

U.S. Virgin Islands State Technical Committee Meeting Notes

Date: March 5, 2026

Location: University of the Virgin Islands, St. Croix, VI

Key Sections & Highlights

Welcome & Introduction - Luis Cruz Arroyo and Dr. Louis Petersen

- Luis Cruz Arroyo welcomed participants and emphasized that the State Technical Committee provides farmers, agencies, and partners a forum to advise NRCS on local needs, investments, program delivery, and collaboration.
- Dr. Louis Petersen welcomed attendees on behalf of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDA) and highlighted the value of regular, substantive committee meetings despite operational challenges.
- Dr. Petersen noted that strengthening the agricultural industry also requires strengthening VIDA's capacity, workforce, and partnerships.

NRCS FY2026 Chief Priorities - Luis Cruz Arroyo

- **Farmer-First Approach under Chief Aubrey Bettencourt:**
 - Preserve and protect productive agricultural land through easements and related conservation tools.
 - Modernize infrastructure, technology, connectivity, and field-office capabilities.
 - Recenter field engagement and direct technical assistance to producers.
 - Strengthen partnerships and reduce unnecessary administrative burdens.
 - Measure conservation through environmental outcomes, not only contracts or practices installed.
- **Local application of priorities:**
 - Improve NRCS presence and service delivery throughout the Caribbean Area, including the U.S. Virgin Islands.
 - Support water quality and water quantity projects.
 - Consider innovative technologies that reduce pesticide and water use, help address labor shortages, and attract younger producers.
 - Communicate outcomes in practical terms, such as sediment or nutrient reductions and habitat improvements.
- **Major national initiatives:**
 - Regenerative Pilot Program: \$400 million through EQIP and \$300 million through CSP.
 - Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) for program ranking.
 - Farmer First efforts to streamline paperwork and administrative requirements.

STC Meetings & Efforts Recap - Mario Rodriguez

- Recapped topics from September 24, 2024, USVI STC meeting, including financial assistance, engineering projects, subcommittee activities, WRE GARC, agency updates, soil health monitoring, and territorial priorities.
- **VIDA priorities previously identified by Dr. Petersen:**
 - Develop a comprehensive irrigation system and dependable agricultural water supply.
 - Improve agricultural infrastructure, tools, and equipment.
 - Strengthen workforce capacity, technology, knowledge, and technical skills.
 - Expand conservation support and producer assistance.
 - Increase VIDA's ability to conduct outreach and deliver services.
- **Collaboration opportunities discussed during the recap:**
 - Joint projects, producer outreach, and training.
 - Support for food orchards, orchard establishment, and grazing-land producers.
 - Continued watershed and engineering work related to water quality and quantity.
- **Soil Science / National Cooperative Soil Survey comments - Manuel Matos:**
 - Continued development of the Virtual Soil Museum and potential physical exhibits to engage students and the public.
 - Edge-of-field soil health monitoring is intended to document erosion, sediment movement, and conservation-practice performance under tropical rainfall conditions.
 - Tropical conditions require locally validated practices and regular monitoring and maintenance.

NRCS Programs FY2025 Recap - Javier Cruz

- **EQIP:** 10 contracts; \$566,742 obligated; \$9,437 paid; 91.70 acres.

- **CSP:** 1 contract; \$21,917 obligated; \$4,000 paid; 2.50 acres.
- **Active contracts:** 82 in the U.S. Virgin Islands.
- EQIP was described as addressing identified resource concerns through conservation practices, while CSP rewards existing stewardship and supports additional enhancements.

Program Implementation Questions and Clarifications

- **Obligations and payments:**
 - An obligation represents the full federal commitment under a signed contract.
 - Payments are generally made after practices are installed and certified; CSP payments are typically made annually.
 - Contracts may remain active for several years, so annual payments can be substantially lower than total obligations.
- **Potential causes of implementation delays:**
 - Permits, material availability and shipping, contractors, and practice schedules.
 - NRCS encouraged shorter, realistic contract schedules when feasible because payment rates generally do not increase after a contract is obligated.
- **Advance payments:**
 - Eligible participants may request an advance payment, commonly up to 50 percent of the practice payment.
 - Advance funds must be used and documented within the applicable program period, generally 90 days.
 - Participants should account for permitting, ordering, shipping, and installation timelines before requesting an advance; unused or unsupported funds may be subject to recovery.
- **Leased or rented land:**
 - Producers may qualify when they demonstrate control of the land for the required contract period.
 - Longer-term programs and practices may require lease documentation, landowner consent, or an appropriate letter/agreement from the territorial government.
- **Beginning Farmer and Rancher status:**
 - Generally, applies to producers within their first 10 years of operating a farm or ranch, subject to program documentation and eligibility requirements.

