

## Tennessee State Technical Committee Meeting 5/9/2023

Starting time 9 a.m.

- **Chris Wolkonowski- Acting State Conservationist –**
  - Intro: I am currently the acting State Conservationist for Tennessee NRCS. Just to give a quick update, Mr. Sheldon Hightower is currently on a detail at the departmental level. He has been asked to work on new farm bill legislation with our congressional leaders. Sheldon has got a big task ahead of him for the near future, but I know that he is going to do a great job helping to craft the new farm bill legislation for the next five or six years. We definitely wish Sheldon the best. We are not sure how long this detail may last. It could last up to one year, but we wish him that best while he is serving for NRCS and USDA, for that matter.
  - I normally serve as the ASTC-FO for Area 2. I have been with the agency almost 25 years. I appreciate Sheldon giving me the opportunity to serve in this capacity at least for the immediate future.
  - A brief update on where Tennessee NRCS is right now before I turn it over to our presenters for today. We do have a lot going on in our state right now. Both with NRCS and with our partners in the Soil and Water Conservation District. We are doing a very good job right now. We are in the middle of our EQIP and our CSP programs for the FY23 year. This year just for EQIP alone Tennessee NRCS and our districts are going to deliver close to \$42 million in financial assistance. Our field office staff are currently working on new obligations for this year. We are about at about 62% obligated statewide for EQIP, so we're in good shape.

- As soon as we wrap up EQIP in the next few weeks, we are going to turn our attention to our conservation stewardship program. We've got closer to \$20 million in financial assistance available for that program for our customers this year.
- We are going to start working on our CSP applications and our contracts as well, so we're looking forward to that opportunity too. When you tie in our easement programs through ASF, that will be an additional \$6 million that Tennessee will have received as well.
- Our Easement Staff is currently working on new applications and new easements moving forward as well.
- It's going to be a historic year for Tennessee and NRCS and our districts. When all is said and done by the end of the fiscal year, we will deliver around \$70 million of financial assistance to our customers.
- Congress signed the Inflation Reduction Act into law. As a result of that, NRCS received approximately \$20 billion in additional funding to add to our current conservation Farm Bill programs. So, we did receive some of that funding this year, approximately \$9 million, for EQIP and CSP.
- Our employees are working really hard at the field office as well. We are all working towards wrapping up these farm bill programs and looking towards the future so we can see what that holds.
- For me right now, especially with the Inflation Reduction Act, our leadership team and our employees are really focused on two big things at the moment. Number one is staffing because as I have mentioned we have \$20 billion in Farm Bill

money coming. So, we have got to have more employees to get that work put on the ground to help our customers. Within the past three or four weeks, our leadership team came together, and we will be advertising an additional 58 NRCS positions that will go out statewide. We have already started to advertise those positions in the last couple of weeks and most of those positions are going to be located at our field offices. We are trying to build our staffing capacity to handle the additional workload that is going to be coming from IRS in our Farm Bill Program. We are putting ourselves in a really good position right now. In the future, we are looking at hiring additional new positions both in FY24 and in FY25 as well. We could see our numbers increase for Tennessee NRCS by at least 1/3 within the next few years. It's an exciting time, but we must get ready for all these new employees that are going to be heading our way.

- Another big thing for us, especially with increased funding through Farm Bills is outreach and trying to get out there and meet new customers. Our agency Outreach Coordinator, Harold Pettigrew, has been working with our local field offices. We have set up about 15 different Field Office outreach days. The intent of these outreach days is not just to meet with our current USDA customers, but also to find new potential customers.

- **Robert Boettcher- Acting ASTC Programs-**

- I am currently serving as the Acting State Conservationist for Programs, previously help by Jamie Carpenter. The new ASTC Programs, Garrett Morris, will be joining us for our next State Technical Committee Meeting. We are excited

to get him on board, and I will return to my full-time duties as full time EQIP Programs manager.

- This is our mid-year update for the EQIP, CSP, and ACEP side of things.
- See, “*STC\_Programs\_May\_2023(1).pptx*”

- **Bill Norfleet- CSP Program Manager**

- See, “*STC\_Programs\_May\_2023(1).pptx*”
- I have a few slides to talk about the conservation stewardship program, and to give you some up to date information on what’s going on. You saw some of these slides under Robert’s presentation, but I wanted to remind everyone when you look over those sheets of practices that it does have practice codes for the normal EQIP practices as well as the enhancement codes for CSP. So, just remember those when you look at the climate smart agriculture and those enhancements that are available through the new Inflation Reduction Act.
- The important deadlines are also listed. As Chris mentioned earlier, we are getting ready to jump in to CSP. Our ranking deadline for applications is June 23<sup>rd</sup>. So, in just a little over a month, we will be completing all of those deadlines for the state. Those deadlines go for IRA CSP as well as RCPP CSP. For Tennessee this year the ranking deadline for Classic as well as IRA and RCPP will be June 23<sup>rd</sup>, and the turnaround for the pre-approved will be on June 27<sup>th</sup>. We have established some obligation markers within the state, and we hope to have around 305 obligated by June 20<sup>th</sup>, 80% but July 21<sup>st</sup>-25<sup>th</sup>, and 100% completed by September 8<sup>th</sup>. That is our goal for this year to work through all the preapprovals and all the applications. We will get those, and the contracts completed by September 8<sup>th</sup>.

