



## **Local Working Group Recommendations for Fiscal Year 2023 Caballo, Dona Ana, Otero, and Sierra SWCDs for NRCS NM Team 9**

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Field Offices within Team 9 are in Alamogordo, Las Cruces, and Truth or Consequences. Team 9 provides technical assistance to the Caballo, Dona Ana, Otero, and Sierra Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD), encompassing Dona Ana, Otero, Sierra, and portions of northeastern Luna and southern Socorro Counties in southern New Mexico. The team area includes SD-2, WP-3, and WP-2 Major Land Resource Areas. Agriculture in the Team consists mainly of ranching, irrigated crop production and dairy operations. The ranches are primarily cow-calf operations. The farms are predominantly chile, corn silage, alfalfa, cotton, onions, wheat, pecans, pistachios, pasture and other vegetable crops. The primary sources of water are surface diversion from the Rio Grande through Elephant Butte Irrigation District, groundwater from the Mesilla Bolson, Nutt- Hockett and Tularosa underground water basins, and surface diversions controlled by acequia groups along tributaries within the Team. The total service area of Team 9 consists of 9,815,621 acres of which Federal lands are the majority (66.3 percent), State lands make up 9.1 percent, the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation makes up 4.7 percent, Private lands make up 18 percent and other municipalities make up 1.9 percent.

### **Local Working Group**

The Local Working Group (LWG) met at the New Mexico Farm & Livestock Bureau conference room located at 2220 N. Telshor Blvd, Las Cruces, NM at 9:30 a.m. on Wednesday, September 21, 2022. An alternate means of attendance was provided via Microsoft Teams that included a call-in number. The LWG is comprised of numerous federal, state, city, and local agencies, local organizations, and individuals who have an interest in this meeting. Twelve people were in attendance (eleven in-person and one via TEAMS).

The purpose of the LWG was to review FY 2022 programs and to discuss local parameters for the fiscal year 2023 program year with emphasis on the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Participants were given general and eligibility information on EQIP (including the Joint Chiefs, Strikeforce, and WaterSMART Initiatives), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG), and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). Due to recent disasters from flood and fire within the LWG boundary, a general explanation and status of the Emergency Watershed Program (EWP) and FSA's Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) was presented to the group.

The application deadline of November 18, 2022, for EQIP, CSP, and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) was announced to the group. Ranking and obligation deadlines were announced as well.

Fiscal year 2022 initial fund allocations for the State, Area, and Team levels were presented to the LWG. Fund pools by land use were presented. The discussion included clarification of land use definitions.

## **Conservation Needs Assessment and GIS Data**

During the meeting it was determined that Conservation Needs Assessments are done informally within the annual workplans for each SWCD. The results of those informal discussions have been, and will be, presented to the LWG. As a part of the Working Agreements and Memorandums of Agreement between NRCS and each District, Conservation Needs Assessments will be further discussed and developed. Development of the assessments will include evaluation of data utilizing GIS systems to be used, or potentially used, in the Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART) for program ranking.

## **Program Outreach**

Current program outreach includes, but is not limited to, press releases generated by the NRCS State Office, newsletter announcements, District social media announcements, public/agency meetings, and word of mouth. The LWG had no additional recommendations.

## **Payment Schedules**

Payment schedules and scenarios were discussed, including the differences between EQIP and CSP. Examples of practice and unit payment rate, such as livestock pipeline in pounds or sprinkler in acres, were discussed. No changes or recommendations for the FY 2024 payment schedule or scenarios were identified.

## **Conservation Stewardship Program**

The attributes of CSP, including the difference from EQIP, were presented to the group. Nationally required resource concerns were discussed, and State Priority resource concerns were mentioned. The group had no specific recommendations for top priority resource concerns.

## **Conservation Innovation Grants and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program**

CIG and ACEP were both explained at the LWG. The group had no recommendations for CIG projects nor any priority areas for ACEP.

## **Environmental Quality Incentives Program Funding Recommendations**

The primary focus and topic of discussion for the LWG was EQIP. The LWG determined priority resource concerns for each identified land use (grazed range, irrigated crop, irrigated pasture, animal feeding operations/concentrated animal feeding operations (AFO/CAFO), and forested), discussed ranking criteria, team sub accounts and funding allocations, payment percentage rates, screening criteria, ranking questions, and CART Assessments.

