

INDIANA STATE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

Moderator: Jerod Chew, Assistant State Conservationist for Partnerships

Location: Morning: Putnam Inn, Greencastle, Indiana
Afternoon: Legan Livestock and Grain

Date: August 25, 2026

Attendees: See attached list

Welcome – Damarys Mortenson, State Conservationist, NRCS

Damarys Mortenson welcomed the group and thanked Indiana Pork for graciously providing lunch. She mentioned she is excited about this new ISTC meeting format and hopes to continue doing field visits at future meetings.

Source Water Protection Areas – Shannon Zezula, State Resource Conservationist, NRCS

Reference Slides: FY27 Source Water Protection Areas

- **Overview:** NRCS national headquarters recently issued a data call to determine if states want to change their Source Water Protection Area priority watersheds for fiscal year 2027. Shannon reviewed the current Source Water Protection Areas policy.
 1. 10% target of Farm Bill Financial Assistance Funding
 - a. [Tracked and analyzed at the national level](#)
 2. States work with partners to identify priority watersheds (HUC 12)
 - a. [Wellheads and surface water protection areas](#)
 - b. [Up to 20% of the state's land base](#)
 3. States work with partners to identify priority practices (higher payments) within the priority watersheds
 - a. [Higher payments](#)
- **Source water protection considerations:** Shannon described how protected data from EPA and state sources are used to identify wellhead and surface water protection zones. Shannon highlighted benefits of aligning conservation efforts with local utilities and maintaining established watersheds to avoid disrupting ongoing local initiatives. The outcome was a shared interest in keeping the established watershed list intact.
- **Criteria for watershed refinement:** Shannon discussed how partners may propose additional watersheds using local data, with EPA intake information and population considerations playing central roles. He noted that while several data sets could be used, the current process balances practicality with established criteria. The group agreed that refinement is possible, but consistency remains important.
- **Conservation practice incentives:** Shannon outlined priority practices eligible for enhanced payments of up to 90% in designated watersheds, emphasizing their water-quality benefits and low adoption rates. Shannon detailed examples like bioreactors, saturated buffers and phosphorus removal systems, noting their high cost and limited widespread adoption. The discussion concluded with acknowledgment that farmer interest typically drives adoption more than incentive percentages.

- **Challenges in complex practices:** Shannon responded to questions about two-stage ditches, noting limited adoption due to high cost and small acreage relevance for individual farms. He explained that farmer understanding and willingness may be more influential than payment rates. The group recognized opportunities for broader outreach and education to improve adoption.

RECOMMENDATION: The Indiana State Technical Committee recommends maintaining current watershed priorities and Source Water Protection Area High-Priority Practices for fiscal year 2027, while considering future data analysis.

Wildlife Subcommittee Report – Brianne Lowe, State Biologist, NRCS

Reference Slides: Wildlife State Tech Sub-Committee

- **Wildlife conservation priorities:** Brianne provided updates on wildlife conservation practice standards, noting national priorities and a major overhaul of standard structures. She explained how standards are being compartmentalized into establishment, management and structural categories, with numerous wildlife standards undergoing review or revision. The next step involves state adoption within a year of national release.
- **Practice standard changes:** Brianne detailed revisions to specific wildlife-related standards, including updated hedgerow establishment criteria, consolidation of management practices under standard 645, and release of seasonal water management provisions. She emphasized clearer categorization and alignment across practices. These changes will guide future conservation planning and contract development.
- **Natural regeneration concerns:** Brianne described high failure rates of naturally regenerated field borders due to woody encroachment, especially in southern and southeastern counties. She stated that stricter suitability and feasibility criteria will be added to limit where natural regeneration is permitted. The plan is to update guidance and continue discussions in upcoming meetings.
- **Plug planting adjustments:** Brianne outlined changes to plug-planting scenarios, noting high costs relative to payments and the need for mulching at 18-inch centers to reduce weed pressure. She shared feedback from small farms teams and partners influencing the revised approach.

RECOMMENDATION: The Indiana State Technical Committee recommends adopting 18-inch centers for plug-planting payment scenarios.

Regenerative Pilot Program – Shannon Zezula, State Resource Conservationist, NRCS

Reference Slides: RPP FY27

- **Regenerative pilot program overview:** Shannon provided a summary of the fiscal year 2026 Regenerative Pilot Program (RPP), explaining that 25% of existing Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) allocations must be targeted to regenerative practices supporting soil health improvement through the pilot. Shannon highlighted strong farmer interest and clarified that no new funding was added to state allocations.
- **Program funding context:** Shannon explained EQIP's \$20 million annual allocation and CSP's \$15 million baseline, noting backlog increases due to rising demand. He emphasized that both

programs fund only a portion of applications and described adjustments made to meet demand. The conclusion underscored the importance of efficient processing to obtain additional funds.

- **Soil Health Testing requirements:** Shannon detailed the requirement for soil health testing requirements under the pilot, with tests conducted at the beginning and end of contracts. Some discussion amongst the group regarding the efficacy of current soil health testing options.
- **Whole-farm assessment requirements:** In fiscal year 2026, RPP clients were required to have their whole farm assessed. Indiana NRCS further clarified this requirement to assess the whole farm for land that is managed similarly.
- **Resource concern thresholds:** Shannon used examples of soil erosion and compaction to illustrate how CART calculations determine whether conservation practices meet required thresholds. See slide illustrations. Shannon highlighted the mathematical nature of the system and how practice combinations help farmers achieve the “met” status.
- **Eligibility complexity:** Shannon explained that all soil and water resource concerns must be met for at least one land unit in EQIP-RPP and for all land uses in CSP-RPP. Shannon noted challenges for farmers with tillage or compaction issues and emphasized the high bar for eligibility. This informed later discussions on refining requirements.
 - In fiscal year 2026, all soil and water resource concerns needed to be “met” at the end of the contract, but Indiana NRCS focused on the Indiana NRCS required resource concerns. Indiana NRCS suggests that this process worked well.
- **Primary practice lists:** Shannon reviewed national primary practices and proposed adding the following perennial-vegetation establishment options, explaining how this change would improve ranking for farmers undertaking more substantial conservation actions.:
 - [327 Conservation Cover](#)
 - [512 Pasture and Hay Planting](#)
 - [380 Windbreak Establishment/Renovation](#)
 - [386 Field Border](#)
 - [391 Riparian Forest Buffer](#)
 - [420 Wildlife Habitat Planting](#) (if changes are made at the national level to give credit to soil and water resource concerns for this practice)
 - [612 Tree/Shrub Establishment](#) (suggested by Indiana State Technical Committee members)

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Indiana State Technical Committee recommends the following:

1. Focus Indiana’s RPP critical soil and water resource concerns for fiscal year 2027 to be the Indiana-required resource concerns for the land use.
2. Focus Indiana’s RPP eligible land uses to continue to be cropland, pastureland, and forestland.
3. Include the perennial vegetation practices above as primary practices.

NRCS Program Updates – Curtis Knueven, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs, NRCS

- **Program delivery improvements:** Curtis highlighted increasing backlogs and described strategies to speed program delivery, including using previous cost lists and implementing the integrated field tool. He shared expectations for earlier approvals and more efficient processing in FY27. The next step is a follow-up meeting in late October or early November to finalize details. The group brought up no issues with using previous year’s cost lists and the concept of earlier obligations.