):

- **Combustion System Improvement:**
 - Engine replacements must achieve greater than or equal to 10 lbs./year NOx reduction OR greater than or equal to 30% reduction overall.
 - No increase in particulate matter allowed.
 - New practice specifications and checkout documents added to the Field Office Technical Guide.
 - Supports the air quality initiative with technical and financial assistance.
- **Vegetated Treatment Areas:**
 - Enhanced criteria for slopes >6% to ensure adequate contact time and erosion control.
 - Strengthens protection against nutrient, pathogen, and contaminant loss.
- **Water Wells:**

- Adopted national variance.
- Aquifer testing moved to “considerations”; testing is encouraged where yields are uncertain but no longer mandatory.

Agronomic & Grazing Standards – 2025 Updates

- Soil health purposes refined and broken into specific resource concerns across multiple standards.
- Gypsum amendment purposes clarified.
- Obsolete pathogen transport criteria removed.

Key standards updated:

- **Conservation Cover:** Clarified soil health language; no major technical changes.
- **Woody Residue Treatment:** Lifespan reduced to 1 year; purposes consolidated from 10 to 6 and some moved to considerations.
- **Cover Crop:**
 - Soil health purposes refined.
 - New integrated livestock grazing section.
 - Biomass requirements tied to erosion tools.
 - Added contingency planning (e.g., rye vs. other small grains) to reduce waiver needs.
- **Hedgerow Plantings:** Lifespan reduced to 5 years; some functions moved to considerations.
- **Seasonal Water Management for Wildlife:** Renamed for clarity; shifted emphasis from structural development to management; lifespan reduced from 5 to 1 year, with structural components addressed under other standards.

Wildlife Practice Updates (2025–2029)

Presenters: Elizabeth “Betsy” McShane (National Wildlife Practice Updates), Kaitlin Farbotnik (Grazing Management, Field Operations Emissions Reduction, Brush Management and Herbaceous and Weed Control), Kaitlin Farbotnik and Hilary Trotman Lane (NRCS New Jersey Air Quality Initiatives)

- The Ecological Science Division is reviewing and updating wildlife conservation practices over 3–4 years.
- Goal: separate construction/installation practices from management-only practices for clarity and consistency.

Example – Upland Wildlife Habitat Management:

- Historically covered both seeding and management (e.g., delayed mowing).
- Now split into:

- **Wildlife Habitat Planting (420):** For seeding and establishment.
- **Upland Wildlife Habitat Management (645) :** For ongoing management (lifespan 1 year; can be repeated annually).

Updates will be phased in to maintain a rolling 5-year revision cycle.

Wetland Restoration Standard

- Continues to be used extensively in WRE, EQIP, and CSP projects.
- Enhancements include clearer guidance and removal of items that now fall under separate standards.
- References to permitting requirements removed, as permitting is addressed under planning policy rather than in technical standards.

Grazing Management (Code 528)

- Formerly “Prescribed Grazing,” now “Grazing Management.”
- New purpose added explicitly addressing reduction of implant test pressure.
- Clarifies scope:
 - Herbivore-focused standard
 - Separate standard being developed for non-ruminant operations (e.g., pigs, poultry).
 - Equine operations with well-managed pastures may still use Grazing Management.

Field Operations Emissions Reduction (FOER – Code 376)

- New requirement: greater than or equal to 30% reduction in emissions.
- Prior reliance on RUSLE2 and WEPS was removed due to limitations in modeling particulate matter.
- New, more appropriate emissions calculators and documentation tools developed.
- A new practice specification was created and added to the standard.

Key documents for planners:

- Practice standard
- Statement of Work (SOW)
- Implementation Requirements (IRs) – field-specific instructions for producers
- Practice overview – plain-language summary for producers
- Specification and emissions calculators/worksheets

The practice is not “plug-and-play”; planners must ensure chosen strategies address the primary source of emissions (e.g., heavy tillage vs. planting geometry).

Brush Management and Herbaceous Weed Control

- Removed blanket requirement to run WIN-PST for every use.
 - New purpose added: reduction of plant pest pressure.
 - Language revised to align with the Pest Management Policy and Handbook.
 - Planners now select the most appropriate risk tools based on specific resource concerns.
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NRCS New Jersey Air Quality Initiative,

- New Jersey is aligning with NRCS's National Air Quality Initiative in preparation for 2026 program offerings.
- Focus: reduce particulate matter and nitrogen oxide emissions from crop cultivation, livestock operations, and fuel use.
- Agriculture contributes approximately 10% of U.S. air emissions; voluntary conservation has helped achieve approximately 2% reduction in sector emissions (2021–2022).