## **Priority Resource Concerns**

Primary resource concerns were accepted as written in the FY 22 LWG Proposal. The primary resource concerns identified by the LWG on **irrigated croplands** include:

1. Source Water Depletion – Inefficient use of irrigation water
2. Soil Quality Limitations – Organic matter depletion
3. Field Sediment, Nutrient, and Pathogen Loss – Nutrients transported to groundwater & nutrients transported to surface water

4. Salt Losses to Water – Salt transported to groundwater & salt transported to surface water
5. Wind and Water Erosion – Wind erosion

Primary resource concerns were accepted as written in the FY 22 LWG Proposal. The primary resource concerns identified by the LWG on **grazed rangelands** include:

1. Degraded Plant Condition – Plant structure and composition, plant productivity and health
2. Livestock Production Limitation – Inadequate livestock water quantity, quality, and distribution
3. Concentrated Erosion–Classic gully
4. Inefficient Energy Use – Farming/ranching practices and field operations; equipment and facilities
5. Wind and Water Erosion – Sheet and rill

Primary resource concerns were accepted as written in the FY 22 LWG Proposal. The primary resource concerns identified by the LWG on **farmstead (AFO/CAFOs)** include:

1. Air Quality Emissions – Emissions of particulate matter (PM) and PM precursors & objectionable odors
2. Field Sediment, Nutrient, and Pathogen Loss – Nutrients transported to groundwater & nutrients transported to surface water
3. Storage and Handling of Pollutants – Nutrients transported to groundwater & nutrients transported to surface water

The order of the primary resource concerns were changed from what was written in the FY 22 LWG Proposal. Concentrated Erosion – classic gully was moved to position 3 and Fire Management – wildfire hazard from biomass accumulation was moved up to position 2. The primary resource concerns identified by the LWG on **forested lands** include:

1. Wind and Water Erosion – sheet and rill
2. Fire Management – Wildfire hazard from biomass accumulation
3. Concentrated Erosion – classic gully
4. Degraded Plant Condition – Plant productivity and health & plant structure and composition

Primary resource concerns were accepted as written in the FY 22 LWG Proposal. The primary resource concerns identified by the LWG on **irrigated pasture lands** include:

1. Degraded Plant Condition – Plant productivity and health
2. Livestock Production Limitation – Inadequate livestock water quantity, quality, and distribution & feed and forage balance
3. Source Water Depletion – Inefficient irrigation water use

## **Ranking Criteria**

In addition to National and State ranking criteria, local ranking criteria questions are utilized for land use categories (irrigated crop, irrigated pasture, grazed range, AFO/CAFO, and forested). The LWG recommended adopting the local ranking criteria from FY 2022. It was further agreed that all guidance and/or direction as to meeting NRCS policy would be followed for developing ranking criteria.

## **Team Sub Accounts and Funding Considerations**

The LWG discussed the allocation of funds for each designated land use. Consensus was that the funds allocation used in FY 22 would be adopted. The funds are to be allocated as follows:

- Team 9 Grazed Range – 30%
- Team 9 Irrigated Crop – 30%
- Team 9 Irrigated Pasture – 20%
- Team 9 AFO/CAFO – 10%
- Team 9 Forested lands – 10%

Any sub-funds left unobligated in one of the above categories will be moved to any of the other accounts to fund the next highest-ranking applications.

## **Payment Rate Factor**

Payment rates will be established from the 2023 EQIP payment schedule. The LWG briefly discussed contract item number caps but recommended not instituting such caps for financial assistance.

## **Screening Criteria – All Land Uses**

The LWG recommended not to utilize screening criteria.

## **Tie Breakers – All Land Uses**

In the event of tied ranking scores within any fund code, the LWG concurred with using the efficiency score from CART. If the ranking and efficiency scores are the same for tied applications, all or none will be funded.

## **Ranking Questions**

The LWG recommended adopting the local ranking questions for each land use from FY 2022. No changes were made to the questions or assigned point values.

## **Cart Assessments**

Cart Assessments and weighted values of resource concerns, priority and non-priority, were discussed. The LWG did not recommend evaluating the same resource concerns for EQIP that must be evaluated for CSP.

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