

Summary Oklahoma State Technical Committee Meeting  
September 9, 2026, Stillwater, OK – Meridian Technology Center

- **Program Accomplishments and Application Evaluation:** Matthew Denton, Acting State Conservationist and Karla Stephens, Assistant State Conservationist discussed Oklahoma NRCS's record-breaking year in Farm Bill program delivery, highlighted the importance of partnerships, and explained the September 30th batching date for evaluating EQIP-Environmental Quality Incentive, CSP-Conservation Stewardship, and ACEP- Agricultural Conservation Easement program applications, encouraging participants to promote these opportunities and provide feedback.
  - **Record-Breaking Program Delivery:** Matthew Denton noted that Oklahoma had the second most Farm Bill program delivery contracts in the country, behind Texas, despite having fewer staff, and emphasized the value of partnerships in achieving these results.
  - **Application Batching and Evaluation:** Karla Stephens explained that the first batching date for application evaluation is September 30th, which serves as an internal cutoff for reviewing EQIP, CSP, and easement program applications, with the possibility of a second signup for some opportunities.
  - **Application Shortages and Ratios:** Matthew Denton discussed the unique situation in Oklahoma regarding CSP contract shortages, noting that Oklahoma funds about 50% of applications compared to one out of six in the central region, and highlighted the need for more CSP applications.
  - **Encouragement for Partner Engagement:** Participants were encouraged to use their connections to promote all available programs, including easements, EQIP, CSP, and technical assistance, to help increase application numbers and let customers choose the best fit for their operations.
- **Regenerative Agriculture and Mandatory Funding Allocations:** Karla Stephens provided an overview of the integration of regenerative agriculture into EQIP and CSP, described mandatory funding allocations for various initiatives, and outlined the challenges and criteria for implementing regenerative practices, inviting ongoing feedback from participants.
  - **Regenerative Agriculture Pilot Integration:** Karla Stephens explained that 25% of EQIP and CSP funds were allocated to regenerative practices, with soil health testing required at the start and end of five-year contracts and noted that regenerative agriculture is now a permanent initiative for 2027.
  - **Mandatory Funding Allocations:** Karla Stephens detailed mandatory allocations: 25% for regenerative agriculture, 10% for wildlife, 5% for beginning farmers/ranchers and socially disadvantaged groups, and described national initiatives such as air and water quality and working lands for wildlife.
  - **Challenges in CSP Regenerative Practice Implementation:** Karla Stephens highlighted nationwide challenges in CSP evaluation criteria for regenerative practices, noting that Oklahoma was not alone in facing difficulties in getting dollars implemented for RPP.
  - **Invitation for Feedback on Priorities:** Participants were invited to provide input on statewide and local priorities, high-priority practices, and potential changes for 2027, with the option to initiate subcommittee meetings for deeper discussion.

- **Easement Programs and Geographic Rate Caps:** Karla Stephens discussed the Wetland Reserve and Agricultural Land Easement programs, described recent changes to geographic area rate caps, and addressed communication, eligibility, and the need for more entities and land trusts to participate, while inviting input on priority areas and program improvements.
  - **Wetland Reserve and Ag Land Easements:** Karla Stephens described the Wetland Reserve and Agricultural Land Easement programs, including eligibility requirements, priorities for 2026 and 2027, and the focus on keeping working lands in agricultural use.
  - **Geographic Area Rate Cap Adjustments:** Melanie Oliver explained that Oklahoma raised rate caps in certain counties, offering up to 95% of appraised value in the Playa Lakes area, which resulted in increased application acceptance and improved alignment with neighboring states.
  - **Partner engagement and Entity Participation:** Participants discussed the need for more communication and advertising, the limited number of land trusts operating in Oklahoma, and the process for producers to work with eligible entities, with links provided to help find partners.
  - **Priority Areas and Grasslands of Special Significance:** Karla Stephens invited discussion on expanding priority areas for grasslands of special significance, currently focused on the Flint Hills and Red Hills, and encouraged participants to email suggestions for new areas or criteria.
  - **Easement Acquisition Branch Support:** Karla Stephens described the involvement of the Easement Acquisition Branch, which provides realty specialists to help process easement applications and alleviate bottlenecks, though the process remains lengthy.
- **Local Work Group Priorities and Transparency:** Participants raised questions about the transparency and accessibility of local work group priorities, discussed the process for setting local priorities, and explored options for compiling and sharing priority lists, with commitments to investigate improved communication and transparency.
  - **Setting Local Priorities:** Karla Stephens explained that local priorities are set by conservation districts through locally led processes, with results posted in district offices, and encouraged participation in local meetings to influence priorities.
  - **Appeals and Exceptions:** Karla Stephens described the process for appealing unfunded eligible practices, including deferral letters and appeal rights, and recommended participation in local work group meetings for those seeking exceptions.
  - **Transparency and Access to Priority Lists:** Participants requested a master list of local priorities by county or district, discussed past efforts to compile such lists, and received assurances from Matthew Denton that they would look into making this information publicly available, pending necessary approvals.
  - **Coordination with Conservation Districts:** The group discussed the need for better coordination between NRCS, conservation districts, and OCC to ensure transparency and facilitate access to local priorities, with suggestions for posting information online and sharing with partners.
- **Program Changes and Technical Adjustments:** Karla Stephens outlined recent and upcoming changes to EQIP and CSP, including elimination of renewal contracts,

modifications for newly acquired land, and software tweaks for water quality and regenerative agriculture eligibility, providing clarity on program operations for 2027.