- Our normal CSP Classic, has been almost \$12 million, at \$11.8 million, and the additional IRA funding of \$5.3. We also have the MRM RBI funding with some organic funding pool as well, so that totals up to almost \$19 million. That will be a record for Tennessee. If we are able to get all of that money spend this year, and we do have over 504 applications in Protracts right now, our conservation contract system, so we are looking at a very large number of applications to go through, and a large number of CSP dollars to get obligated by September. Tennessee has been great, since I have been at the State Office, at getting the \$12 million allocated. Even before that, we were starting out at around 8 or 9, so we worked our way up to 12. We have to keep rolling to get us up to the almost \$19 million, which I know we can have another successful year this year.
- As a little summary, we have already completed our renewal contracts for FY23, and these are our final obligation numbers. We spent over \$1.4 million on just regular renewal contract for a total of fifty. Nine of those were non-industrial private forest land for over 400,000 participants. We had 9 contracts for historically underserved participants of almost \$200,000 spent within that category for 760 acres contracted. Those are some good numbers for renewals this year.
- **Pamela Hoskins- Easement Program Manager**
  - See, "*STC\_Programs\_May\_2023(1).pptx*"
  - I will be completing the ACEP update. We are working on the Fiscal Year 23 program applications, and we had two signups. I just wanted to remind everyone that we had the first cut off on November 3<sup>rd</sup>. We did not receive as many

applications as we would have liked to, so we announced a second signup and the cutoff date for that was February 10<sup>th</sup>. We received several more applications. We plan on having another sign up that will be in November of 2023. We will probably announce our program probably in August or September of this year, and then we will have that cutoff on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

- We have ten of our wetland reserve easement applications that we are moving forward on, and then we have one that is in our partnership application category. So that's eleven that we are moving forward on for about 1500 acres, which is a really good group of applications. We also have one application that is on the books already as a 30-year WRP easement, and that landowners wanting to move that to a permanent wetland easement.
- Also, as a reminder, people always have questions about our geographical area rate CAP, which is the method that we use to compensate landowners for the easements. It's always good to review these, and to know which categories that the counties are in, what categories that we use, and that we use open land which consists of cropland and pastureland. We have the woodland forest land compensation category. We also have other land which is the land that does not fit in to those other categories. Just as a reminder, we are working on updating this for our Fiscal Year 24 applications. So, steps have already been made to even update this, and we update that every year to reflect the current land prices.
- As previously stated, we used this dark map as a basis for how we compensate our landowners for their easements. We do that by an area wide market analysis and as I mentioned before we have already started the update for Fiscal Year 24. This

is the first step of that area wide market analysis. The appraiser is a private certified appraiser. He is already working on gathering the data for the property sales in the last 12 months so that we can get our fiscal year 24 dark map updated. Once he gets all of that information and data collected and categorized, he will send that to us and then we will submit that in to have our dark map updated. Tennessee, namely the State Technical Committee, have decided that our compensation would be based on 95% of what that average value is that the appraiser comes up with and we round that down to the nearest \$50.00. We do a 95% average value which is good, and you all should be applauded for coming up with that. This first step where appraiser gathers the data is currently happening right now.

- **Robert Boettcher- Acting ASTC Programs-**

- I would like to go back to the chat for a second just to bring this conversation out for those who have not had a chance to read it. There was a question that asked how many agroforestry EQIP applications had there been so far this year. Right now, it looks like there have been at least 150 applications that pertain to forestry. That is just a quick look at one of our pools. There could easily be way more than that, but easily over 150. The follow up question was, do you know how the breakdown of practice for those applications, and our reports don't really give us that type of information until after it's been contracted. I do have the ability to look through and kind of just get a quick of those for our AG forestry practices. Of those 150, almost all of them include the practice 666, forest land four stand improvement. Almost all of those applications include four stand improvement, a

lot of applications also include prescribed burning and any supporting practices. Any burn buffers or filtered burn filters or anything that's needed to help support that brush management is another one of the top practices and tree planting the 612-tree shrub establishment. Those are really the top practices, but for the most part every application includes that 666 practice of four stand improvement. I would say the 666-314 brush management, 612 tree planting, and then any other supporting practices. There are some other wildlife practices in there like wildlife plantings, noxious weed control through 315 herbaceous weed treatment, and some of those other practices. For the most part, those are the top practices that are included in almost all of the application, so hopefully that answered those questions.

