



NRCS New Mexico State Technical Advisory Committee

USDA Conference Room
100 Sun Avenue, NE, Suite 602
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87109

Meeting Minutes

May 28, 2026

COMMENCEMENT

The meeting began at 9:00 a.m.

ATTENDEES

There were approximately 20 in-person attendees and 65 virtual attendees.

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS (Kenneth Branch, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs)

This is the first of two State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) meetings for fiscal year 2026 (FY26). This first meeting is meant to provide as much information as possible to partners because we need recommendations from the partners ahead of fiscal year 2027 (FY27). The second meeting is expected to be held in August. Please submit recommendations to the email addresses given during the presentations.

The PowerPoint presentations and meeting minutes will be posted on our website for your reference in approximately 30 days.

STATE CONSERVATIONIST'S REMARKS (J. Xavier Montoya)

Thank you for joining us. STAC meetings are very important. We provide you with a lot of programmatic and technical information. We hope to receive feedback from you during our second STAC meeting of the year.

News from the agency: The House has passed their Farm Bill, so here is hoping we may have a new Farm Bill soon. The NRCS installed a new chief, Colton Buckley. This is an exciting development as he is

expected to be a big proponent of partnerships. As our chief, he will highlight partnerships and training for employees to ensure the correct technical information is disseminated to producers and partners. He will continue the Farmers First initiative, and he will work to reinvigorate Local Working Groups (LWGs). He would also like to have more certified planners.

Our employee numbers are down, but we have filled a few positions. Hopefully, we will have more soon.

New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts' (NMACD) regional meetings are coming up. Please attend.

PROGRAMS (NRCS Program Staff)

Introduction to the State Technical Advisory Committee/Section 1619 (Kenneth Branch)

- Presented 10 PowerPoint slides. Presentation highlights included:
 - Reviewed STAC responsibilities.
 - Reviewed Section 1619 of the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (Section 1619) limits.
 - Section 1619 strictly limits the USDA, its contractors, and cooperators from disclosing personally identifiable information (PII) related to agricultural producers or landowners.
 - Interested parties may submit Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, but desired information may not be released.
 - PII examples include names, addresses, phone numbers, location, geospatial data about agricultural land or operations, maps, and crops planted.
 - Aggregated information may be shared.
 - There are exemptions to Section 1619 limits:
 - When providing technical or financial assistance related to agricultural operations, land, or conservation practices
 - In response to a disease outbreak or pest threat
 - Reviewed updated program application, ranking, and 80-percent obligation deadlines.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) (Lucas Montaña, Acting EQIP Program Manager)

- Presented 28 PowerPoint slides. Presentation highlights included:
 - EQIP overview
 - FY26 allocation is \$28.2 million, up from \$23.9 million in FY25.
 - Received 1,317 (General) applications in FY26 compared to 662 applications received in FY22, the last time General applications only were received.
 - Contract obligation statistics reviewed.
 - Total number of contracts obligated is down.
 - Obligation amounts are bigger, however.
 - Top five EQIP practices in NM for FY25 included:

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- Irrigation Pipeline (430)
 - Brush Management (314)
 - Sprinkler System (442)
 - Fence (382)
 - Forest Stand Improvement (666)
 - Changes from last year to the number of fund pools each state can have.
 - There were 78 funding pools, now there are 5 in total:
 - North Area, South Area, Water Management Entities (WMEs), Tribal, and Disaster
 - 35 NRCS service centers in the state's North and South Areas
 - Service centers are divided into 11 teams statewide.
 - Each pool has categories within them to capture national, state, and local priorities.
 - Pools and categories were described in greater detail and examples given.
 - District Conservationists (DCs) will meet with LWGs annually to get feedback from the local level to make our programs work better going forward.
 - FY26 national and local priorities described.
 - FY26 Local Priorities—7 categories included in the area pools and each of the 11 teams has between 3-5 ranking categories focused on specific land uses.
 - FY26 National Priorities named and described—National Water Quality (NWQI), Regenerative Pilot Program (RPP), Source Water, and WaterSMART.
 - High Priority Practices (HPPs) defined.
 - FY26, 10 HPPs listed.
 - How do we improve this list to better serve our constituents?
 - Do these 10 HPPs need to change?
 - Are there other practices that have high potential for conservation benefit but are underutilized?
 - National Bulletin issued in May notifying states that Technical Service Providers (TSPs) have specific Technical Assistance (TA) allocations available for FY26
 - New Mexico has \$86,000 in TSP allocations to incentivize using TSPs more and to relieve field office staff.
 - We need more TSPs in the state.
 - Sam Fullen, State Agronomist, is the NM TSP coordinator.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Kenneth Branch stated that local fund and ranking pools are obligated down to local team level. As much funding kept local to ensure we are addressing local field issues. Need STAC recommendations re: how and where to continue to allocate funding.

