



NRCS New Mexico State Technical Advisory Committee

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

Meeting Minutes

September 9, 2026

COMMENCEMENT

The meeting began at 9:02 a.m.

ATTENDEES

In addition to NRCS staff, there were approximately seven in-person attendees. There were approximately 54 virtual attendees including NRCS staff.

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

- Presented five PowerPoint slides. Presentation highlights included:
 - A brief overview for newcomers including NRCS staff list
 - State Technical Advisory Committee's (STAC) roles and responsibilities
 - Request for recommendations on many levels; for example:
 - Funding, new concerns, emerging needs, practice standards, specifications, program policy (state and national recommendations only)
 - Limited authority to change policy.
 - Local Working Groups (LWGs) should also be looked at to report back to STAC and vice versa.
 - Looking to STAC to help with public outreach and answer questions from participants.
 - Recommendations deadline is September 25.
 - Short turnaround
 - Email any priority recommendations to any of the NRCS staff listed on the slide.

STATE CONSERVATIONIST'S REMARKS (J. Xavier Montoya [with Kenneth Branch])

- Showed PowerPoint presentation entitled, “Farmer First, Field Focused. IMPAC 2.0”
 - Thank you for joining us.
 - STAC is very important.
 - It is a two-way street with LWGs/STAC and the NRCS state office (SO).
 - This is brand new information for the future of NRCS.
 - We should be far ahead of everyone else in FY2028.
 - FY2027 will be very different from past practices and policies.
 - This is a big change.
 - Taking 25 years of history and turning it on its head.
 - Going back to look at the statutes and seeing how we can implement programs.
 - We are one of nine pilot states.
 - Core team went to Lincoln, NE in August, including:
 - Xavier Montoya
 - Kenneth Branch
 - Ana Gomes
 - Nick Goodman
 - Martin Meairs
 - D’Laynn Bruce
 - Introduction to IMPAC 2.0
 - Four emphases:
 - Improving management of programs, applications, and contracts;
 - Opportunity for a foundational change in program delivery;
 - Time and opportunity to rethink all we do;
 - Change in user roles and responsibilities.
 - A true change in how we do business
 - Looking to the future:
 - Improves our ability to spend more time providing direct conservation technical assistance to clients—get more conservation on the ground.
 - Planners in the field with our producers, planning
 - Streamlines and increases the capacity for contracting and contract support.
 - Continues great working relationships with conservation districts and partners in NM.
 - Here in NM, we already have some of this in place with NMACD and NMDA (e.g., Farm Bill Specialists).
 - Opportunity to rethink EVERYTHING:
 - Program rules;
 - Program management;
 - Software;
 - User roles and responsibilities.

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- Current State (Kenneth Branch)
 - Depicted as one full circle with different seasons and challenges.
 - Little time for staff to go into the field because of ranking, funding, etc.
 - Staff are split between planning and contract management.
 - Chasing our tails as we are either falling short on technical assistance (TA) or contract management (CM).
 - Looking to transition to a two-circle model.
 - Top circle is TA; bottom is CM process.
 - These two circles are operating simultaneously.
 - Some staff will be focused on TA work; other staff will be focused on CM.
 - Biggest Changes
 - Basically, removing numeric ranking scores for selection.
 - New to all of us
 - First time in at least 25 years
 - How are we going to fund?
 - By priorities—state and local.
 - STAC and LWGs become even more important than they are now.
 - Field offices get together and decide priorities for their teams.
 - DCs will get recommendations from LWGs.
 - Those priorities could lead to funding applications.
 - Same at the state level.
 - Moving forward, changes to processes/functions for LWGs.
 - LWG meetings to be held in April and May.
 - STAC after ALL of the LWGs have concluded and provided recommendations.
 - DCs will share those priorities.
 - Utilizing workload prioritization tools (e.g., screening tools) will help to determine which applications are funded.
 - Each application will be evaluated per the statute.
 - They will not be funded based on numeric score.
 - Anticipating several policy waivers.
 - Waivers are only for nine pilot states.
 - Field staff will have a lot of different roles; same as area staff.
 - Creating training for the whole state's NRCS staff.
 - FY2027 may be chaotic and confusing at times.
 - Please be patient, especially in FY2027.
 - Roles and Responsibilities (J. Xavier Montoya)
 - We are splitting up the duties.
 - Technical field staff will reduce administrative work; administrative staff will take all those administrative duties.
 - NRCS must input contracts into the system (not affiliates).