- **Chris Wolkonowski- Acting State Conservationist –**

- Thank you to our Program staff for those presentations. I would like to touch on one thing as well. There was a statement in the chat concerning climate smart ag funds. There is going to be a great opportunity, not only for NRCS and our districts, but all our partners concerning some of these climate smart ag practices. Robert earlier on in his presentation showed that list, we provided it to our State Technical Advisory Committee Members as well. There's going to be a big push, especially starting next year on a lot of the climate smart soil health friendly practices that are going to be available in it. It is going to be a great opportunity for all of us. We have been doing some great soil health work in this state for many years, and we are going to see that continue to increase especially with the



IRA funding that's coming down the road for the next couple of years. There are lots of opportunities out there for all of us.

- **Brandi Broughton- FSA Program Specialist –**

- I am the program specialist for the Farm Service Agency over our conservation programs. I have a few updates regarding conservation programs here with the Farm Service Agency. So, an overview of the Conservation Resource program includes the involuntary land conservation program and our goals with this program are to adjust the number for you to protect the nation's soil, water, and wildlife resources course, improve water quality, and enhance our wildlife habitat. Just to name a few of the benefits of the Conservation Resource program, we have three options for our producers: general CSP, continuous CRP, and grasslands CRP. These contracts can range from 10 to 15 years. Under these contracts, the producers will receive the annual rental payment and of course we are extended through the life of this farm bill, which ends September 2023. We have a listing of our physical year 2023 soil rental rates for each county in Tennessee at the link provided.
- The annual sign up had a deadline of April 7, 2023. For this current general CRP that we have, we are tied to our EBI scoring which is competitive bidding that the producers will compete across the nation with all offers. The secretary will set a cut off score, which has not been received yet, but based on the score whoever received that score or above will be accepted into the program, and continuous ERP signup.

- This is our ongoing signup except for our reenrollment offers that are expiring and included in this we have regular HLI, which is a highly erodible land initiative. Our safe acres, as well as a new part of it, which is clear 30. This is not subject to competitive bidding, but we are more focused on conservation practices such as waterways, filter shrimps, and riparian buffers just to name a few. For the enrollment in these programs, our general signup just ended on April 7<sup>th</sup>. We are waiting to receive which offers we had accepted or rejected, and then our ongoing signed up for continuous CRP and still ingoing except or reenrollment. That sign up is still open. The end of the Farm Bill is September 30<sup>th</sup>, and we will have some new deadlines coming out for our continuous as well. Currently, we have our CRP grasslands sign up going on that ends on May 26<sup>th</sup>. We also have our forest management incentive opportunity as well as our transition incentive program as well. This is the deadline for our general signup 60 deadline. As I mention before, the deadline was April 7<sup>th</sup>, but once we get that accepted or rejected listing of offers then we have a few other deadlines for that are going to move forward with contracting where the technical service providers will provide a conservation plan and get signatures from our producers as they move forward which is August 11<sup>th</sup>. We would then have to have it approved and ready to go by October 1<sup>st</sup> which must be approved by September 30, 2023. The transition at center program is an overview of this program, and this is an opportunity for producers. They are currently enrolled in CRP that are looking to either retire from farming or sell land to a beginning or socially disadvantaged farmer. This is a program that we are providing to owners and operators where they can receive

an incentive for two years based on the contract. We are supporting the grazing operations, biodiversity, and lands programs. Forbs under the greatest threat of conversion are what we are focusing on. The minimum rental rate is \$13.00 per acre. Currently, we do have a priority zone which will receive 15 ranking points. This program has competitive bidding as well, and there will be a cut off score. Any producers that have offers that meet the cut off scores will be accepted into the program as well. We also have opportunities for additional ranking points if you are a beginning socially disadvantaged or bettering farmer or rancher. This is the current grassland CRP priority zone, and our state rates range from \$13-\$35 per acre based on location and county. This is new on land and EQIP contract is eligible for enrollment in grasslands CRP. This sign up is an opportunity for producers to be able to enroll in both programs. I did want to mention that an additional 15 points are automatically offered if that area that is in our state wildlife priority zone. 50% of that acreage will obtain 15 points to the author. Incentive payments for continuous signup include SIP, PIP, and Water & Air Quality Incentives. SignUp Incentive Payment receive 32.5% of your first full annual rental payment. Practice Incentive Payment will receive up to 50% of the installing practice paid. For the Water and Air Quality Incentives, we provide 20% rental rate incentive for any water quality practices that we have listed. Some may not be applicable to all practices, but most of them we do have some type of incentive on top of the inner annual rental payment as well. They want to mention that we do provide a Cost Share Assistance to these practices as well. We provide up to 50% cost of the participant cost or the established costs that we have at the

state level, but we cannot exceed 100% installation costs. We are kind of limited as to that instance, but we do provide cost share assistance.