Local field offices can provide information to applicants to help improve their applications/address existing resource concerns.

Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) (Martin Meairs, State CSP Program Manager)

- Presented 32 PowerPoint slides. Highlights included:
 - Defined CSP, what it is, and its benefits.
 - Outlined CSP payments:
 - Five yearly payments, no more or less
 - CSP payment and contract limit improvements for FY26
 - New activities: “Enhancing practices and the operation.”
 - CSP Pool Management—two ranking pools with categories under pools:
 - Agricultural land (i.e., crop, pasture, and rangeland) and Non-Industrial Private Forestland (NIPF)
 - Must target at least 5 percent of available funds to Beginning Farmer and Rancher (BFR) and Socially Disadvantaged Farmer and Rancher (SDFR) using separate ranking pool categories for each.
 - Must target at least 25 percent of available funds to RPP.
 - Must offer separate funding category for Organic producers.
 - Fiscal year 2024 (FY24) maps shown where money in state was allocated by service center.
 - Listed FY25 obligated CSP contracts by service center.
 - CSP allocations for FY26 by program listed.
 - Each of the 11 teams will receive \$662,000.
 - Trying to spread it out across the state.
 - Qualifications for CSP RPP outlined.
 - Map shown re: source water areas for FY26.
 - CSP renewals for FY26 came from national headquarters (NHQ).
 - Renewals not offered during FY26.
 - Renewal applications were moved to the CSP General signup.
 - FY26 application outlook includes 205 pending applications.
 - Eight NM Priority Resource Concern Categories and ranking weights by categories listed for both agricultural land and NIPF
 - Need recommendations in particular for these categories.
 - Points allocations?
 - Hermit’s Peak/Calf Canyon (HPCC) Conservation Restoration Plan updates outlined.
 - Plan details described—what it is and what goes into it.
 - Top nine common practices to address resource concerns enumerated.
 - Photos shown of damage created.
 - Damage still taking place even though fire was five years ago.
 - Number of applications received for HPCC Conservation Plan requests—2,988.
 - Completed and delivered plans—2,224
 - New applications needing to be assessed—224.
 - Acres assessed—229,994.

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- Total dollars planned—\$1.9 billion.
 - Application deadline was January 15, 2026.
 - Hoping to complete Conservation Restoration Plans by end of August 2026.
 - Additional comments by Kenneth Branch:
 - HPCC project is different from Emergency Watershed Protection projects
 - We provide our services for free to landowners.
 - We don't take any money from FEMA or the HPCC claims office.
 - CSP—we need to be more inclusive of the whole state and that's why we divided/spread money around the teams/state.
 - We contract a lot of acres for little money, so we are a “cheap” state, but we are a big player.
 - If tracked by acres, we would be in top five.

Regional Conservationist Partnership Program (RCPP)/(Kenneth Lujan, Acting RCPP Program Manager)

- Presented 10 PowerPoint slides. Presentation highlights included:
 - Described what RCPP is and program requirements.
 - Cost-sharing program
 - Led by partners (only difference from EQIP)
 - Implemented area-wide
 - Five-year project level basis
 - Described the Notice of Funding Opportunity (NoFO).
 - Shared what it is, how to find it, and how to search within it.
 - Typically released during the first quarter of the fiscal year.
 - None this year thus far
 - Outlined RCPP process:
 - Submit proposal, NRCS reviews and makes selections, awards announced, negotiations, execute programmatic partnership agreement (PPA) and supplemental agreements (SAs), PPA and SA implementation, PPA final project report and closeout, and SA closeout
 - Described breakdown of RCPP agreements.
 - Outlined the nine active NM RCPP agreements.