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- CM staff will fulfill the administrative program specialist roles.
 - Some staff prefer to be meeting with producers in the field; others prefer to be in the office.
 - None of this is a long-term decision—pilot only.
 - Later, team staff may switch to other roles.
 - Area staff will take a bigger role in team operations.
 - VERA (voluntary early retirement) means some staff are retiring by year-end.

QUESTIONS

Unknown Speaker: What provoked separating San Miguel and moving Mora to another district?

RESPONSE

J. Xavier Montoya (NRCS): One DC is taking the VERA, and one is not. The DC remaining can cover all four offices in the north.

COMMENTS

Athena Cholas (NRCS): Thinking outside the box re: the circles—for partners especially that have a similar model but with one circle off to the side—in California, they have dairy team working with an agronomist and an engineer—it may be beneficial for us to consider, too, for future years.

PROGRAMS (NRCS Program Staff)

Per Kenneth Branch, staff will provide an FY2026 recap and requests for recommendations that we are seeking (i.e., funding priorities).

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

- Presented 29 PowerPoint slides. Presentation highlights included:
 - EQIP overview
 - EQIP provides TA and FA to agricultural producers and forest landowners to address natural resource concerns.
 - Conservation plan development
 - Voluntary program
 - FY2026, EQIP General funding was \$29,016,013
 - NRCS NM did get an additional \$1 million late in the year.
 - National priorities include:
 - National Water Quality (NWQI)
 - Initiative delivered jointly with state water quality agencies and the EPA to address agricultural sources of water pollution.

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- NM running low on contracts, looking for more.
 - Regenerative Pilot Program (RPP)
 - Conservation management approach addressing soil health, water management, and biodiversity improvements.
 - Must meet three program requirements:
 - Whole farm assessments
 - Primary practices
 - Soil testing (first and last years of the contract)
 - Offers FA and TA through EQIP and Conservation Stewardship Program to address natural resource concerns.
 - Five-year contracts
 - Twenty-eight contracts obligated for \$7,342,301.
 - Need recommendations for primary practices.
 - Debbie Hughes (NMACD) suggested brush management.
 - Kenneth Branch asked that recommendations be emailed.
 - Source Water Protection Watersheds
 - Focuses on protecting sources of drinking water in high-priority areas and watersheds.
 - Four different areas in NM awarded contracts.
 - Seven contracts obligated for a total of \$1,564,136.
 - Thirty-three Source Water protection practices.
 - WaterSMART
 - Running low on contracts.
 - Currently have two active contracts.
 - If you know someone who may be interested, please let us know.
 - Five-year contracts
 - Collaborative effort with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.
 - 2018 Farm Bill requires specific targets for FA.
 - EQIP FY2026 has five state pools, and each state pool has categories within it to capture national, state, and local priorities.
 - State Pools
 - NM has two “Area” state pools—North Area and South Area.
 - 105 contracts obligated for North Area totaling \$14,080,458.
 - 58 contracts obligated for South Area totaling \$14,056,688
 - Water Management Entities (WMEs) have their own state pool because they are not eligible for regular EQIP.
 - WME examples include irrigation districts, aquifer recovery, and acequias.
 - Three WME contracts obligated for a total of \$974,500.