Key mitigation strategies:

- Maintaining soil cover
- Reducing equipment passes
- Installing wind barriers
- Improving combustion systems (e.g., Tier 4 engines, electrification)
- Adopting precision agriculture technologies

New Jersey PM10 & NOx Control and Mitigation Guide

- Developed by Kaitlin Farbotnik, David Schaaf, and Hilary Trotman Lane.
- Compiles information from NRCS–EPA publications, regulations, and control techniques.
- Posted in the Field Office Technical Guide alongside the NJ Vegetative Planting Reference.

Content highlights:

- Mitigation measures across cropland, pasture, and forest land.
 - Tables organized by practice and by emission source (e.g., dust from tillage, drift from pesticide application).
 - Includes examples showing how practices apply in NJ scenarios.
 - Covers all air quality-related conservation practices, not only combustion or FOER practices.
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Field Operations Emissions Reduction Practice – Implementation Details

- FOER’s purpose is to reduce PM10 and NOx emissions through improved field operations and technologies.
- Techniques include:
 - Combining tillage operations
 - Using GPS and auto-steer to reduce overlap
 - Adopting alternative equipment configurations to reduce passes and emissions
- The practice focuses on dust, particulate matter, and drift.
- A 30% emissions reduction is required; qualifying techniques and calculation methods are specified.

Compliance tools:

- Excel-based emissions calculator
 - Reporting worksheet
 - Practice specification indicating when calculations are required vs. when field-verifiable changes are sufficient.
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Combustion System Improvement Standard

- Supports replacement of older, high-emitting diesel engines (EPA Tier 0–2) with cleaner Tier 4 diesel or electric units.
- Applies to non-road agricultural engines (tractors, loaders, irrigation engines, etc.).

Requirements:

- Proof of operability, ownership, and 12 months of baseline usage.
- Existing engines must be destroyed after replacement.
- Replacement must be like-for-like and:
 - greater than or equal to 25 brake horsepower
 - less than or equal to 125% of existing horsepower
 - New (less than or equal to 200 operating hours, no prior sale/lease/rental)
 - Tier 4 diesel or electric

Emission thresholds:

- At least 10 lbs../year NOx reduction

- At least 30% NOx reduction overall
- No increase in particulate matter

Financial assistance:

- Payment based on engine size.
- Historically, cost-share often covered 50–75% of costs (final NJ schedules pending).
- Greatest benefits when combined with other practices (e.g., FOER with GPS).

11:15 AM – Soils Updates: Edwin Muniz and David Steinman, NRCS

NRCS Soil Services in New Jersey

- Soil staff (Fred, Milton, Dave, Edwin) provide year-round technical support.
- Encourage planners and partners to use soil data at the start of projects.
- Services include program compliance reviews, training, and custom data products for agencies and private entities.

LESA (Land Evaluation and Site Assessment) Update

- LESA has not been updated in decades; soil data and interpretations have significantly evolved.
- The update will focus on the **Land Evaluation** component.

Purpose:

- Identify high-quality farmland and evaluate land for agriculture, forestry, and urban agriculture.
- Supports decisions related to irreversible farmland conversion and the Farmland Protection Policy Act.

Why an update is needed:

- Soil data are dynamic; older LESA values are often outdated or inconsistent.
- New algorithms allow more accurate productivity indices.
- Partners have requested updated LESA values.

Planned approach:

- Use modern soil data and productivity algorithms to update LE.
- Prepare explanatory materials on changes and terminology.
- Share drafts with the State Technical Committee for review and feedback.
- Offer updated LESA to NJ Department of Agriculture and Soil Conservation Districts for adoption.

2026 Northeast National Cooperative Soil Science Conference

- NRCS New Jersey will host the 2026 conference in partnership with Rutgers University.
- Planned for June 2026 and likely in-person.
- Open to a broad range of professionals, not just soil scientists.
- Attendees will have opportunities to network, share research, and discuss innovative practices.

Hammonton, NJ Soil Survey Office

- Part of NRCS Soil and Plant Science Division.
- Staff: David Steinman (office leader) and Edwin Irrizari.
- Supports 5 states, 38 counties, and 3 MLRAs.
- Provides, updates, and maintains soil data for NRCS and partners.