- **EQIP and CSP Contract Changes:** Karla Stephens explained that renewal contracts are no longer offered, newly acquired land is added to existing contracts, and enhancement requirements are now built into conservation standards, simplifying program management.
- **Minimum Payments and Caps:** Minimum base payments for CSP are set at \$4,000, and the payment cap for individuals has been raised from \$40,000 to \$60,000, with additional changes for pass-through entities.
- **Technical Adjustments for Eligibility:** Eligibility changes are planned at the national level to improve eligibility for regenerative agriculture and water quality initiatives, with no major program changes expected for 2027.
- **Discussion on Land Trusts and Tribal Participation:** Participants discussed the limited presence of land trusts in Oklahoma, the potential for tribal governments to participate as eligible entities, and the requirements and challenges involved, with suggestions for further education and communication.
  - **Land Trust Availability:** Participants noted that only a few land trusts, such as TNC and Texas Ag Land Trust, operate in Oklahoma, and discussed the need for more entities to support easement programs, referencing resources like the Land Trust Alliance.
  - **Tribal Government Participation:** Karla Stephens explained that tribal governments could potentially participate as eligible entities if they meet requirements for maintaining easements and monitoring, but acknowledged that this could be a heavy lift and suggested further education and process streamlining.

Follow-up tasks:

- **Local Priority Transparency:** Look into compiling and sharing a master list of local work group priorities by county or district to improve transparency and accessibility for partners and the public. (Karla)
- **High Priority Practice Suggestions:** Consider adding brush management and forest stand improvement to high priority practices and review related feedback for inclusion in 2027 programs. (Karla)
- **Easement Program Communication:** Verify and update the website link to land trust entities and share information about additional land trusts operating in Oklahoma to assist applicants. (Karla)
- **Grasslands of Special Significance Criteria:** Coordinate a meeting to review and potentially update the criteria and priority areas for grasslands of special significance based on stakeholder input; invite interested parties to email for participation. (Karla)
- **Local Work Group Priority Posting:** Discuss with conservation districts and OCC the possibility of posting local work group priorities online or in offices to increase visibility and engagement. (Karla)

- **Overview of RCPP Program and Funding:** Tiffany Nelson provided a comprehensive overview of the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP), including eligible partners, funding pools, project types, and considerations for applicants, with input from Karla and other participants regarding Oklahoma-specific projects and application processes.
  - **Eligible Partners and Funding Pools:** Tiffany Nelson explained that eligible partners for RCPP include producer associations, state and local governments, Indian tribes, farmer co-ops, higher education institutions, water districts, and organizations with a history of working with local producers. She described the two main funding pools: critical conservation areas (national priorities) and state/multi-state pools, with funds split 50-50.
  - **Project Types and Roles:** Tiffany outlined the two project types: RCPP Classic, where NRCS handles most technical work and partners focus on engagement and impact measurement, and Alternative Funding Arrangement (AFA), where partners take on most responsibilities except NRCS non-delegable tasks. She emphasized the importance of partner contributions and management experience.
  - **Application and Negotiation Process:** The annual Notice of Funding Opportunity (NFO) sets project parameters, deadlines, and guidance. Selected proposals enter a negotiation phase to establish programmatic partnership agreements, outlining responsibilities, cost share rates, and payment processes, which differ from grants as payments are made after work completion.
  - **Active Oklahoma Projects:** Tiffany reported two active RCPP projects in Oklahoma: Neighborhood Solutions to Natural Resource Concerns (with Oklahoma Conservation Commission) and Tribal Buffalo Restoration (with Inter-Tribal Buffalo Council), highlighting funding amounts, resource concerns, and eligibility requirements for tribal nations with buffalo herds.
  - **Questions and Follow-Up:** A participant inquired about eligibility for irrigation districts, and Tiffany responded that it might fall under PL 566 but would need to confirm and follow up, providing their business card for further discussion.
- **Regenerative Agriculture Pilot Project Updates:** Caleb Stone discussed the transition of the regenerative agriculture pilot project into a permanent program, detailing contract requirements, soil health testing, resource concerns, and practice standards, with active input from Karla Stephens, Matthew Denton, Clay Pope (The Nature Conservancy), John Hendrix (USFW), Laura Goodman (OSU), and other participants on practices, eligibility, and technical aspects.
  - **Contract Requirements and Resource Concerns:** Caleb explained that the program operates within CSP and EQIP, requiring a five-year contract, adoption of at least one primary regenerative practice, and CEMA 216 soil health testing in the first and last year. National guidance may allow prioritization of critical soil and water resource concerns instead of requiring all concerns to be met.
  - **Practice Eligibility and Additions:** Participants discussed the inclusion of prescribed burning and soil carbon amendments (compost, biochar) as eligible regenerative practices. Caleb confirmed prescribed burning would be added, including forest applications, and clarified the requirements and limitations for soil carbon amendments, including testing protocols and eligible land types.