- Three contracts were obligated under the Tribal state pool for the Tribal forest, grazed range, and irrigated crop categories.
- Two Disaster state pool signups were conducted for invasive noxious weed and Locoweed.
 - 12 contracts were completed for \$672,866.
- Local Priorities
 - Local priorities inform state pool priorities.
 - Seven categories
 - Examples include Beginning Farmer and Rancher and Socially Disadvantaged.
 - Six specific land uses comprised ranking categories such as irrigated crop, range, and forest.
- Ten High-Priority Practices (HPPs) going into FY2027
 - Keeping the same 10 HPPs from FY2026.
 - Can take recommendations for future years.
- Technical Service Provider (TSP) National Bulletin 440-26-12
 - NM TSP TA allocation for FY2026 is \$86,000.
 - No TSPs are physically located in NM.
 - We always need more TSPs.
 - Please promote.
 - Sam Fullen is NM TSP Coordinator
 - 505.761.4450
 - samuel.fullen@usda.gov
- Top five EQIP practices in NM listed for FY2025 and FY2026.
 - Examples include Fence (382), Sprinkler System (442), and Brush Management (314).
- Application statistics: 1,317 applications in FY2026
- Contract obligation statistics:
 - FY2025—158 contracts obligated.
 - FY2026—163 contracts obligated for \$28,137,145.
 - Obligations by pool listed.
- EQIP FY2027 priority recommendations requested from STAC.
 - Examples: geographic areas, practices, or a swath of practices needed to address an objective (e.g., forest stand improvement for wildfire mitigation)
 - September 25 is deadline to submit priority recommendations.

COMMENT

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): Looking at priorities, get as specific as you can (e.g. brush management for wildfire mitigations), and identify specific practices for this state (e.g., fuel breaks, prescribed burning). Need specifics for ranking purposes.

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

- Presented 18 PowerPoint slides. Highlights included:
 - Defined CSP, what it is, and its benefits.
 - Offers TA and FA to help producers take conservation efforts to next level.
 - Outlined CSP payments:
 - Five-year contracts with five yearly payments; not changing
 - Base payment of \$4,000 plus payments based on additional practices implemented.
 - Everything is now tied back to a practice not “enhancements”; easier to understand.
 - CSP FY2026 Application Outlook
 - Funded approximately 25 percent of our applications.
 - 266 applications received.
 - 52 obligated.
 - 82 canceled.
 - 132 pending.
 - CSP allocation for FY2026
 - Total CSP allocation-: \$20,701,379
 - RPP: 1 big \$7 million tribal contract
 - Team allocation worked well in FY2026; will keep in FY2027.
 - Total acres: 685,623
 - NM is number two for spending money and number of acres under contract in Western Region.

QUESTION

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): Why did you have that many that dropped out?

RESPONSE

Martin Meairs (NRCS): I am not sure. A few were selected for funding and then decided not to proceed with the contract. It could have been eligibility issues, or they were not able to get a farm and tract number. Some decided they just did not want to proceed with CSP anymore.

CSP (continued)

- CSP FY2027 Application Outlook
 - 132 deferral applications
 - 40 socially disadvantaged applications
 - 21 Beginning Farmer and Rancher applications
 - 10 RPP eligible applications
 - Need more RPP applications to meet NHQ’s 25% goal
 - Eighty percent re-ups typical

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- CSP Pool Management for FY2027
 - Two separate ranking pools—agricultural land (e.g., crop, pasture, rangeland) and non-industrial private forest land (NIPF)
 - IMPAC 2.0 reduced fund pools to 5 with total categories not to exceed 15

QUESTION

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): Why is forested land separated from agricultural land?

RESPONSE

Martin Meairs (NRCS): Per statute, those two cannot be applied together. Forestry only competes against forested land, and rangeland competes only against crop and pastureland.

CSP (continued)

- RPP CSP
 - No renewals offered in FY2026 or FY2027.
 - Will be eligible under classic EQIP.
 - Eight NM priority resource concern categories for Agland and eight for NIPF
- LWGs: seem like there are few changes
 - Need input for FY2027: CSP priority ideas
 - September 25 deadline for recommendations
 - Need more crop/pasture applications.
 - CSP is different than EQIP—CSP contracts must apply to 100 percent of the land.

QUESTION

Debbie Hughes (NMACD) Where does virtual fencing come under?

RESPONSE

Martin Meairs (NRCS): Virtual fencing comes under grazing management.

QUESTION

Unknown Speaker: When do you need recommendations?

RESPONSE

Martin Meairs (NRCS): September 25.

QUESTION

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): Prescribed fire is still in CSP?