- We do offer an emergency conservation program and a emergency forest restoration program. The emergency conservation program is a program that we have that provides emergency funding to our farmers and ranchers to help during any natural disasters that had any damaged land due to their nursery lifestyle, tornados, straight line winds, flooding, drought, and things of that nature. We can cost share up to 75% or cost or 90% of cost for limited resource farmers and socially disadvantaged producers to help rehabilitate those back to their normal state. We cover debris removal, restoring fences, restoring conservation structures, and grading, shaping, or leveling land.
- We also have the Emergency Forest Restoration program. This program is the sister program to the Emergency Conservation Program, and it focuses more on forest lands. The same type of assistance that we provide with their emergency conservation program is similar to the conservation program. The land must be physically located in any area that was affected by the natural disaster that was caused. We also cover different practices such as hardwood forest restoration, softwood forest restoration, and within these we cover debris removal, site prep, planting, fencing, and conservation structures just to name a few. We do have a few counties that that are implementing these programs due to our current disasters that we have had across the state, such as tornados and straight-line winds. If you do see your counties listed, or if you do not and you receive some type of damage due to a natural disaster, please contact your local county office

and let them know where they can request ECP or ERP as well. The current signups that we do have going on across the state due to the tornado damage from March 31<sup>st</sup>-April 1<sup>st</sup>. We are currently working on getting those producers assistance. Please take note of the signup period dates, and if you're interested or eligible, please contact your local county offices for assistance.

- My contact information is Brandi Broughton Moore, Agricultural Program Specialist, [brandi.broughton@usda.gov](mailto:brandi.broughton@usda.gov).

- **Chris Wolkonowski- Acting State Conservationist –**

- Thank you, Brandi, for your presentation.
- At the end of your presentation, you touched on ECP, the Emergency Conservation Program, and it has been a tremendous benefit. It is a tremendous lifeline for our customers here in Tennessee, and we have used it. We've worked with you all a great deal, especially in the last few years with a lot of these severe weather outbreaks. ECP has been a big help to our folks to help with a lot of the cleanup and damage, especially this year in February, March, and then the April 14th tornado outbreak. It's been really a godsend to our customers. Thank you for providing an overview on that program as well.
- Mr. McClurkan is on the call as well. Speaking of great partnerships to work with, the Tennessee Department of Agriculture has been a huge one of ours for many years as many of our folks on the State Technical Committee work with TDA a great deal through the Agricultural Resources Conservation Fund.

- **John McClurkan- Administrator, Land & Water Stewardship Programs –**

- As Chris mentioned, the AG Resources Conservation Fund, and thanks to everybody on this call who helps implement that program out in the area offices and in the district offices. Your help is very appreciated and very important.
- Last year, fiscal year 2022, was an all-time high revenue mark for us. Our revenues exceeded \$15 million in fiscal year 2022, and so we've been very busy trying to spend up all that money. We're in fiscal year 2023, and about to go into 2024. Our revenues this year, since the funding is tied to the real estate market, which is going quite strong, but not quite as strong as fiscal year 2022. We are forecasting somewhere between \$10-\$12 million this year. That is a bit of a decrease. We watch the revenue stream every month. It will be a conservative fiscal year 2024 with allocations, the Soil and water Conservation Districts are busy turning in their applications. For those funds we are about to start fiscal year 2024 allocations very soon. I want to share with you all a program that we've been talking about for some time. We are about to really push, and maybe do a better job about getting the word out about this program. It's called the Tennessee Riparian Incentives Program. Brandi, who went in front of me, was talking about CRP. This program is set up right now to focus on the Tennessee Valley watershed and Tennessee River watershed. Any land that there is a rapport repairing force to buffer need and interest by the landowner, and if they qualify for FSA continuous signup CRP. The landowner would go in and apply through FSA, get approved, get the project done, get the trees planted on the riparian forested buffer for the project, and then through our department the Tennessee Valley Authority has awarded us funds to provide one-time incentive payments to these riparian buffer

areas. We're going to be providing, once the project is finished and certified, the landowner a one-time \$3,000 per acre incentive on that project. We are looking to find a way to distribute that information everyone on this call, everyone on the state committee, everyone on the Soil and Water Conservation District, and every employee in our CSA and FSA so that we can get the word out. There will be more to come on that, so stay tuned.