NRCS Programs FY2026 Focus & Allocations - Javier Cruz

- **EQIP total:** \$14.07 million across the Caribbean Area.
 - CPAs, DIAs, and CEMAs: 2% (\$281,400).
 - Beginning Farmers and Ranchers: 5% (\$703,500).
 - Disaster: 4% (\$562,800).
 - Water Quantity: 8% (\$1,125,600).
 - CAFO/Energy: 5% (\$703,500).
 - Wildlife and Joint Chiefs: 10% (\$1,157,000), including at least \$250,000 for Joint Chiefs.
 - SDFR Mountainous Region: 15% (\$2,110,500).
 - SDFR Coastal, Hills, and Valleys Region: 23% (\$3,236,100).
 - Regenerative Pilot Program: 25% (\$3,517,500).
 - General/Organic: 1% (\$140,700).
 - Reserve/Overrun: 2% (\$281,400).
- Funding categories function as separate ranking pools so applicants compete with similarly situated applicants.
- Unused disaster or reserve funds may be reassigned in accordance with program authorities and workload needs.
- The Regenerative Pilot Program requires conservation planning and soil-health measurements to document baseline conditions and outcomes.
- Joint Chiefs projects combine NRCS and Forest Service resources for issues such as forest health, wildfire risk, watersheds, shaded agricultural systems, and related conservation needs.
- **CSP:** Funding is divided among agricultural land and nonindustrial private forestland ranking pools, including targeted funds for socially disadvantaged and beginning producers and the Regenerative Pilot Program.
- **ACEP:**
 - Agricultural Land Easements: \$1 million.
 - Wetland Reserve Easements: \$1 million.
 - WRE Stewardship: \$10,000.

FY2026 Program Schedule, RCPP, and Ranking Criteria - Javier Cruz

- NRCS accepts applications continuously; batching dates establish when applications are evaluated for a specific funding cycle.
- The January 15, 2026, batching date was established nationally following the federal shutdown and compressed implementation schedule.
- Caribbean Area leadership expressed a preference for future batching dates closer to the beginning of the fiscal year when possible.
- Additional batching periods may be opened if funding and national guidance permit.
- **RCPP:**
 - Enables NRCS to partner with eligible organizations on defined regional or critical conservation concerns.
 - Combines NRCS funding and technical assistance with partner resources, expertise, outreach, and implementation capacity.
- **Ranking criteria:**
 - Eligibility questions first determine whether an application qualifies for a funding category.
 - Point-based questions then consider anticipated conservation benefits, priority areas, partner contributions, and other locally identified factors.
 - Ranking is based on resource concerns and conservation benefits - not farm size, producer income, or commodity type.
 - Examples include erosion, water quality, proximity to impaired waters, and important wildlife habitat.
- Participants emphasized sharing data and planning tools between NRCS and VIDA to improve outreach, land-use planning, and transitions from EQIP to CSP.

Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC) for Wetland Restoration Easements (WRE) - Javier Cruz

- **ACEP-ALE:** An eligible entity holds, monitors, manages, and enforces the agricultural land easement.
- **ACEP-WRE:** The United States holds the easement, and NRCS is responsible for monitoring, management, and enforcement.
- WRE eligibility requires the potential to restore wetland hydrology and ecological community functions on eligible private land.
- Compensation is based on the lowest of:
 - Fair market value established through an individual appraisal.
 - An Area-Wide Market Analysis or survey.
 - The Geographic Area Rate Cap.
 - A voluntary landowner offer.
- Puerto Rico's current benchmark was presented as 95% of fair market value, not to exceed \$20,000 per acre, for both 30-year and permanent easements.
- **Committee discussion:**
 - NRCS requested information on USVI agricultural land sales and values to support a locally appropriate determination.
 - Participants discussed previously farmed or altered lands that may now be suitable for wetland restoration.
 - NRCS and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service coordination may help identify eligible sites and restoration opportunities.
 - No final change to the USVI GARC was recorded during the meeting.