RESPONSE

Martin Meairs (NRCS): Yes, it is still in CSP. We can look at it. It is a big one, especially considering all the fires we have had lately. It is included in a couple of contracts this year.

Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon Conservation Restoration Plans (Martin Meairs)

- Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon (HPCC) Conservation Restoration Plan Details
 - On-the-ground conservation assessments used to document damages to the natural resources caused by the HPCC fire and flooding events
 - HPCC Conservation Plan Requests
 - 3,102 total applications received
 - To date, delivered or completed plans: 2,360
 - Acres assess: 340,350
 - Total dollars planned: \$2,061,500,445
 - Almost done—another one to two months

COMMENTS

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): HPCC Conservation Restoration Planning was a huge project for us. It is coming to an end. CSP and EQIP are two main programs in the IMPAC 2.0 pilot. There may be funding changes. We are giving you current-day information, and it is subject to change for FY2027. Roles and responsibilities from STAC, this year you may hear a lot of complaints from applicants because their applications did not meet the priorities. Please share this information as far and wide as possible. There is a big backlog of applications. We are going to look at archeological and engineering backlogs. Priorities could also be broad beyond practices and then narrowed down. Think differently. If it is not against regulations, then we can consider it.

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

- Kenneth shared 12 PowerPoint slides.
 - Felicia Speranske is coming on board soon as the permanent RCPP Program Manager.
 - Different animal than being in the field as a DC.
 - RCPP is a cost-sharing program designed to be led by partners and implemented on an areawide (i.e., state, multi-state) 5-year project-level basis.
 - This year, we had a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NFO) at the END of the year for FY2026; suspects that there will be another one soon for FY2027.
 - RCPP Classic and Alternative Funding Arrangement (AFA) NFOs were publicized.
 - Submission deadline was August 24.

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- We received several applications that we are evaluating.
 - Proposal evaluation and selection processes described.
 - RCPP agreement types described:
 - Programmatic Partnership Agreements (PPAs)
 - Supplemental Agreements (SAs)
 - Contracts
 - NM has nine active RCPP agreements; listed and described.
 - Two signups in FY2027:
 - Grazing Management and Non-Lethal Predator Risk Mitigation in NM and AZ (3093)—Classic
 - Additional signups in FY2027 and FY2028
 - NM Restoration Initiative for Rangeland, Forestland, and Wildlife on Ranches with Federal Lands (2127)—Classic.
 - Application deadline is October 4.
 - Tribal Buffalo Restoration in the Southwest Region (3503)—AFA: NM is the lead state.
 - Currently, only contracts are with NM pueblos; none in partner states.

QUESTION

Athena Cholas (NRCS): Can Tribes do work off Tribal land to benefit the buffalo?

RESPONSE

Kenneth Lujan (NRCS): Must all be on Tribal land.

QUESTION

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): There is a lot of money in that one. Has any of it been spent yet?

RESPONSE

Kenneth Lujan (NRCS): Very little spent. It is only about a year old, and there has been a lot of negotiation in the process of getting the contract signed.

QUESTION

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): Are you contacting the Pueblos and Tribes, or is the lead partner doing it?

RESPONSE

Kenneth Lujan (NRCS): The lead partner contacts the Tribes/Pueblos.

QUESTION

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): Where are they located?

RESPONSES

Unknown Speaker: South Dakota.

Xavier Montoya (NRCS): There are different RCPPs around the nation with different Tribes and Pueblos.

RCPP (continued)

Kenneth Lujan (NRCS): RCPP is not following pilot—maintaining numerical ranking just like it has in the past.

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): Remember that RCPP is based on proposals. So, if a proposal comes in, it is based on the recommendations rather than numerical.

QUESTION

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): Are applications coming from NM?

RESPONSE

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): We received three from NM partners; another six that are multi-state where NM is not the lead partner. In that case, we can provide our recommendations back to the lead partner. We do not make direct recommendations back to national headquarters like we would for those that NM is the lead partner.

COMMENTS

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): We are advising SWCDs to wait until the next Farm Bill to apply.

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): When it comes to RCPP, it is a different pot of money than our regular programs. When we write contracts with landowner using RCPP funds, if there is ever a modification needed, we need to hold money back from that RCPP agreement in the event we need it later for modifications. We cannot use CSP or EQIP money.