- Through the Land and Water Stewardship Program, we also manage the EPA funded 319 nonpoint source grants. Those grants are on an annual cycle. The deadline of submittal of applications for the 319 grants for fiscal year 2024 will be December 1<sup>st</sup>. We do invite any of you who are interested in applying for a 319 grant to contact me or Sam Marshall in our office. You can also look on our website. We have all of the information there, who to call, and all about the applications.
- Finally, I would like to talk about a four-year action plan that we have embarked upon here at the department to increase our outcomes on soil, water, and nutrients from 2022 through 2026. We have written this plan, and the main points of this plan are going to track nutrition management planning that is going on across our state. We are going to track soil testing and the implementation of precision agriculture. We are interested in tracking no till and cover crops, thanks to the work of Deborah Henderson. We know about our no till rates in Tennessee are very high, maybe the highest in the country. As far as the percentage of row crops that are planted using no till or conservation tillage, it's a great statement to make for our state. We're also excited about seeing the numbers of cover crop acres.

They're reported to go up and up. That's a very important and very valuable practice for nutrient flux reduction and for soil erosion mitigation. We're happy to see more and more acres of cover crops going in the ground. Tennessee has received a grant. The Department of Environment and Conservation has received a grant through the Gulf Hypoxia Program. It was part of the BIL, I forget what the acronym stands for, but we've received the first installment of that five-year grant program. It's about \$1.7 million to implement and focus on target watersheds on additional cover crop incentives. The other two parts of our four-year action plan are going to be looking at the state's impaired waters list and do some ground truthing of that and based on those impairments that are noted in the TDEX impaired waters list, have our partners and us embark on a project to determine where the lands are in these impaired watersheds. They're most in need of conservation programs and try to document outreach to those lands that are most in need, and at least make sure that those landowners are aware of the conservation programs that are in place to help them.

- **Debra Kenerson** –State Statistician

- Thank you, Chris, and thank you John for the shoutout about the no till estimates that we do. I think that we are the only state in the nation that collect those data.
- Good morning. My name is Debra Kenerson, and I currently service Tennessee State statistician for the National Agricultural Statistics Service. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. Thank you to acting State Conservationist Wolkonowski and Katherine Burse for your invitation.



- Partnerships certainly have several advantages, including the ability to bridge gaps in expertise and knowledge, more opportunities for learning, and providing moral support to each other. They also keep us from looking inward and put our customers' needs first to understand and provide the data that our customers do need. NASS depends on partnerships and agreements with other agencies and organizations, so together we can provide the most accurate agricultural statistics for Tennessee, which is our number one industry. NASS works within our CS, Tennessee State University, Farm Service Agency, Rural Development, University of Tennessee, Tennessee Department of Agriculture, and Tennessee Farm Bureau just to name a few.
- We work with these organizations constantly, not only on programs, but to get the word out about when some of our surveys are being conducted. We also encourage participation and give legitimacy to our surveys and all results of our surveys are available to the public. The most current survey we have going on is a sensitive agriculture which we conduct every 5 years. We are now working on the 2023 census of ag, and those results will be available in early 2024. The results from the census provide the most independent, comprehensive set of agricultural statistics, and are used by university researchers. Everyone from researchers to agricultural producers to organizations who need solid statistics so that they can say instead of "about this much", we give the hard statistics about the number of cattle, acreages, yield production for crops, and income expenditures. We do collect organic information on the census of ag, and we publish everything from bison to ostrich income and expenses by county for every state. I have been very

fortunate to be involved to be involved in NRCS organics program by providing our statistics for every year that we've published and show whether organic producers by type are increasing over time.

- Thank you, Danny, and Katherine, for your support and involving us in this program. It has also given me the opportunity to see how you too work with other agencies and organizations to fund out their needs and how you can best meet them.
- We are co-sponsors with NRCS on the (CPAM) Conservation Practice Adoption Motivation. The first phase which included 34,000 producers nationwide received a survey for either crop land or confined livestock version of the survey. The first phase was conducted from May to September last year and results were published October of last year. The purpose of the survey was aimed at assessing the adoption of conservation rates for different crop land, livestock, and forestry practices. The second phase, which will be conducted next year, will include forest land questions and ranch land questions. Overall, the resulting state and regional level data will be used to gather information specific to each practice and measure and use as a guide to the implementation of NRCS practices and programs in the future. We also work with you on CPAP, which was established in 2002 to quantify the environmental impact of USDA's conservation programs. This is a joint effort between NRCS, NASS, FSA, and other foundations.
- This is all to say that working together makes all of us stronger and understanding the needs of the agricultural community. We are very proud to be a partner of NRCS and look forward to working together in the future for these and other

projects. NASS is an agency of a less than 1000 employees that publish a little less than 500 reports on an annual basis. In addition to the five-year census of agriculture, we are very committed to providing the most accurate estimates for every aspect of agriculture to measure agriculture's impact on America's economy.

