

Puerto Rico State Technical Committee Meeting Summary

Date: September 2, 2026

Location: USDA Forest Service International Institute of Tropical Forestry, Jardín Botánico Sur, Río Piedras, PR

Key Sections & Highlights

Some NRCS Caribbean Area and Partners FY 2026 Achievements

- As of September 2, 2026, NRCS Caribbean Area funding obligation by programs was at 91.7% for EQIP and 84.3% for CSP, leading the way in the Southeast region.
- New Conservation Practices, such as strip pavements (*placa-huellas*), have been tested, and new technical products have been developed.
- NRCS has increased capacity by providing technical training for staff and partners alike.
- Through a collaborative effort with **Envirosurvey Inc.**, the **Guide to Native Shrubs for Conservation Practices in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands** was successfully developed and published, providing valuable technical guidance for conservation planning and implementation.
- In coordination and partnership with **The Nature Conservancy (TNC)**, the publication **Marine Aquaculture Policies and Regulations in Puerto Rico** was released under a Cooperative Agreement between the two organizations, supporting informed decision-making and sustainable aquaculture development in Puerto Rico.
- Through work with Arte Suelo Ser, the virtual Museum of Caribbean Soils has been released along with different videos and exhibits that capture the identity and importance of soils throughout the Caribbean.

NRCS Conservation Programs Update – Frank Velazquez, Javier Cruz & Mario Rodriguez

FY 2026 Recap:

- Financial assistance, contract numbers, and allocations (see presentation for full table):
 - EQIP: 219 contracts, \$22,619,038 obligated
 - CSP: 139 contracts, \$4,369,362 obligated
 - Active contracts: 1,142 contracts, \$78,136,556 obligation dollars

FY 2027 Allocations & Focus:

- Proposed allocations for EQIP, CSP, and ACEP (see presentation for full table).
- Emphasis on regenerative agriculture, water quantity, and beginning farmers/ranchers.

Geographic Area Rate Caps (GARCs) Distribution:

- For Puerto Rico, GARCs are 95% of the fair market value, not-to-exceed \$25,000 to \$45,000 per acre, depending on the region.

FY 2027 Programs Implementation:

- FY 2027 sign up for EQIP closes on October 2, 2026.

- See presentation for full FY2027 program implementation schedule table.

Regenerative Agriculture Pilot Program (RPP) Feedback – Mario Rodriguez

- RPP supports conservation systems for soil health, water outcomes, and resilience.
- Delivered via EQIP/CSP, with whole-farm planning and multi-year contracts.
- Soil health testing (CEMA 216) required at start and end of contract.
- FY 2026: 183 applications, 63 contracts under RPP, 130 contracts with practice 216, 1,913 acres CSP, 5,327 acres EQIP.
- Lessons learned: need for clearer practices, improved documentation, better communication, and partner coordination.
- FY 2027 outlook: Expand participation, prioritize critical concerns, increase soil health data, refine practices with STAC input.
- NRCS collected 50 poll responses from STC members to help inform FY 2027 RPP planning and identify local priority resource concerns, land uses, and practices:
 - Top Priority Resource Concerns: 1) Organic matter depletion, 2) Drought vulnerability, and 3) Nutrient transport
 - Top Priority Land Uses: 1) Crop, 2) Mixed/Diversified Operations, and 3) Forest
 - Top Primary Practices: 1) Nutrient management, 2) Conservation Crop Rotation, 3) Contour Farming, 4) Drainage Water Management, and 5) Cover Crop / Irrigation Water Management (ranking tied for both practices)
 - Top CEMA 216 Considerations: 1) Producer education, 2) Field staff training, and 3) Representative sampling

National Weather Service and Drought – Ernesto Rodriguez & Emanuel Rodriguez

- The 2026 drought is significantly impacting Puerto Rico's agricultural and conservation sectors, with Extreme Drought in the southwest and northeast regions.
- Multiple factors—not just lack of rain—are driving current impacts, and all stakeholders have a role in mitigation and recovery.
- Both meteorological and agricultural drought conditions are present, with flash droughts causing rapid deterioration.
- Farmers must make water-based management decisions as conditions continue to evolve.
- El Niño is a key driver of the drought; the current event is classified as strong, not “super,” and drought may persist for months.
- Weather outlooks show below-normal rainfall for the region, though January–March 2027 may bring improved precipitation chances.
- NWS supports farmers through twice-yearly short- and long-term forecasts and is developing “super forecasts” that incorporate farmer-provided data.
- Field observations are urgently needed; farmers are encouraged to report rainfall and drought impacts through CoCoRaHS and CMOR.
- Environmental impacts include severe vegetation stress and over 2,700 forest fires reported in 2026.