John Tunberg (NMACD): NMACD's perspective—First, we are offering training, six-hours for SWCDs in how to apply and manage RCPPs. There are three trainings planned. Second, for NMACD contracts in RCPPs, we sequester enough money to do archeological survey work separately with contractors to complete them faster.

Kenneth Lujan (NRCS): Sending people to NMACD.

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): Costs—we have no authority or ability to change those costs on the payment schedule. Especially on chemical brush management, Ana has taken notes and forwarded them to our national payment schedule team so they can look into it.

QUESTION

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): Can it be proposed as part of the pilot?

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): No.

COMMENTS

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): BLM is pouring a lot of money into brush control.

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): We noticed that when we changed payment schedules, and we are concerned about it, too.

QUESTION

Unknown Speaker: Can Citizens Advisory Groups (CAGs) be organized and used to move funding to that area or issue?

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): Cannot advise them to do that because it is still a competitive process. From our end, our CAG equivalent would be the LWGs and STAC. If they want to create a CAG to identify a priority or resource concern, they would then take it to the LWG or to the STAC.

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

- Athena presented 14 PowerPoint slides. Presentation highlights included:
 - ACEP is not part of the IMPAC 2.0 pilot.
 - Strict guardrails in place
 - Emphases on streamlining and using technology
 - Gain efficiency
 - Reduce subjectivity and increase fairness
- During the May STAC meeting, we asked for feedback.
 - Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) program input
 - In FY2026, 6 ALE projects funded.
 - 5,676 acres
 - \$6,537,979
 - ALE and RCPP projects in process:
 - 13 projects
 - 18,500 acres
 - \$17,319,600
 - How are “Grasslands of Special Significance” defined for NM and how should they be ranked?
 - Separate process for prioritizing; ranking.
 - Wetland Reserve Easement (WRE) program input

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- Annual ask for maximum amount of compensation
 - Wetland restoration criteria guidelines
 - NRCS policy on access:
 - Consolidated existing policy re: land access; clearer.
 - Legal and physical definitions and parameters discussed.
 - Type of terrain
 - State conservationist can determine what is accessible.
 - Legal access definition is very strict.
 - Transferrable? Unconditional? Permanent? Insurable?
 - Ditch crossings potential discussed.
 - Regrid National Parcel Data
 - Acquired (subscription based) and now available.
 - Updated monthly and daily in some cases.
 - Confidential information
 - Tells us owner and the boundaries, which is very helpful:
 - Tells us the owners.
 - Shows us the boundaries.
 - Downside is information is county-dependent.
 - LENS for Monitoring and Onsite Investigations
 - High-resolution satellite imagery
 - Detects land use changes (e.g., vegetation and building changes).
 - Updates quickly (monthly or sooner).
 - Pilot currently
 - Aids in the communication process with landowners.
 - Farmland Information Center
 - Available to everyone through American Farmland Trust website.
 - Go to tab for ACEP-ALE Toolkit.
 - Helpful explanations of easement deeds
 - Grasslands of Special Significance (GSS) technical criteria and guidelines
 - How are attributes and locations designated in NM?
 - At-risk species
 - Habitats
 - Sensitive or declining grassland types in the state
 - Deeds are extremely restrictive, which inhibits the number of applications received.
 - ACEP-ALE ranking
 - State-level questions outlined re: proximity to several rivers, protection of water rights, and preservation of riparian habitats, etc.
 - Some are too subjective; wants more specificity locally but no changes nationally
 - Parcel location?
 - Would the easement protect vulnerable water rights?
 - Does the parcel contain riparian habitat, pond, playa, or perennial stream?
 - WRE and Geographic Area Rate Cap (GARC)
 - GARC specifies all compensation rates.

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- Ninety percent of market value is highest allowed by WRE policy.
 - We do not exceed \$5,000 per acre for land without water rights; national cap.
 - National limit for land with water rights, we can pay up to \$13,000 per acre.
 - NRCS pays up to 75 percent of the GARC rate.
 - That is 67.5 percent of market value.
 - Purchasing 30-year easements.
 - Need a market analysis for going market rate of water rights.