DPNR Natural Resources Priorities - Jean-Pierre Oriol and Dr. Nicole Angeli

- DPNR emphasized that St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John have different soils, ecosystems, land-use histories, and conservation needs, even though they share Caribbean Area programs.
- **Territorial planning framework:**
 - The Comprehensive Land and Water Use Plan, adopted in December 2024, includes priorities for agriculture, natural resources, slopes, erosion, watersheds, and wetlands.
 - DPNR is moving from planning to implementation and encouraged partners to use the plan when developing projects.
 - Additional plans include the territorial Agricultural Plan, aquaculture rules and regulations, and wildlife/corridor planning.
- **Groundwater and agricultural water:**



- Many St. Croix farms are located above important aquifer systems; DPNR is collecting information on wells, meters, groundwater use, and recharge.
- Participants discussed permitting and management of new and existing wells, drought conditions, and opportunities to improve recharge through vegetated areas and watershed projects.
- **Wetlands:**
 - The National Wetlands Inventory for the territory was updated through field verification with support from Ducks Unlimited and other partners.
 - DPNR has developed restoration concepts and varying levels of engineering design for numerous priority wetlands.
 - Restoration priorities include runoff interception, water-quality protection, bird and native-plant habitat, nutrient cycling, and protection of coastal and coral-reef resources.
 - WRE may provide opportunities where agricultural properties contain wetlands or previously farmed areas suitable for restoration.
- **Wildlife corridors and native vegetation:**
 - Historic land-use maps and current conservation data are being used to identify corridors across guts, coastlines, agricultural land, and mixed-use areas.
 - Native vegetative buffers can support wildlife movement while also reducing erosion and protecting agricultural operations.
 - DPNR recommended reactivating the Wildlife, Wetlands, and Forests Subcommittee to update biodiversity priorities and help develop applications.
- **Aquaculture:**
 - New aquaculture rules and regulations and an interagency governance structure provide a pathway to grow the industry.
 - DPNR encouraged conservation-compatible aquaculture, including native species and potential shellfish/oyster projects.
 - RCPP and a demonstration site were discussed as possible mechanisms, subject to partnerships and funding.
- **Land tenure and public lands:**
 - Short-term VIDA leases and changing land uses can create challenges for multi-year federal conservation contracts.
 - Agencies should coordinate early on land control, public access, lease duration, and long-term maintenance responsibilities.
- **Agrivoltaics / energy discussion:**
 - Participants discussed dual-use concepts such as shade structures with solar panels.
 - NRCS emphasized that productive agricultural land should not be displaced by large solar installations; any energy project should support, rather than replace, agricultural production.
- **Watershed and recharge coordination:**
 - DPNR has assessed major watersheds and developed priority concepts for groundwater recharge, vegetated buffers, road-runoff treatment, and restoration.
 - Some concepts have progressed from preliminary to more complete designs and may be advanced with partners such as public works, utilities, NRCS, and local sponsors.

Priority Watersheds Discussion - Mario Rodriguez

- The National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) was presented as a way to focus NRCS assistance where agricultural activity, documented water-quality concerns, reachable producers, and active partners overlap.
- **USVI considerations:**
 - Steep terrain, thin soils, and short ridge-to-reef drainage distances increase erosion and rapidly transport sediment and nutrients to coastal resources.
 - Existing watershed plans and partner monitoring can reduce startup time, but the available information must be verified at the farm and field level.
- **Current water-resource projects:**
 - **Bordeaux:** Pond restoration, irrigation expansion, distribution piping, tanks, pumps, and future water-transfer/storage improvements. Planning was expected to continue through FY2026, with construction targeted for FY2027 if requirements are completed.