Recent and Ongoing Soil Projects

- **Saltwater Intrusion Study:**
 - Studied dynamic soil properties in cropland, salt-affected land, and forest reference sites in NJ, DE, and MD.
 - Soils: Piney Neck and Hammonton.
 - No notable salt buildup observed (similar EC and pH), likely due to coarse textures, good drainage, and higher landscape positions.
 - Other properties (bulk density, aggregate stability, Ksat) did vary.
- **Camden Urban Soil Survey Update (FY 2024):**
 - Completed and published in Web Soil Survey.
 - Remapped a large 12,000-acre urban land polygon into detailed geomorphic units.
 - Updated available water capacity interpretations for 29 map units.
 - Established three new human-altered soil series, including Northmont.
- **Carbon Flux Project (NJDEP & Rowan University):**
 - Focused on the Delaware Estuary and Pines (Manahawkin and Atsion soils).
 - Examining carbon stocks across forest and soil types to support forest and Atlantic white cedar restoration.
 - NRCS will collect soil carbon data, update Web Soil Survey, and revise databases.
 - Field sampling at 12 sites planned for winter and spring.
- **Coastal Survey Update (Atlantic & Cape May Counties):**

- Partner: Del-Atlantic Soil Conservation District.
- Updating coastal soil mapping to support aquaculture and estuarine restoration.
- Nearly 70 soil cores collected.
- Atlantic County data being prepared for FY24 release; work will continue into Cape May and toward Delaware Bay.

Future activities (1–2 years):

- Urban soil survey update for Trenton and possibly broader Mercer County.
- Continued coastal survey work.
- Ongoing technical soil services statewide.
- Publication of additional ecological site descriptions.

Partner engagement:

- Participants are encouraged to report data gaps or mapping issues to David Steinman or Edwin Irrizari.

11:34 AM – Public Affairs / Outreach Update: Jacob Bailey, NRCS

Cape May Plant Materials Center 60th Anniversary

- Appreciation expressed to all who attended the 60th anniversary event.
- Hosted in partnership with Delaware–Atlantic partners; special thanks to Mike Kent and team.
- Attendance: 170–180 participants from 25–28 partner organizations.
- Event occurred just before the federal shutdown, which made it feel more distant in memory.
- Chris Miller to provide a more detailed presentation on the PMC.

Upcoming Events

- **Northeast Agricultural Expo** (formerly Veggie Growers Association Convention)
 - Location: Atlantic City
 - Dates: January 20–23, 2026
 - NRCS will have a booth; emphasis on CSP outreach.
- **NOFA-NJ 36th Annual Winter Conference**
 - Location: Asbury Park
 - Dates: January 31 – February 1, 2026
 - NRCS staff will engage with the organic and sustainable agriculture community.

Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) Webinar Series

- Developed in partnership with:
 - Audubon (Alyssa Megonigal)
 - US Fish & Wildlife Service (Marc Virgilio)
 - Ducks Unlimited (Ben Langey)
 - Quail Forever (formerly Hunter Ross; now with NJ Audubon as Wetlands Steward)
 - Builds on “Breakfast with a Biologist” events that promoted WRE and WLFW.
 - Webinars will:
 - Reach audiences unable to attend in-person, early-morning events.
 - Be held after sunset, recorded, and posted for later viewing.
 - Cover WLFW initiatives, target species (pollinators, bog turtle, black duck, bobwhite quail, etc.), habitat ecology, NRCS practices, and holistic land management.
 - Sessions planned for January and February (dates may shift due to shutdown-related delays).
 - Format: 30–45 minutes plus 15 minutes for Q&A.
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11:43 AM – Partner Report: Rural Development (RD): Maryann Tancredi, Rural Development

Overview of Rural Development

- Sister agency to FSA and NRCS.
- Three mission areas:
 - Rural Business–Cooperative Service
 - Rural Housing Service
 - Rural Utilities Service
- Provides financial assistance to rural communities, businesses, nonprofits, and residents.
- Supports infrastructure, facilities, housing, and economic development.

What Rural Development Can Fund

- **Water & Environmental Programs:** Water, sewer, and waste systems.
- **Community Facilities:** Municipal buildings, community centers, emergency vehicles, public safety infrastructure.
- **Business Programs:**
 - Loans and grants for rural businesses and nonprofits

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

- Downtown revitalization and business improvement efforts

Key Program Updates

- **Value-Added Producer Grant (VAPG):**
 - Supports producers adding value to raw commodities.
 - Two grant types: Planning and Working Capital.
 - Application period: Opens January 15; runs approximately 90 days (through April).
- **Meat & Poultry Processing Expansion Grant:**
 - New NOFA anticipated this month.
 - This round will focus on beef and poultry (previous round focused on invasive catfish).
- **Guaranteed Loan Program:**
 - For businesses, ag producers, and nonprofits.
 - Eligible uses: business purchase/expansion, equipment, and refinancing for improved cash flow.