- NWS drought recommendations rely on combined data: rain-gauges, soil moisture, vegetation health, streamflow, hydrology, and agricultural water impacts, with ongoing communication encouraged (including a WhatsApp group with Emanuel).

Forestry, Wildlife & Wetlands Subcommittee – Iván Llerandi Román

- Collaborated with the East Soil & Water Conservation District on joint conservation and restoration initiatives.
- Supported NRCS efforts related to GARC determinations for Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE), strengthening interagency coordination.
- Identified opportunities to assist The Nature Conservancy's oyster-farming habitat restoration project, helping connect partners and resources.
- Contributed to the development of long-term habitat restoration plans, including selecting focus areas for the next five years.
- Worked to expand collaboration with other agencies to support conservation program implementation across disciplines.
- Began shaping a coordinated strategy for ACEP-WRE implementation, emphasizing the need for structured, multi-partner initiatives.

Partner Updates

USDA Forest Service International Institute of Tropical Forestry – Magaly Figueroa

- Funding this year supports forest restoration, forest health, education, fire management, land easements, and disaster-related needs.
- \$6 million in projects are currently being executed across Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.
- Forest fires continue to rise, with 2,748 documented fires as of August 31, impacting approximately 12,000 acres.
- New efforts include evaluating ground material content to support improved fire behavior modeling and response.
- Increased funding is being directed toward firefighter resources, including equipment and education.
- The Forest Service installs and maintains weather stations in multiple locations (Salinas, Guánica, Maricao, San Sebastián, Mayagüez, Manatí, Añasco, and USVI), with all data publicly accessible, these provide data for forest fires.
- A major success story is the Rio Hondo community co-management plan, which continues to strengthen local stewardship of the forest.
- The State Forest Action Plan may include updates on silviculture initiatives, with input from Darien Lopez.

The Nature Conservancy – Tania Metz

- Launch of Puerto Rico's first aquaculture project in collaboration with NRCS, focused on expanding sustainable oyster farming. Project components include:
 - public education,



Natural Resources Conservation Service

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

- farmer exposure trips to see oyster operations in other states, and
- installation of infrastructure such as depuration tanks in Culebra and a hatchery facility at ISER Caribe in La Parguera to support oyster reproduction and farmer training.
- There was an algae cultivation project in La Parguera, led by Loretta Robertson, which helped document aquaculture processes specific to Puerto Rico.
- Challenges involve establishing best practices and helping oyster farmers meet requirements to participate in FSA programs.
- Ongoing Soil & Water Conservation District watershed project aims to reduce runoff by implementing conservation practices; funded for eight more years through private support.
- Work in La Plata watershed focuses on reducing runoff and advancing the watershed management plan developed by Protectores de Cuencas and NRCS, with active farmer feedback collection.
- TNC expressed openness to greater collaboration and increased partner participation in ongoing and future projects.

RAFI – Jaimie McGirt

- The *Alliance for Agriculture* cooperative agreement with NRCS officially closed at the end of March.
- 31 farmers received assistance under the agreement.
- 11 farmers obtained NRCS contracts in 2024, and 1 additional farmer secured a contract in 2025.
- In USVI, RAFI provided information to 24 producers, and 3 farmers successfully submitted applications with RAFI's support.
- The RAFI team, based in Puerto Rico, develops production plans for small and agroecological farmers, offering guidance on planning and farm readiness.
- The team is also collecting data on drought impacts to support ongoing agricultural resilience efforts.

Caribbean Regenerative Community Development (CRCDD) – Nicole Bottman

- Advancing Markets for Producers (AMP) project, directly impacting farms participating in conservation and regenerative agriculture initiatives.
- Providing incentives for conservation practices and agroforestry, helping producers adopt long-term sustainable land-use systems.
- Supporting implementation of CEMA 216 & 217, currently working with 100 farms to conduct soil-health and conservation evaluations.
- Offering equipment purchase incentives to help farmers adopt conservation and climate-smart technologies.
- Dr. Diana Guzman is leading efforts to develop a forest-fire mitigation plan in partnership with the USDA Forest Service.
- Implementing Puente Forestal, a pilot with three model farms—one focused on fire-barrier strategies in Maricao and associated ecological risk reduction.

AgrolInnova – Ana Rodriguez

- AgrolInnova operates a value-added product incubator, helping farmers develop and commercialize new products.
- A total of 220 product labels have been approved, supporting producers entering value-added markets.
- Actively seeking farmers interested in developing value-added goods, expanding participation in the incubator.
- They are managing 54 acres in Caguas, where they are interested in implementing conservation and land-management practices.