- **Dorothea:** Reservoir pumping, approximately 3,500 feet of irrigation piping, improved distribution, meters, and repairs intended to improve reliability and equitable service to farms.
- **Bethlehem:** Water-quality concerns include nutrient runoff, exposed or eroding slopes, animal waste, livestock access to guts and ponds, and degraded riparian buffers. Potential practices include nutrient management, composting/waste utilization, livestock exclusion, alternative watering facilities, filter strips, riparian buffers, critical-area planting, and cover crops.
- **Preliminary watershed review:**
 - Great Pond Bay, Southgate, and Solitude Bay were identified in existing documents as having the strongest combination of agricultural land and watershed concerns.
 - Teague Bay was identified as a possible secondary area; the remaining East End watersheds and areas on St. Thomas and St. John may offer partner or monitoring opportunities even where active agriculture is limited.
 - The review was described as preliminary and was not presented as a final territorial ranking or designation.
- **Committee feedback:**
 - Historic land-use maps and older watershed plans may identify land as agricultural even when it is no longer actively farmed.
 - Candidate watersheds must be validated through field visits, current producer information, and coordination with VIDA, DPNR, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and local farmers.
 - Participants encouraged consideration of other areas with current production or restoration potential, including Salt River and agricultural lands outside the East End Marine Park watersheds.
 - Watershed selection should consider both current agricultural operations and opportunities to reduce runoff, erosion, and downstream impacts.
- **Data and planning tools:**
 - Territory-wide LiDAR data collected during 2024-2025 is being processed, with derivative terrain and hydrology products anticipated for future planning.
 - Drone and partner data may also support site-level assessments.
- **Potential next steps:**
 - Conduct field-level verification of agricultural acreage, active operations, and resource concerns.
 - Reengage producers and local partners before making final NWQI recommendations.
 - Coordinate NRCS, DPNR, VIDA, districts, NOAA, TNC, UVI, VI RC&D, and other partners around monitoring, outreach, and implementation.
 - Use existing watershed and engineering designs to identify projects that are ready for planning, sponsorship, or funding.

Technical Service Provider (TSP) Opportunities

- The detailed TSP briefing included in the presentation was not completed because of time constraints and is expected to return as a future discussion item.
- During the program discussion, NRCS noted that certified technical providers can expand local capacity for conservation planning, design, and other specialized services when qualified professionals are available.

Partner Updates

- **USDA Forest Service:**
 - Announced a Community Wood funding opportunity for community wood-energy systems and facilities that use material generated through ecosystem-restoration work.
 - Interested organizations were encouraged to contact Forest Service staff promptly because the application period was approaching its deadline.
- **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - Caribbean Ecological Services Field Office:**
 - The Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program can provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners, including farmers, for habitat restoration and conservation agreements.
 - USFWS and NRCS share complementary goals and may collaborate through Joint Chiefs and other habitat initiatives.
 - USFWS offered to help organize the Wildlife, Wetlands, and Forests Subcommittee.
 - Participants were referred to the USFWS Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) tool for preliminary information on federally listed species; site-specific questions should be coordinated with USFWS staff.



- **Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture - Dr. Louis Petersen:**
 - VIDA continues to advance agricultural water infrastructure, including construction of new cistern capacity.
 - Reforestation and tree-distribution efforts have been supported through partner funding, with additional distributions anticipated.
 - VIDA recognized NRCS support through cooperative agreements and efforts to expand service capacity in St. Thomas.
 - VIDA was preparing a public notice regarding an emerging biosecurity concern and was coordinating with territorial and federal partners; official details were to be provided separately.
- **UVI / Education and Workforce Development:**
 - Participants emphasized creating a sustained pipeline of local students into agriculture, conservation, and related technical careers.
 - Suggested approaches included internships, experiential learning, placement with agricultural businesses, conservation-district partnerships, and consistent engagement with schools and colleges.
 - Developing local expertise was identified as essential to reducing dependence on off-island specialists.
- **Community Financing and Business-Development Partners:**
 - Local partners described low-cost or bridge-loan assistance that can help farmers cover up-front project costs while awaiting program reimbursement.
 - Intensive assistance with applications, paperwork, business planning, and technology was described as necessary for many producers to successfully access grants, loans, and NRCS programs.
 - Partners encouraged referrals and continued coordination so farmers receive hands-on assistance rather than only information about available programs.

Agreed Follow-up and Next Steps

- Compile current USVI agricultural land-sale and valuation information to support the WRE GARC review.
- Coordinate NRCS, DPNR, USFWS, VIDA, and landowners to identify potential wetland-restoration and easement sites.
- Reactivate the Wildlife, Wetlands, and Forests Subcommittee and establish or strengthen a watershed-focused working group.
- Build a contact list of technical experts and interested committee members for subcommittee participation.
- Validate preliminary watershed information through field assessments, current producer data, and partner consultation before making final NWQI recommendations.
- Continue planning and discussions for Bordeaux, Dorothea, Bethlehem, groundwater-recharge, and other watershed-scale projects.
- Expand producer outreach related to financial assistance, advance payments, land-control requirements, access to capital, and technical support.
- Have subcommittees report progress and recommendations at future STC meetings.