- **Technical Service Providers and Qualified Individuals:** Caleb and others addressed the need for a statewide list of qualified individuals for CEMA 216 soil health testing, noting that NRCS cannot maintain such a list but districts may add qualified individuals to their vendor lists. The group discussed the limited number of technical service providers and ongoing efforts to improve access.
- **Program Sign-Up and Funding:** The group clarified that regenerative ag sign-ups occur alongside EQIP and CSP, with 25% of funds allocated to regenerative practices. Participants were encouraged to sign up for EQIP or CSP and indicate interest in regenerative ag, as it is not a separate program but an additional funding stream.
- **Practice Standards and Updates:** Caleb discussed ongoing updates to practice standards, including brush management and nutrient management (590), noting that recent changes were made at the national level and local staff are monitoring and providing guidance. Participants were encouraged to communicate any limitations or clarity needs.
- **Partner Reports and Collaborative Initiatives:** Kim from the Farm Service Agency, Bayleigh Acosta and Cierra from Oklahoma Local Ag Collaborative, and Erin Martin from Fresh Rx Oklahoma provided updates on their respective programs, including CRP sign-ups, conservation recognition, mentorship, engagement, and the Food is Medicine initiative, highlighting collaborative efforts and opportunities for producers.
  - **Farm Service Agency Updates:** Kim reported on CRP sign-ups, including over 5,000 acres enrolled, smaller continuous sign-ups, and conservation plans due by the 18th. Emergency conservation and livestock programs were also discussed, with ongoing support for producers affected by weather and fire.
  - **Oklahoma Local Ag Collaborative Programs:** Bayleigh Acosta described OLAC's producer engagement, regional workshops, farm tours, conservation recognition program, and mentorship initiatives. The group has nearly 2,500 members and offers resources, communications, and support for conservation and regenerative practices, with applications for recognition and mentorship open year-round.
  - **Conservation Recognition Program Details:** Cierra explained the tiered structure of the conservation recognition program, site visits, and incentives for direct-to-consumer producers using conservation or regenerative practices. Nine producers have been accepted, with ongoing reviews and support for those not yet eligible.
  - **Resource Development and Accessibility:** OLAC is developing guides on soil health, mulching, native plants, and pollinators to make conservation practices more accessible to beginners. Copies were offered to attendees, and ongoing efforts aim to expand resources and support.
  - **Food is Medicine Initiative:** Erin Martin shared updates on Fresh Rx Oklahoma, which connects local growers to healthcare markets, invests in regenerative practices, and has driven significant revenue for farmers. The Food is Medicine Act mandates statewide implementation, and upcoming conferences will focus on the intersection of food, health, and regenerative agriculture.
- **Discussion of Grasslands of Special Significance and New Priorities:** Participants discussed the identification of grasslands of special significance, referencing the GPGI

program as a starting point, and Karla highlighted new NRCS priorities, including expanding wildlife conservation and strengthening workforce culture, encouraging input and consideration of additional areas.

- **Grasslands Location Suggestions:** A participant suggested using locations from the GPGI program as a starting point for identifying grasslands of special significance, noting that all grasslands could be considered but recommending targeted areas for review.
  - **NRCS New Priorities:** Karla announced two new NRCS priorities: expanding wildlife conservation and outdoor access, and optimizing mission delivery by strengthening workforce culture, in addition to existing priorities of keeping working land and hands.
- **Networking and Meeting Logistics:** Cooper Sherrill introduced himself as a new member of the Prairie's Joint Venture, and Karla emphasized the importance of networking and collaboration among participants, with plans to hold the next meeting in 12 months and contact information shared for follow-up.
  - **New Member Introduction:** Cooper Sherrill introduced themselves as working in Lower Central Oklahoma, focusing on landowner engagement and seeking support from experienced members for programmatic guidance.
  - **Networking Opportunities:** Karla encouraged participants to use the meeting for networking and collaboration, noting the value of cross-state interactions and sharing experiences among landowners and conservation professionals.
  - **Meeting Schedule and Contact Information:** The next meeting is scheduled for approximately 12 months from now, with contact information for Karla, Caleb, Tiffany, and others provided for ongoing communication and questions.

Follow-up tasks:

- **RCPP Eligibility Inquiry:** Follow up with the irrigation district representative to clarify eligibility under PL 566 and provide a business card for further contact. (Tiffany)
- **Regenerative Ag Practices List Update:** Collect and review suggestions for additional regenerative ag practices to be added to the list (Caleb)
- **Statewide Qualified Individual List for CEMA 216:** Continue developing a method for maintaining a statewide list of qualified individuals for CEMA 216 without NRCS direct involvement. (Caleb)
- **Practice Standards Update Feedback:** Solicit and review feedback from staff and partners regarding limitations or clarity needed in practice standards and communicate issues to Caleb for resolution. (Caleb)
- **Grasslands of Special Significance Locations:** Receive and consider information about locations used in the GPGI program as potential starting points for grasslands of special significance, and review additional areas suggested by participants. (Karla)