

**South Dakota Natural Resources Conservation Service
State Technical Committee Meeting Minutes
September 2026**

- **NRCS Leadership Transition and Reorganization Updates:** Jessica Michalski spoke on leadership transition, and discussed ongoing agency reorganization, noting that approved talking points will be shared soon.
 - **Leadership Transition Timeline:** Jessica state that Tony will return full time as State Conservationist and Jessica will return to her role as State Resource Conservationist effective October 1.
 - **Reorganization Communication:** Tony stated that approved talking points regarding the agency reorganization are not yet available but will be shared with partners and employees once finalized; questions can be answered informally in the meantime.
 - **National Experience and Agency Direction:** Tony described his experience serving at National Headquarters, meeting the political team, and gaining insight into the administration's direction for the agency, expressing optimism about upcoming changes focused on field-level support.
 - **Acknowledgment of Support:** Tony thanked Jessica for managing the agency during his absence and expressed appreciation for the support from partners and employees, highlighting the collaborative nature of the transition.
 - **NRCS staffing expansion:** Jessica announced plans to add approximately 50 field-level positions and described South Dakota's selection for the IMPAC 2.0 pilot. She explained the pilot's emphasis on local priorities, whole-farm planning, and improved management of program applications and contracts.
 - **Technical assistance focus:** Jessica elaborated on national support for returning to technical assistance roots, noting the aim to streamline ranking processes and strengthen conservation planning. This update reinforced that measurable outcomes and sustained producer relationships will guide future program delivery.
 - **Leadership team changes:** Tony announced an upcoming retirement of Denise Gauer (M&S) within the leadership team after 37 years. Tony emphasized efforts to maintain continuity and fill critical leadership roles upon her retirement.

- **FSA Updates:** Roger Chase provided an overview of FSA activities, including drought and flooding challenges, CRP contract finalizations, staffing changes, and disaster response, with Owen, Don, and county office representatives recognized for their conservation efforts.
 - **Weather Impacts and Disaster Response:** Roger reported on drought conditions in various regions of South Dakota, flooding in the Far East, and livestock losses due to heat, noting the agency's ongoing response to these events.
 - **CRP Contract Finalization:** Roger explained that South Dakota remains among the top three states for CRP acreage enrollment, with contracts being finalized and significant conservation and wildlife habitat benefits achieved.

- **Staffing and Training Initiatives:** Roger announced state training sessions for staff, recent approval to hire seven additional county office employees and three GS employees, and ongoing efforts to address reduced staffing compared to previous years.
- **Conservation Funding and Public Access:** Roger highlighted the importance of conservation funding, public access to CRP lands for hunting, and the department's priority to ensure hunters have access to 1.625 million acres of private land.
- **DANR Updates:** Hunter Roberts reported updates on bacteria breakouts in lakes, staffing changes within watershed programs, and progress on shoreline buffering initiatives totaling nearly 300 miles and \$8 million in contracts. The discussion also covered animal feeding operations including nine waste contracts affecting 5,000 animal units and \$1.3 million in payments.
- **SD GF&P Updates:**
 - **Environmental and wildlife conditions:** Hunter Roberts reported updates on bacteria breakouts in lakes, staffing changes within watershed programs, and progress on shoreline buffering initiatives totaling nearly 300 miles and \$8 million in contracts. The discussion also covered animal feeding operations including nine waste contracts affecting 5,000 animal units and \$1.3 million in payments.
 - **Habitat and access programs:** Kevin Robling provided updates on enrollment numbers within various conservation and habitat programs, including reenrollment of 2,600 acres and addition of 2,700 new acres in Jim River projects. He noted achievements in public access programs totaling 1.625 million acres and highlighted areas facing drought and enrollment challenges.
 - **Public access funding concerns:** Kevin described uncertainty around a \$3 million public access grant that South Dakota historically received, noting ongoing efforts to seek clarification. This discussion concluded with commitments to pursue answers from national contacts and sustain advocacy.
 - **Wildlife population status:** Kevin shared updates on pheasant numbers and habitat conditions across regions, citing favorable reports in areas with balanced moisture. The discussion also addressed concerns about insect production in dry pockets and expectations for a strong upcoming season.
 - **Disease monitoring:** Kevin reviewed EHD conditions affecting deer populations, explaining environmental patterns that encourage midge fly development and the long-term emergence of partial immunity in affected herds. The update emphasized the importance of producer-reported deer deaths to support proactive license management.
 - **Hunting season outlook:** Kevin noted that hunting activities were beginning, reporting positive observations of game presence and early-season conditions. This update set expectations for increased activity heading into October

- **SDACD Updates:** Angela summarized recent partnership efforts, including producer surveys at Dakota Fest, upcoming state conferences, and focus on building local leadership capacity. Her remarks highlighted producer interest in planting grass on cropland and ongoing work on drought issues statewide.

- **NRCS Program and Subcommittee Recommendations:** Val presented detailed subcommittee reports on financial assistance, wetland easements, and agricultural land easements, outlining updated management practice guidance, specialty production funding, regenerative pilot program practices, and high priority areas for ALE, with input from committee members and partners including Kevin Robling, David Flannery, and others.
 - **Management Practice Guidance Update:** Val recommended updating management practice guidance to allow five years of payments for contracts including soil health tests, aligning with regenerative pilot program objectives, while maintaining three-year payments for others.
 - **Specialty Production Funding:** Val and Kevin discussed the allocation of funds for specialty production operations, noting a separate fund pool and increased interest, with hundreds of new producers certified in South Dakota, especially after disaster events.
 - **Regenerative Pilot Program Practices:** The subcommittee recommended adding range planting as a core practice for the regenerative pilot program, aligning with ecological sciences input and national conservation planning priorities.
 - **High Priority Practices and Resource Concerns:** Val reviewed the unchanged list of ten high priority practices and eight state priority resource concerns, emphasizing their role in program application assessment and conservation stewardship.
 - **ALE Priority Area Mapping and Funding:** Val presented proposed maps for ALE priority areas, explained payment rates for general and GSS applications, and addressed questions about CRP land eligibility, productivity considerations, and strategies for distributing limited funds.
 - **Easement funding capacity:** David Flannery reported receiving around 25 ALE applications with the state funding approximately four, noting allocation increases from \$1.8 million to over \$5 million after national reallocation. He highlighted continued high demand and competitive funding conditions.
 - **Wetland Easement Restoration Criteria and Guidelines (WRCG):** No substantial updates were made to the WRCG but administrative process changes were amended to reflect current priorities and processes.

