

Regenerative Pilot Program STAC Meeting notes, August 27th:

- **Regenerative Pilot Program Overview and Success:** State Conservationist, Amanda Mathis, provided a comprehensive overview of the Regenerative Pilot Program (RPP), highlighting its launch in 2026, its structure under EQIP and CSP, and its significant demand and success in Arkansas, with Acting Assistant State Conservationist, Roger Cousins and other NRCS staff supporting the discussion.
- **Purpose of the 2 hr virtual STAC Meeting:** Amanda described the input that was being requested of the State Technical Committee as related to RCPP primary practices, resource concerns and land uses within the initiative.
 - **Program Structure and Requirements:** Amanda explained that the RPP is not a new program but an initiative under EQIP and CSP, requiring a whole farm assessment, adoption of at least one primary regenerative management practice, and soil health testing in the first and last year of a five-year contract.
 - **Demand and Funding Outcomes:** Amanda reported that Arkansas received over \$87 million in EQIP RPP requests and \$26 million in CSP requests, with nearly \$30 million obligated, leaving substantial unmet demand for both programs.
 - **Inclusivity of Conservation Practices:** Amanda emphasized that RPP allows for inclusion of additional resource concerns and practices beyond the primary ones, enabling producers to address a wide range of conservation needs if they adopt a core practice and meet soil health testing requirements.
 - **Differences Between EQIP and CSP:** Amanda clarified that EQIP RPP requires only one field to meet resource concern thresholds, while CSP RPP requires all fields on the farm to meet thresholds, resulting in higher utilization rates for CSP but also more challenges in meeting requirements.
- **Recommendations for Eligible Land Uses:** Amanda recommended continuing with pasture land, cropland, and forest land as eligible land uses for RPP in Arkansas, with no objections from attendees, including Roger and NRCS staff.
 - **Land Use Eligibility Criteria:** Amanda stated that the eligible land uses for RPP in 2026 were pasture land, cropland, forest land, and range land, but since Arkansas has no true range land, the recommendation is to retain only pasture, cropland, and forest land.
 - **Consensus on Recommendation:** Amanda paused for comments and, hearing none, concluded that the group agreed with the recommendation to maintain the current eligible land uses for RPP in 2027.
- **Refinement of Critical Soil and Water Resource Concerns:** Amanda led a discussion on refining the list of critical soil and water resource concerns for RPP, proposing to remove certain water-related concerns and pollutant handling issues, with input from Canton and other NRCS staff on technical challenges and system overrides.
 - **Initial Resource Concern Assessment:** Amanda described the original requirement to assess all soil and water resource concerns for every RPP application, including sheet and rill erosion, soil quality limitations, and various water concerns.
 - **Proposed Refinements:** Amanda proposed removing salt losses to water and storage/handling of pollutants from the critical concerns list, as these are not widespread or directly tied to regenerative agriculture in Arkansas.

- **Technical System Issues:** Canton raised concerns about nutrient transport to surface water being a barrier due to system issues, and Amanda explained that NRCS has protocols to override these concerns when they are not present, focusing on resolving technical errors rather than removing critical concerns.
- **Consensus and Guidance:** Amanda confirmed that the group agreed with the refined list and stated that guidance would be provided to field staff on how to handle overrides and focus on the most critical resource concerns for regenerative agriculture.
- **Proposed Additions to Core Regenerative Practices:** Jeremy, Douglas, and Keith presented proposals for adding new core practices to RPP, including amending soil properties with lime, annual forages for grazing lands, and prescribed burning for forest lands, with Amanda and other participants discussing their merits and applicability.
 - **Grazing Practices Proposal:** Jeremy proposed adding amending soil properties with lime and annual forages for grazing lands as core practices, citing Arkansas soil data and research on their benefits for soil health, nutrient availability, and microbial activity.
 - **Discussion of Annual Forages:** Jeremy and Bubba discussed specific forage mixes suitable for Arkansas, including cereal rye, crimson clover, vetch, rye grass, and brassicas, highlighting their compatibility, grazing benefits, and wildlife value.
 - **Entry-Level Practice Benefits:** Amanda noted that practices like annual forages and amending soil properties with lime serve as entry points for producers new to regenerative agriculture, allowing gradual adoption and positive soil health impacts.
 - **Prescribed Burning for Forest Lands:** Douglas advocated for adding prescribed burning as a core practice for forest lands, explaining its benefits for soil health, nutrient cycling, wildfire risk reduction, and long-term carbon retention, with Amanda supporting its inclusion for forest landscapes only.
 - **Cropland Practice Considerations:** Keith highlighted the value of soil and source testing for nutrient management, especially for small farms and organic producers, noting its existing inclusion in RPP and its role in helping producers assess nutrient needs without mandatory nutrient application.
- **Open Discussion and Next Steps:** Roger and Amanda facilitated an open discussion for additional input, confirmed the next in-person meeting on October 7th, and outlined plans to move forward with the recommended changes for FY27, inviting further feedback from attendees.
 - **Next Meeting Announcement:** Roger announced the October 7th in-person state technical committee meeting at the Arkansas Rural Water Association in Lonoke, including a field trip to the bio media irrigation district pump station.
 - **Closing Comments and Feedback Invitation:** Amanda reiterated the importance of attendee feedback, confirmed plans to advance the recommended land uses, resource concern updates, and practice additions, and encouraged participants to reach out with further suggestions.
 - **Appreciation for Prescribed Burning Consideration:** Garrick expressed appreciation on behalf of the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission for the

inclusion of prescribed fire as a core practice, emphasizing its significance for landowners and resource protection.