Example Projects

- VAPG-supported projects include:
 - Mushroom broth product (Sofi Gold Award winner, 2022).
 - Gorgeous Goat Creamery (Stockton, NJ) – artisan cheeses, soaps, and lotions (multiple VAPG awards).
- Guaranteed loan examples:
 - **Oishii Strawberries (Phillipsburg):** \$16M equipment loan under REAP for hydroponic production, helping lower retail prices.
 - **Plainview Growers (Allamuchy):** \$9.5M guaranteed loan for greenhouse expansion.

Rural Utilities Service & Housing

- Supports water and environmental projects, often leveraging Congressional Directed Spending (CDS).
- NJ recently received \$16M in CDS funding for FY 2026 for large water projects.
- Also administers:
 - Distance Learning & Telemedicine grants
 - ReConnect broadband loans/grants
 - Housing programs offering direct financing and grants for home repairs, especially for seniors and very low-income residents.

Key contacts:

- Diana Morrison – Acting State Director (Deputy State Director)
 - Maryann Tancredi – Business Programs Director (Acting Community Programs Director)
 - Geraldine Manganero – Housing Program Director
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11:53 AM – Cape May Plant Materials Center Update: Chris Miller, NRCS**60th Anniversary & Historical Context**

- The 60th Anniversary of the Cape May Plant Materials Center (PMC) was celebrated just before the federal shutdown.
- Strong turnout with significant partner participation; thanks given to Delaware–Atlantic Conservation District and other supporters.

Historical Context – Southern New Jersey (Late 1950s–1960s)

- **1957:** Garden State Parkway completed to Cape May.
- **Early 1960s:** Cape May–Lewes Ferry terminals built; vessels repurposed from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge–Tunnel.
- **1961:** NJ Green Acres Program established, later helping acquire land for the PMC.

1962 Ash Wednesday Nor’easter

- Three-day nor’easter causing severe flooding and coastal damage.
- Most destructive storm in the region until Superstorm Sandy (2012).
- Prompted coordinated response by agencies and the local Soil Conservation District, leading to the establishment of a plant materials facility focused on coastal resilience.

Establishment of the Cape May PMC

- Prior NRCS (then SCS) PMCs existed at Big Flats, NY (1954) and Beltsville, MD (1939).
- The 88th Congress (1964) appropriated \$102,000 for buildings, equipment, and four acres along Route 9.
- NJ Green Acres Program contributed \$50,000 to purchase an additional 80 acres of farmland.
- Cape May PMC became the 20th of 25 NRCS Plant Materials Centers.

Mission and Service Area

- Focus areas:
 - Coastal shoreline and dune stabilization
 - Droughty, sandy, low-fertility coastal plain soils

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

- Wetlands and acid-producing soils
- Service area extends from southern New England to North Carolina, emphasizing the Coastal Plain physiographic region.

Site Characteristics

- Dominant soil: Downer sandy loam (NJ State Soil), with smaller areas of Hammonton and Ingleside soils.
- Includes a 6-acre freshwater irrigation pond created during Parkway construction.
- Bordered by Route 9 (west), Garden State Parkway (east), and Great Sound Marsh (farther east).
- Despite sea level rise, the irrigation pond remains freshwater.

Regional Role

- Although administered through the NJ State Office, the Cape May PMC serves the broader region, similar to the Hammonton Soil Survey Office.
- Activities include plant collection, evaluation, field trials, demonstration projects, and collaboration with commercial seed and nursery growers.

Major Accomplishments of the Cape May PMC

Foundational Work – Dunes and Shorelines

- First major project (1965 onward) involved large-scale collection of American beachgrass from NC to southern New England.
- These collections formed the basis of the first release: **Cape American Beachgrass** (released in 1972).
- Church's Nursery (Frank, then David, now Paul Church) became the primary commercial producer, historically growing approximately 60 acres, now 15–20 acres, with many additional cooperators along the East Coast.

Advancing Tidal Shoreline Stabilization

- The PMC progressed from dune stabilization to tidal shoreline and marsh fringe stabilization.
- Early non-structural shoreline work (1970s) relied solely on vegetation, without rock or structural elements.
- A VIMS professor later acknowledged PMC as an early leader in vegetative shoreline and marsh-fringe stabilization techniques.