- **Ecological Sciences Subcommittee Updates:** Jessica provided updates on prescribed fire in CRP and adoption of new conservation practice standards.

- **Prescribed Fire in CRP:** Owen Fagerhaug and Pete Bauman led efforts to pilot prescribed burning during nesting season, with full support from the state FSA committee and plans to submit documentation to national headquarters.
 - **Compost Extracts and Biological Products:** The Ecological Sciences subcommittee recommended adopting an interim conservation practice standard for plant biostimulant and microbial applications, enabling financial assistance for producers using these practices.
 - **Regenerative Pilot Program:** Val and Jessica discussed recommendations to add perennial seeding, prescribed burning, and soil carbon amendments to the regenerative pilot program, inviting further input from partners.

- **Engineering Practice Updates:** Jim noted updates to engineering practice standards in the National Handbook of Conservation Practices (NHCP), mostly clarifying language, and informed the group about upcoming public comment opportunities for conservation practice standards recently posted to the Federal Register (comment period ends October 1).
 - **Flowing Well Control Standard:** Jim reported on consultations with well drillers regarding the evaluation and control of existing flowing wells, recommending adoption of the practice in the technical guide and ongoing collaboration for grant support if needed.

- **Tribal Advisory Committee Updates:** Jessica described efforts to reinvigorate the Tribal Conservation Advisory Council, gather local priorities from tribal representatives, and enhance local work group participation, with survey data and district official training aimed at strengthening conservation partnerships.
 - **Tribal Advisory Committee Participation:** Despite outreach, only two tribal representatives attended the recent meeting, but provided valuable feedback on reservation priorities, which will inform program application and conservation planning.

- **Local Work Groups Updates:**
 - **Local Work Group Survey and Data Use:** Angela and Jessica explained that conservation districts are holding local work group meetings and collecting survey data from producers to identify local priorities, which will be used by resource unit conservationists for workload and funding decisions.
 - **District Official Training:** Angela highlighted the need to better train district officials on their roles and legal responsibilities, with plans to focus on building understanding and capacity as part of local work group activities.

- **Partnership Data Sharing:** Angela emphasized the importance of sharing collected local input with all agencies and partners to ensure broad benefit and informed decision-making across the conservation partnership.
- **Partner Reports and Collaborative Initiatives:** Laura Kahler, Mark Norton, Matt Gottlob, Kris Dozark, and others shared updates on collaborative projects, including the Central Grasslands Road Map, prescribed fire training, RCPP application review, watershed protection, and ongoing surveys to identify barriers to conservation program participation, with recognition of partner contributions and upcoming events.
 - **Central Grasslands Road Map Initiative:** Laura announced upcoming regional nodes for the Central Grasslands Road Map, including events in South Dakota, and invited participation to discuss regional conservation needs.
 - **Producer Survey on Program Barriers:** Laura described a project conducting interviews with producers to identify barriers to participation in conservation programs, seeking broad input across production types and regions.
 - **Prescribed Fire Team and Training:** Mark reported on the prescribed fire team's activities, including upcoming tours and live fire training, and highlighted the impact of habitat specialists and easement support in eastern South Dakota.
 - **RCPP Application Review Process:** Matt Morlock explained that South Dakota received 15 RCPP applications, with a competitive review process underway and selections targeted for announcement in early October.
 - **Watershed Protection Program Updates:** Chris provided deadlines for Section 319 applications, announced an upcoming nonpoint source task force meeting, and thanked partners for their contributions to successful watershed programs.

Follow-up tasks:

- **Reorganization Talking Points:** Obtain and distribute officially approved talking points related to the reorganization to all partners and employees once available. (Jessica/Tony)
- **VPA Public Access Grant Clarification:** Follow up with NRCS national contacts to obtain clarification and explanation regarding South Dakota's status and eligibility for the VPA public access grant funding. (Val)
- **ALE Priority Area Feedback:** Collect and review written and visual feedback from partners regarding proposed ALE high priority areas, especially for private lands in the Black Hills, and update maps accordingly. (Val)
- **Regenerative Pilot Program:** Communicate additional conservation practice standards recommendations (e.g., prescribed burning, soil carbon amendments, interim biostimulant standard) to the National Office for inclusion in the regenerative pilot program. (Val, Jessica)
- **Tribal Advisory Committee Participation:** Develop and implement strategies to increase participation from all nine federally recognized tribes in the Tribal Conservation Advisory Council meetings. (Nate, Jessica)

- **Local Work Group Survey Data Sharing:** Share collected local work group survey data and producer input with all relevant agencies and partners to inform conservation priorities and partnership activities. (Angela)
- **Prescribed Fire Pilot State Proposal:** Send a letter with supporting documents to the national FSA office to advocate for South Dakota to be a pilot state for prescribed burning during the early nesting season. (FSA State Office)
- **Well Driller Availability Issue:** Attend the upcoming well drillers conference in March to gather feedback and discuss solutions for well driller availability challenges impacting ranching communities. (Jim)