QUESTION

Unknown Speaker: Question asked about reimbursement timeliness.

RESPONSE

Kenneth Lujan, NRCS: There was a 2- to 3-month delay in reimbursements to our partners. The issue was a staffing shortage at NHQ. Only one person processing the reimbursement requests. They are actively working on it, and they have the payments down to a 1-month delay.

Kenneth Branch, NRCS: Please try to combine payment requests into bigger requests—not \$25, \$50, etc. New payment requests cannot be processed until older ones are paid. He suggested that requests be lumped together and submitted on a quarterly basis.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) (Athena Cholas, Easements Program Manager)

- Presented 38 PowerPoint slides. Presentation highlights included:
 - Chief’s first priority is to “Preserve and Protect Agricultural Land” through expanding targeted conservation easement programs to slow the loss of 5,000 acres of farmland per day.
 - Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) policy and funding updates:
 - FY25—3 ALE contracts, 5,770 acres, \$5 million
 - FY26—7 ALE applications, 6,460 acres, \$7.6 million
 - Now there are dedicated pools in four regions of the state.
 - We received all the funding we requested; all applications funded.
 - Deadline for national applications is May 29, 2026.
 - \$200 million is available.
 - \$78 million is needed for current applications.
 - Publications that highlight success stories can be used to inform landowners and communities.
 - Includes a report that shows more economic value for land to be agriculture than housing.
 - Farmland Transition Grants—\$10,000 to support the transfer, access, or permanent protection of farmland or ranchland (i.e., succession planning).
 - Policy updates described.
 - Programs manual was revised, caught up to all the bulletins.
 - More concise and up to date
 - Incidental land, no agricultural production
 - Capped at 10 percent. Need input.
 - Grasslands of Special Environmental Significance (GSS) input requested on state criteria.
 - GSS vs. non-GSS outlined.
 - Payout differences defined.
 - GSS technical criteria and guidelines outlined.
 - A. Shortgrass Prairie described and input requested.
 - B. Chihuahuan Desert described and input requested.
 - C. Blue Grama dominated areas described and delineated in NM.
 - Scenic Views/Subdivisions: NRCS at its discretion can limit subdivisions.
 - Input requested on criteria to consider when approving subdivisions.
 - Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) Geographic Area Rate Caps defined, and input requested on changing maximum compensation.
 - WRE program input requested for wetland restoration criteria.

QUESTION

Cecilia Rosacker, Rio Grande Agricultural Land Trust (RGALT): RGALT requested state support for reinstating a grant from NRCS to provide easement outreach to historically underserved landowners. The national funding was rescinded by NRCS. The grant had to be scrubbed of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in order to continue.

RESPONSE

Athena Cholas, NRCS: ACEP ALE does not have special provisions for historically underserved landowners in the regulation like CSP and EQIP. NRCS will look for ways to help partners and support landowners where it can.

QUESTION

Unknown Speaker: Is there going to be another application opportunity before 2027?

RESPONSE

Unknown Speaker, NRCS: New Mexico has not yet set a deadline for 2027, and the deadline could also be set by NHQ as it was in 2026.

COMMENT

Jason Mondragon-Martin, NRCS: The NRCS Santa Fe MLRA Soil Survey Office has mapped playas down to ¼ acre size in their most recent Land Resource Unit (LRU) update.

RESPONSE

Athena Cholas, NRCS: For wetland easements, a field visit may be needed to check for hydric soils since hydric soils might not be delineated for all playas.