QUESTION

Unknown Speaker: Is there any room for adjustment at \$5,000 and \$13,000 water rates? Different based on the basin?

RESPONSE

Athena Cholas (NRCS): We could contract for a market analysis, but we receive so few applications. We would need a policy waiver from NHQ.

COMMENT

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): NM has a legacy fund for a match.

RESPONSE

Athena Cholas (NRCS): We can do 30-year contracts with the WRE program, but payment is much less than with a permanent easement. Bringing Legacy Fund or SWCD funds to the restoration easement, would make them more attractive.

COMMENT

John Tunberg (NMACD): GSS—sacaton flats in southwest part of the state—birds and upland area that feeds it; super wildlife value.

RESPONSE

Athena Cholas (NRCS): We must define these things better—protection enrollment percentages.

COMMENT

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): Email it to us for priorities consideration. Keep in mind with easements, made a big push to increase the number of easements in the state. With that, a lot of education is needed. Perpetual easements require a LOT of review (e.g., access, correct ownership, deed restrictions). NHQ reviews these in addition to the state.

QUESTION

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): Are playa lakes eligible?

RESPONSE

Athena Cholas (NRCS): Not many; need hydric soils.

QUESTION

Unknown Speaker: Does being adjacent to a national forest increase access for this program?

RESPONSE

Athena Cholas (NRCS): There is an allowance for the ALE and the WRE easements to get agreements for access through USFS; tough hurdle; no access through state land.

COMMENT

Athena Cholas (NRCS): Applications due December 18—same as EQIP and CSP; national deadline. Those can prove through letter from adjacent landowner for legal access. USFS has a different process. Goal is to have bigger parcels contiguous to other protected land.

QUESTION

Unknown Speaker: Does that include the USFS? Get a letter from a ranger?

RESPONSE

Athena Cholas (NRCS): There is a difference process. There is an MOU process.

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

- NM can use EQIP dollars.
 - CIG has requirement for EQIP-eligible producers—CAGs qualify.
 - Ensures needs of local producers are being met.
 - Ensures resource concerns are addressed.
- Four state priorities:
 - Increased reliance on biodiversity to control pests.
 - Soil health management systems
 - Water conservation
 - Fish and wildlife habitat
- Gaging interest.
- Send us any other priorities to be addressed by CIG by September 25.

QUESTION

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): Must involve EQIP-eligible producers?

RESPONSE

Athena Cholas (NRCS): Yes.

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

- Twenty PowerPoint slides were shared. Highlights included:
 - EWP is available to communities when:
 - Natural disasters occur.
 - Creates a sudden watershed impairment.
 - Poses a threat to life and/or property.
 - Eleven active projects in NM discussed, including HPCC (x 2 agreements), South Fork and Salt Fire (x 2 agreements), and the NRCS/Lincoln County EWP Buyout.

QUESTION

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): Chaves County—repairing the dam?

RESPONSE

David Griego (NRCS): Yes.

COMMENTS

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): Problems in Carlsbad with the pipeline (indecipherable).

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): Over \$1 billion came through NM since 2022. Only 15 other states working on buyouts. In Ruidoso, first-time buyouts offered after a fire.

QUESTION

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): Do other states have dedicated realty specialists?

RESPONSE

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): NRCS staff, no. The sponsor will hire realty specialists. NRCS state staff must review all of the closing documents because ultimately the state conservationist must sign off on them. Other states are using easement staff and/or other specially trained staff like Athena, who is doing double duty.

QUESTION

Debbie Hughes (NMACD): Would like a job description.

RESPONSE

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): We can help with that.

RESOURCES TECHNOLOGY UPDATES (RTS) (Ana Gomes, Acting State Resource Conservationist with Elias Gnann, State Conservation Engineer)

- Ana presented six PowerPoint slides. Presentation highlights included:
 - Conservation Practice Standards (CPS) are the official, science-based technical standards that set minimum criteria for all Ecological and Engineering practices (i.e., planning, designing, installing, operating, and maintaining).
 - National CPS sets the baseline; states adapt them to local conditions via the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG).
 - NRCS scheduled to release a minimum of 99 CPS by the end of the calendar year.
 - Updated every five years.
 - Public has opportunity to review and comment.
 - State has one year to adopt (2027) and uploaded to our FOTG.
 - CPS review process described.
 - Proposed revisions are published in the Federal Register.
- Eli urged attendees to reach out if they have any recommendations for standards/specifications.