- Thank you for your role in making this possible and thank you again for your invitation and your time.

- **Chris Wolkonowski- Acting State Conservationist –**

- We are running a little bit early this morning, but I know that Dustin is on the call with us, and I have known Dustin for a while now. We talked about some of these programs that are out there to complement our Farm Bill programs and the US Fish and Wildlife Service has got a great partner for Fish and Wildlife program that we use, just like we use ARCF funds. A lot of time when we work with customers, and we don't have available Farm Bill monies for them, we can always lean on our partners to provide some other opportunities from financial assistance. Dustin, you all have done a great job in providing that support to our field offices and our customers as well.

- **Dustin Boles- Acting PFW State Coordinator –**

- I appreciate the introduction, and likewise, NRCS is among our strongest partners along with TDA and others on this call. We are proud of that partnership that we have with y'all. My name is Dustin Boles, and I am the Acting State Coordinator for the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program here in Tennessee.

- Today, my plan is to give you a program update and talk about some of our priorities that were currently working on and where we look to go in FY24. I will start out with just a general overview of what the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program is. In Tennessee we are situated under the Ecological Services Division of the US Fish and Wildlife Service. We are a voluntary private lands habitat restoration program. We work to achieve the service mission of conserving, protecting, and enhancing habitats for the benefit of federal trust resources. We provide technical and financial assistance to private landowners, and we've been around for a pretty good while now. We are recently celebrating our 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the program nationwide. Since 1998, in Tennessee, we have been a partner on 285 projects, worked on around 15,000 acres, and restored over 670 miles of stream habitat.
- We work with others to restore and enhance native habitats. We focus our efforts on areas of conservation concern such as upland forests, native prairies, rivers, and streams, and we designed these projects to benefit federally threatened and endangered species. We are part of a conservation delivery team within Tennessee Ecological Services Field Office. We try to coordinate our efforts with other partners to maximize the benefit to Federal Trust Resources.
- A large part of what I do in the partner program is coordinating efforts through the farm bill. We work with the state biologist, Robin Mayberry, Area Biologists, and DC's routinely to maximize the effectiveness of planned projects through the farm bill to benefit our focal species. We also leverage resources like Chris was alluding to. We cost share on projects with USDA to the extent allowable to make

sure we get the benefits after for our species. There are several policies that support our efforts within the Fish and Wildlife Service, but recently there was a director's order that came out in 2016 that really positioned us to work closely within our ECS to promote voluntary conservation actions for non-federal landowners through the working lands for wildlife program. That is a huge focus for us, is working landscapes and providing resources to landowners that are beneficial to them and the resource.

- Coordination with USDA on a higher level through the State Technical Committee is crucial to our success and delivering conservation and delivering the right actions at the right places. Some of our goals through the State Technical Committee are to identify high priority natural resource issues and solutions to those issues, facilitating partnerships, and on the ground project implementation assist in the development of an eligibility of ranking factors for EQIPS, CSP, and other conservation programs. We work to identify biologically sound and cost-effective conservation practices, developing compatible use guidelines for WRE and other programs. The big thing here is just maximizing our effectiveness to deliver the right conservation for our species.
- Our delivery of the private land's programs here in Tennessee through the parks official My Life program is structured in a strategic habitat conservation framework. What this is getting at, is doing the work on the front end to know where we should be working based on species, need and threats, and what the habitat is really needing to improve the status of those species. In the last couple of years, we developed a new strategic plan that will be in place from 2022 to

2026 and we will talk more in detail about that plan in a few minutes. We have identified the focal species and watersheds that we are the most concerned about. These species that we're working on are all federally are at risk species. Really what we are after is delivering conservation actions that support species recovery needs. Those needs are documented in species recovery plans, species status assessments, and other planning documents that we refer to, to kind of guide our work. All the conservation delivery would not be possible without our partnerships. This is the mechanism for delivering this through the Soil Conservation Districts, Tennessee Department of Ag, and NRCS is as big as major partners in this delivery.

- Diving more and more into this strategic plan that was recently finished. This is part of a national effort. The program every five years revisits the national plan. The state plan gets rolled into that, and we went through an exercise to identify where we've worked historically where we see opportunities to work in the future, and then the locations where species are. So, we come away with two work areas for the state. We have two partners, biologists stationed in Cookeville Tennessee, me and Robert Cogburn. In the state we have the two work areas, and we spend the majority of our time within the focal area in these areas. The upper Tennessee River basin includes the Clinch, Powell, and the Nolichucky rivers. The Cumberland Plateau focal area includes the Wolf, Sequatchie, Emery, Clear Fork, and Upper Canine. We also have a terrestrial habitat component to the Cumberland Plateau focal area specifically for white fringeless orchid, but there's also opportunities to conserve bass species on these forested tracts. Something

new for us and the partners program is the Central Basin Karst focal area, which includes Wilson and Rutherford counties. Currently where our focus is conserving limestone glade habitats. The Lower Tennessee River Basin includes the elk, duck, and middle cypress creek watersheds. One thing I would note on here, is that Bradley and Polk counties along with these most three eastern counties, Unicoi, Carter, and Johnson, are covered by other field offices. This was part of a strategic work plan that the region produced several years ago. The state of Georgia is covering those upper Coosa counties of Bradley and Polk. The mountain bog habitats are covered by the Asheville, North Carolina, field office Laura Fogo.