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIGs) (Athena Cholas, Easements Program Manager)

- Presented eight PowerPoint slides. Presentation highlights included:
 - CIG State (NM) priorities given and input requested for FY27:
 - Increased reliance on biodiversity to control pests.
 - Soil health management systems
 - Water conservation
 - Fish and wildlife habitat
 - CIG Classic Program priorities and parameters outlined:
 - Water management
 - Conserving ecosystems by managing pest pressure
 - Soil
 - Habitat improvement

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- Farmer-focused conservation outcomes:
 - Very specific considerations under each priority
 - Due July 27, 2026
 - Notice of Funding Opportunity (NoFO) announced.
 - Minimum payout of \$250,000
 - Maximum payout of \$2 million
 - Total to be awarded: \$15 million.
 - Water Quantity
 - Higher priority considerations outlined.
 - Due July 27, 2026.
 - NoFO announced.
 - Minimum amount awarded of \$250,000.
 - Maximum amount awarded of \$5 million.
 - Total to be awarded: \$50 million.
 - On-farm trials/CIG priorities given:
 - Irrigation water management technologies
 - Nutrient management
 - Grazing lands
 - Soil health demonstration trials
 - Upcoming webinars (registration required):
 - CIG Classic on June 18, 2026 @ 3:00 p.m. (Eastern)
 - On-Farm Trials on June 17, 2026 @ 3:00 p.m. (Eastern).

Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP) (David Griego, State EWP Program Manager)

- Presented 19 PowerPoint slides. Presentation highlights included:
 - Defined what the EWP is and the criteria that must be met.
 - Available to communities when a natural disaster occurs.
 - Creates a sudden watershed impairment.
 - Poses an imminent threat to life and/or property.
 - Listed the 12 active EWP projects in the state of New Mexico.
 - NM has the largest EWP Buyout in the country—Lincoln County EWP.
 - Disaster dated June 16, 2024.
 - Total project amount: \$211 billion
 - Funding allocated to purchase 449 homes and properties, which will be demolished or relocated.
 - Acquisition handled by the project sponsor who then purchases the property and becomes the owner.
 - Deed restriction placed on title limiting land use to open space and natural resource conservation.

QUESTION

Kenneth Branch, NRCS: EWP funding occurs solely based on the event not on an annual allocation. Eligibility requirements apply.

RESOURCE TECHNOLOGY UPDATES (RTS) (Ana Gomes, Acting State Resource Conservationist)

- Presented 13 PowerPoint slides. Presentation highlights included:
 - List of current RTS staff
 - Outlined RTS projects and programs, for example:
 - Delivery of training to NRCS and affiliate staff
 - Support Programs by ranking criteria and planning guidance
 - Certify planners via ecological job approval authorities (JAAs).
 - Coordinate the Technical Service Providers (TSPs) registry for the state.
 - Defined who TSPs are and what they do.
 - TSPs may be certified in conservation practices, i.e., Conservation Planning Activities (CPAs), Design or Implementation Activities (DIAs), and Conservation Evaluation and Monitoring Activities (CEMAs).
 - TSP application resources given.
 - RTS training updates outlined.
 - Statewide planner certification (priority) trainings
 - NHQ trainings requested by the state (levels 3 and 4). Denied FY26.
 - NHQ Chief's priority training to support RPP ("Back to Roots," Las Cruces, NM)
 - Ongoing assistance offered by RTS:
 - Payment schedule scenarios
 - Technical checkouts
 - NEPA evaluation
 - Restoration plan development
 - Planning for field work (e.g., irrigation, rangeland, crop, forest)
 - CART (Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool).
 - Emergency Conservation Program (ECP)
 - Assist the Farm Service Agency via:
 - Technical support
 - Engineering guidance
 - Conservation practice standards assessment.

Handbook Updates (Andrew Lee, State Forester)

- National Forestry and Agroforestry Handbook
 - 190-H Parts 635 and 636
 - Evaluation, treatment, and management for forestry and agroforestry systems
 - Previous handbook was from 2004.

CPA-52/Biology Update (Nick Goodman, State Biologist)

- Presented nine PowerPoint slides. Presentation highlights included:
 - Advancing Markets for Producers (AMP) initiative
 - Formerly known as Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities program.
 - AMP is built to advance the priorities of today's American farmer.
 - A "Farmer First" initiative
 - Assists farmers by developing new markets, premiums, and value-added agricultural products.
 - Streamlines reporting metrics.
 - Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Guide (WHEG) update
 - Seven wildlife species' WHEGs have been updated so far.
 - For pronghorn, added a movement and migration section to the WHEG.
 - Example given of habitat scoring sheet (e.g., turkey habitat).