Key Publication

- “Vegetation for Tidal Shoreline Stabilization in the Mid-Atlantic States” by Curtis Sharp and Chester Belcher (late 1970s).

- Provided a systematic method to assess shoreline suitability for vegetation-only stabilization based on factors such as sand supply, orientation, fetch, wave climate, and existing vegetation.

“Operation Green Diker”

- Community-based dune restoration efforts led by SCS technicians.
- Volunteers (Boy Scouts, garden clubs, civic groups) harvested and transplanted beachgrass.
- Supported by local civic organizations (Rotary, Knights of Columbus).
- Featured in a 1966 Rotarian article, “Green Dikers Save Their Shores,” and accompanied by a dune restoration brochure.

Additional Plant Releases (Late 1970s–1990s)

- **Avalon Saltmeadow Cordgrass**
- **Atlantic Coastal Panicgrass** (native warm-season dune species)
- **Ocean View Beach Plum**
- **Wildwood Bayberry**

In the early 1990s, dune seeding techniques were refined to complement beachgrass plantings.

Warm-Season Grass Ecotypes (Early 2000s)

- Large-scale collection of native warm-season grass ecotypes across the coastal plain from southern New England to NC.
- Focused on selecting regionally adapted releases.

Army Corps Partnership – Dredged Sand & Marsh Restoration

- Reimbursable agreement with the US Army Corps of Engineers (New York District).
- Developed seeding techniques for smooth cordgrass and specifications for seeding in dredged sand.
- Supported erosional island expansion and restoration in the NY City area.

Marsh Island Restoration – Jamaica Bay, NY (2006–2012)

- Cape May PMC collaborated with the US Army Corps (New York District) on marsh island restoration in Jamaica Bay.
- Site was National Park Service property; PMC was responsible for seed collection, cleaning, and plant propagation.
- Conducted direct-seeding trials of ***Spartina alterniflora***, typically established using plugs.

- With partner assistance, collected and cleaned approximately 400–500 lbs. of *S. alterniflora* seed in one season.
- Used kitty litter as a carrier to facilitate efficient seeding with a single-row seeder.
- Trial plots seeded in September 2007 showed strong establishment by July 2008, demonstrating feasibility of direct seeding.
- Successful trials led to larger applications, including contractor-led seeding of 32–35 acres on Yellow Bar Island.
- Completed just before Superstorm Sandy; the site remained intact due to protection by Rockaway Island.

Seed Program Modeled After “Seeds of Success”

- PMC was contacted by the Bureau of Land Management (DOI) to support an eastern program modeled after the western “**Seeds of Success**” initiative.
- PMC was contracted to receive wild-collected seed from approximately 30 target coastal species.
- Multi-year effort with seed collected from Southern New England, New York City, and North Carolina.
- PMC cleaned seed, returned samples to collectors for documentation, and made cleaned seed available for coastal restoration after Superstorm Sandy.
- A subset of seed was sent to long-term germplasm storage for preservation.
- Cape May PMC was the first NRCS Plant Materials Center in the eastern U.S. to participate in this effort.

General Program Work Beyond Beachgrass and Cordgrass

- Although beachgrass and cordgrass have been longstanding focal species, PMC has also:
 - Evaluated plant species for salt-affected soils and coastal flooding.
 - Conducted pollinator demonstration work with the Xerces Society.
 - Evaluated cover crops for soil health through the National Plant Materials Program.
 - Collaborated with USDA ARS on:
 - Carbon sequestration in native grasses
 - Riparian buffers using native grasses
 - Biomass production in native warm-season grasses (with Rutgers).
 - Partnered with Big Flats PMC on early 1990s water-quality projects using filter strips.

- Worked with University of Rhode Island on wind barriers and vegetative barrier conservation practices.

Pollinator Research (2009–2012)

- Science-based pollinator restoration project with Rutgers University (2009–2012).
- Worked with Professor Rachel Winfree to measure pollinator abundance and species richness on selected plantings.
- Plant species for study were jointly selected; long-term plots established.
- Two Rutgers graduate students completed degrees based on these data.
- Project produced technical notes and reference materials; began as a SIG grant and expanded.
- PMC’s seaside goldenrod selection, ‘**Monarch**’, is promoted for dune systems along with beachgrass, coastal panicgrass, and coastal little bluestem.