- The Upper Tennessee River Basin Focal Area which includes the Clinch, Powell, and Nolichucky. Tennessee is a highly diverse state, within this river basin alone, we have over thirty listed or at-risk species that occur as part of this exercise. We were asked to really focus in though, and we could not list all thirty species as being the main priorities, although most of these species are cooccurring. We really had to fine tune that list a little bit. For each of these focal areas what I would like to do is kind of discuss one's species generally and talk about some of the threats that we see and kind of what we are after with the program. Species recovery plans for the Birdwing Pearlymussel site pollution, and siltation are leading factors for species decline. To address those threats our goal is to reduce that nonpoint source pollution through installing, repairing buffers, stabilizing eroding stream banks, excluding livestock from the tributaries to the main stems with the Clinch and Powell installing alternative water sources. As the picture

shows here there is a hardened stream crossing that allows livestock to cross in one place rather than entire stream reaches. We worked heavily with NRCS and Tennessee Department of Agriculture to plan these projects and cost share on them in these focal water sheds, and this is a perfect example of reducing threats to the Birdwing Pearlymussel along with several other aquatic species that you see listed there, and ultimately leading to recovery actions for the species.

- The next focal area that we will talk about is the Lower Tennessee River Basin. The picture that you see is of a riparian forest buffer planning that was recently completed in Marshall County and that was through a partnership with Tennessee Division of Forestry, TWRA, NRCS, along with the partners of the Fish and Wildlife program, and TBA. These riparian buffers as previously mentioned by Brian and John McClurkin, are a huge point of emphasis for our program to get these installed where we have landowners that are willing to do so and there's an example. You know any of these species that you see here, Birdwing Pearlymussel, Pale Lilliput, Slabside Pearlymussel, Pygmy Madtom, nonpoint source pollution is a huge threat to that species and any recovery efforts is really going to have to have that component. One other species I would mention here in the Lower Tennessee River Basin that we're focused on is the Slackwater Darter. The Slackwater Darter is a fish species that occupies the headwater reaches especially within Middle Cypress Creek, and that's where it like to spawn. When we are in the early Spring or late Winter, when we have periods of a lot of moisture, that species will go up into the fields and spawn there, and so it is crucial to have habitat connectivity for that species and so road stream crossings



are a priority for us. Currently we have a plan that we are still finalizing, but hopefully to get a full assessment done of barriers that we are in that watershed where we can effectively go after those crossings and increase stream miles to benefit species. That's the one thing that is really mentioned here for Slackwater, and given the nature of those stream crossings, a lot of those occur on private lands too, and farms, and other places. That's really something to be aware of as we talk about recovery for that species.

- Central Basin Karst Focal area, it's something we're really excited about in the program. Robbie Cochran has been leading that effort up to work with private landowners that own these degraded glade systems. What we are after there is the opening the canopy, removing Cedars, and putting fire on the ground to maintain these habitats. Something that has really been of interest to us is the response we're seeing from the habitat. Regarding the Northern Bobwhite Quail habitat, it's perfect. It is a perfect balance for these listed plan species that we're trying to conserve, and then the habitat requirements for the quail. We are really trying to open this canopy and again restore these habitats. There are a lot of threats in the Central Basin Karst area that we are all aware of, and trying to offset as much as we can. One of those has been the lack of fire on the landscape, which is a challenge to deliver on private lands. We are looking at ways to increase that ability with the Tennessee Division of Forestry, habitat fragmentation. It is a highly fragmented landscape; relatively small tracks of property and the pressures of urban sprawl continue to cause an issue here. To highlight one species in particular, we will talk about the Leafy Prairie-Clover. The picture that is

displayed is a site that we are actively involved with in the Rutherford County, and it was a project that we across about three years ago for the Leafy Prairie-Clover where there was a landowner there that was interested in restoring the site to its native state. We worked with him to come in with a forestry mulcher, remove those some cedars, and then put fire on the landscape, which ultimately will also reduce the number of cedars. Something neat about these sites, too, is we have Streamside Salamander on site, which is an at-risk species that is currently under review. As most of you know what's beneficial for the Leafy Prairie Clover, we've also found to benefit stream side. It has been a great project there. One other thing to mention was being strategic and working on a landscape scale. There is opportunity here in the Central Basin Focal Area to capitalize on the work that the Tennessee Division of Natural Areas is done at places such as Seeders 11 and then TWR is doing it in the Wildlife Management Area. We are really hoping we've been strategic and engaging landowners adjacent to those tracks just further advance our efforts there.