ENGINEERING UPDATES (Elias Gnann, State Conservation Engineer)

- Presented eight PowerPoint slides. Presentation highlights included:
 - Watershed programs update:
 - Comprised of four different programs:
 - Watershed & Flood Prevention Operations Program (WFPO)
 - Assists units of federal, state, and Tribal governments (i.e., project sponsors) to protect and restore watersheds.
 - Rehabilitation Program (Rehab)
 - Rehabilitates aging dams that are near the end of their design life and/or no longer meet federal or state safety criteria or performance standards.
 - Biggest hurdle is funding.
 - Only \$1-2 million available nationwide for rehab, and that is what we focus on in NM.
 - Flood protection
 - Most dams are in southern NM, following river valleys.
 - Remedial Assistance Program (Remedial)
 - Corrects problems caused by a design/installation error.
 - Structure must be within their design life.
 - Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP)
 - Reduces imminent hazards to life and property threatened by excessive erosion and flooding caused by a natural disaster.
 - Watershed vs. Farm Bill Programs
 - Agreements are with local governments (i.e., project sponsors) rather than an individual landowner.
 - Viable project sponsors can include:
 - Any entity legally organized under state law, for example:

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- State, county, town, soil and water conservation district, irrigation district
 - Any Tribal entity
 - New Mexico has eight active watershed projects—1 WFPO; 2 Remedial; 5 Rehab.
 - Outlined FY26 watershed program expectations.

PARTNER UPDATES/PRESENTATIONS

USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA) (Zachary Riley, State Executive Director)

- FSA programmatic updates
 - Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) deadlines closing in May 2026.
 - Supplemental Disaster Relief Program (SDRP) application deadline is August 12, 2026.
 - Specialty Crops Relief Program (ASCF) applications due August 7, 2026.
 - Crops grown in NM are covered by this program.
- FSA staffing updates
 - Currently have four or five job postings.
- Other updates
 - Interagency efforts continue to implement “one farmer, one file” initiative.

New Mexico Department of Agriculture (NMDA) (Katie Crayton)

- Healthy Soil Program update
 - Thank you to everyone in the room that assisted with this program.
 - Received 65 applications this year.

New Mexico Department of Agriculture (NMDA) (Secretary Jeff Witte)

- Thank you to NRCS for being a wonderful partner.
- Hopefully you will receive some help soon with staff shortages.

QUESTION

Andrew Lee (NRCS) asked Secretary Witte with whom he should speak regarding Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS) in livestock.

RESPONSE

Secretary Witte said that they have been dealing with this issue in dairies since 2018. Asked Andrew to send him an email, and he will provide contact information.

QUESTION

Alex Etkind asked Andrew Lee about forest stand improvements (mostly in ponderosa pine stands, not piñon-juniper). Can prescribed burning be incorporated into practices? Can landowners receive prescribed burn training?

RESPONSE

Andrew Lee, NRCS: Prescribed burning can be included in the practices, but it is highly dependent on landowner's priorities in NM. Most prescribed burns are piling and burning. Also, what is your prescribed burn plan with containment? It all starts with a plan. There is no prescribed burn training offered to landowners.

Athena Cholas, NRCS: Prescribed burn training may be able to be covered under the CIG program.

Kenneth Branch, NRCS: People are shy on burns given recent history in NM. There is a suite of practices for prescribed burns. The 900 series practices used for prescribed burns are for TSPs only. TSPs have the expertise but not federal government employees. We encourage people to get TSPs signed up. There is a big push nationwide to add more TSPs in the states.

CLOSING REMARKS (Kenneth Branch, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs)

Thank you for your time and attendance. Presentations and meeting minutes will be on the NM NRCS website in three to four weeks. The next STAC meeting will be in August. Email invitations will be sent to the contact list and the meeting is publicized publicly. Please add your contact information into the Teams chat, and we will add you to the list.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting ended at approximately 12:10 p.m.