Beach Plum Research and Agricultural Development

- PMC selected ‘**Ocean View**’ beach plum in the 1980s; released to growers in 1992.
- Recognized value-added uses for fruit (jams, jellies, wine, cocktails, salad dressings, etc.).
- Established a beach plum orchard at the PMC in 1994 for research and demonstration.

Rutgers’ work at the orchard included:

- Pruning trials
- Evaluation of fruit sweetness, flower abundance, and fruit production

The orchard:

- Supported formation of the **Cape May Beach Plum Association** (active approximately 2005–2012).
- Helped establish beach plum as a viable specialty crop in southern New Jersey.
- Beach plum was ultimately designated the official fruit of Cape May County.

Current High-Priority Work: Salt-Affected Lands

- Primary focus: evaluating plant performance on salt-affected lands.
- Greenhouse trials with native warm-season grasses to assess salinity tolerance under controlled conditions.

- Field trials follow greenhouse screenings to compare performance under real-world conditions.
- Working with multiple varieties of **saltmeadow cordgrass** to:
 - Stabilize marginal farmland impacted by saltwater intrusion and flooding.
 - Explore potential as an alternative crop in wet, saline soils.

Regional Coastal Buffer Project

- Completed an extensive project in the Delmarva region (Maryland) with:
 - University of Delaware
 - University of Maryland
 - George Washington University
- Evaluated native forests and grasses as coastal buffers to enhance habitat and water quality.

Plant Selections in Development

- **Seashore mallow:**
 - Salt-tolerant obligate wetland plant.
 - Collections from NJ, DE, and NC under evaluation.
 - Planned release to commercial growers in FY 2027 or FY 2028.
 - Also an excellent pollinator plant.
- *Bushy bluestem (Andropogon glomeratus)*:
 - Native grass for salt-affected and wet soils.
 - Not overly aggressive; compatible with pollinator plantings.

Mid-Atlantic Sea Oats Release

- Recently released a Mid-Atlantic–adapted sea oats selection during the PMC’s 60th anniversary.
- Complements dune plantings with beachgrass, coastal panicgrass, little bluestem, and seaside goldenrod.

Project history:

- Initiated by former PMC Manager **Don Hammer** (served 1985–1995).
- Don continued work as an Earth Team volunteer nearly 30 years after retirement (since 1995).
- Effort included:
 - Seed collections from VA, NC, SC, and GA (1980s)

- Multiple evaluation and demonstration plantings
- Damage from Superstorm Sandy and subsequent beach-replenishment bulldozing at some sites
- Final release completed in September 2025

A long-term planting at Cape May Point (established approximately 2016–2017) is visited annually, with Don still actively involved.

Additional Notable Feature

- PMC hosts the **New Jersey champion water oak**, the largest in the state.
- Planted around 1965, the year the center was established; informally known as the “**anniversary tree.**”

12:33 PM – Partner Updates

Dave Clapp and Erica Rosetti – State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC)

(Presented by Evan Madlinger, NRCS)

- Revised **Soil and Water Rules** for New Jersey’s preserved farm conservation program have been adopted.
- Program has similarities to NRCS conservation work; PMC assisted in the rule-revision process.

Key changes:

- **Increased project eligibility and cost-share cap:**
 - New formula: **\$50,000 + \$500/acre**, up to **\$150,000** maximum state cost-share.
 - Previous cap: \$75,000 (effectively doubling maximum funding).
 - **Inflation and cost-table updates:**
 - Approved contracts may be increased—upon applicant request—up to the **lowest of three cost estimates.**
 - **Technical assistance grant:**
 - Up to **\$20,000 every five years** for planning or engineering assistance.
 - Cost-share capped at 50% of actual costs, not exceeding the approved amount (or revised amount, where applicable).
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Marc Virgilio – US Fish & Wildlife Service

- USFWS is partnering with the Plant Materials Center to propagate **sensitive joint-vetch**, a federally threatened annual plant, in New Jersey.
 - New Jersey currently has only **one remaining population** in a freshwater tidal marsh, making it highly vulnerable to loss due to poor conditions or infestations.
 - Goal: work with NRCS, the PMC, and landowners to reestablish the species at **multiple locations** in New Jersey to improve long-term viability.
 - Recent furlough-related disruptions caused missed treatment windows (e.g., for Phragmites control).
 - As winter approaches, USFWS and NRCS will collaborate on woody vegetation control to improve habitat conditions and resume normal management activities.
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Adjournment

- The meeting concluded at 1:39 PM.