NRCS In-Field Soil Health Assessments (Andrew Lee, State Forester)

- Andrew shared 18 PowerPoint slides. Highlights included:
 - NRCS was established during the Dust Bowl in the 1930s under the name of Soil Conservation Service.
 - Soil health a big priority in the agency.
 - In-Field Soil Health Assessments are a tool; soil health quantification method.
 - Emphasis this year on staff training.
 - Tied into the Regenerative Pilot Program.
 - Nothing replaces staff professional judgment and experiences on the landscape.
 - Assessments over time discussed.
 - Soil cover—what is good; how much is needed?
 - Land uses include cropland, rangeland, and forestland, among others.
 - Assessments are land-use specific and are designed to be done in the field using professional judgment.
 - There is an ideal time to evaluate soil health.
 - Results guide the identification of resource concerns.
 - Examples of in-field worksheets included.

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- Indicators are unique to land use type. Examples of indicators are soil cover, plant recovery, and soil burn severity.
 - Results guide the identification of resource concerns and inform decision making.
 - Resource concerns include soil compaction, aggregate stability, soil organism habitat, and organic matter depletion.

COMMENT

Kenneth Branch (NRCS): Email us with recommendations.

PARTNER UPDATES/PRESENTATIONS

USDA Farm Service Agency State Office (FSA) (Leslie Leyba, Agricultural Program Specialist)

New hire. Stopped by to introduce herself.

New Mexico Department of Agriculture (NMDA) (Dean Bruce, Healthy Soils Program Co-Lead)

Expressed gratitude for the support from NRCS for the Healthy Soils Program. We are having a soil health conference October 14-15 with NMSU. Jim Armendariz from NRCS will be speaking. All-producer led on day 1. Day 2 will include field demonstrations and soil testing. Added information/flyer in the chat. Please share.

New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts (NMACD) (Debbie Hughes, Executive Director)

NMACD plans to go to the legislature to request a funding increase for TSP agreements—now called TAPs, technical assistance providers. For 22 years, they have received \$600,000 from the state and NRCS. Time to increase base budgets of SWCDs as NM has more than \$3 billion in surplus. State budget is based on \$65/barrel of oil. Difficult to get recurring money.

HPCC contract—to help with acequias, lots of work to do up there.

Trying to work with National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), to continue work on that contract as the funds have not been completely spent. NFWF trying to get it on the website. So, list of 19 new people needed will be more like 10 or 11.

NMACD Conference begins October 19 with meetings; October 20 is the main general session. Large turnout expected.

Funded by state through NMSU/NMDA, they are training boards on roles and responsibilities including applicable laws. If you hear of any problems from SWCDs, please contact someone. The more training we do the more we find problems. Starting grant writing training. Another pot of money, DFA + New Mexico Community Trust Foundation, for another \$670,000 for more conservation planning training. Going to

have Arch training—Cultural Affairs-designed training, i.e., field school training. Online and on-the-ground training with Cultural Affairs. Hoping to do some prescribed fire training. Acequia technical training for the next generation. Want five in north and five in south. Stream bank morphology restoration training—to be led by engineers.

COMMENT

Athena Cholas (NRCS): National Farm Viability Conference in Albuquerque beginning October 22. REGENERATE conference in Santa Fe, October 28-30.

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

Recommendations due September 25 due to pilot in order to get obligations/contracts ready for growing season.

CLOSING REMARKS (J. Xavier Montoya, State Conservationist)

Thank you for joining us in the discussion. Please stay flexible. Our internal staff training will be in late October and early November. The continuing resolution takes us to December 11. Ask the DC first if you see something out the field.

ADJOURNMENT

The meeting concluded at approximately 11:39 a.m.