- The Cumberland Plateau Focal Area includes Clear Fork, Emory, Sequatchie, Wolf, and Upper Caney water sheds. A priority for us and these water sheds is livestock exclusion, bank stabilization, and just looking at ways to reduce nonpoint source pollution and improve those riparian habitats for aquatic species. We have the White Fringeless Orchid that occurs on the plateau. The threats associated with that plant species oftentimes are loblolly pine stands, and competition for sunlight. We have not been able to develop projects that we would like for that species, but it will be a focus going forward. We've been really

successful in these aquatic projects. One thing to think about with this watershed is the RCPP, the ridges to rivers RCPP. We hope to capitalize efforts there and make some progress towards recovery of species. The Laurel Dace, Slabside Pearlymuscle are both species that occur in the Sequatchie and are really in need of help. Sequatchie occurs in the headwaters of Walden's Ridge. The RCPP also covers that geographic area. We're hopeful to get some good conservation on the ground through that we'll be supporting NRCS, and the Tennessee Aquarium in the coming months to hopefully connect landowners with that resource. I'll take just a second here to talk about the Fluted Kidneyshell, it occurs extensively in the Wolf River. Around three years ago, we weren't really sure of the status for that species and started up a project in the Wolf River to survey the reach and identify areas where we could restore habitats with the hope of someday reintroducing the species. Turns out on that trip, we located two alive Floating Kidneyshell next to an eroding string bank. From there we really got even more interested in the watershed and worked with Tennessee Tech to do a full assessment documenting occupied reaches and degraded habitats that we could focus on, and we've been able to implement 5 projects through the partners program, not to mention all the work that NRCS has done, and the Tennessee Department of Ag in that watershed to reduce nonpoint source pollution. It's been pretty successful, and we really look to continue that effort in the coming years, develop more projects like the one you see in this picture was taken last year on the livestock project, a huge buffer, the landowner gave up probably 150 feet in places to allow us to install this fence. This past spring, we went back and planted hardwoods for the landowner, so that

was a great project. Going back to the RCPP, I would like to comment that our conservation delivery coordinator in the office, Jeff Kyle, has been working with the Nature Conservancy, in particular Jason Thornberry, to put together a be high training out of the Tennessee Aquarium this summer. We were hopeful that we can learn from this training and then use it to apply strategic conservation in the Sequatchie drainage, in particular, and so we are excited to offer that to a few folks from NRCS.

- In FY23 the partners program submitted two implementations for regional consideration for funding. One of those two strategies was funded, and that was the Cumberland Plateau working lands aquatic habitat restoration project. We received an allocation of \$125,000 to support habitat restoration and enhancements, just like the project we have just shown specifically dedicated to the plateau. This money will be parked with the Cumberland County Soil Conservation District, and it'll be a 5-year project that we hope to implement priority recovery actions with. It will support the ridges to rivers RCPP, and again the exact project examples we went through: livestock exclusion, alternative water sources, heavy use areas, and stream crosses. We also want to examine stream restoration and riparian plantings as well. Stream restoration is something that we would like to see us expand a little bit within the coming years. We've done a lot of bank stabilization projects, but what we really want to get out with these species needs is in stream habitats and requirements that support their life history. Partners involved in this effort are Tennessee Department of Ag, Tennessee Aquarium, the Cumberland County Soil Conservation District, NRCS,

TVA, TWR, Quail Forever, and private landowners. One more note, is that in August, the Area 3 Biologist for NRCS, Chase Coakley, and I have been planning a coordination meeting with the DC's, Tennessee Department of Ag, Quail Forever, and Tennessee Aquarium to have a project meeting before we really get going on this thing to update on threats that these species face and the conservation planning that we can do that supports recovery. I think that date is August 9<sup>th</sup>, and with that I will leave you with my contact information. (Dustin Boles, Acting PFW State Coordinator, 931-261-0117, [dustin\\_boles@fws.gov](mailto:dustin_boles@fws.gov)), (Robby Cogburn, Private Lands Biologist, 931-214-3365, [Robert\\_cogburn@fws.gov](mailto:Robert_cogburn@fws.gov))

- **Chris Wolkonowski- Acting State Conservationist –**

- Thank you, Dustin. I know that Brian had actually put a question in the chat. He asked if any of your projects are getting funded from private sector carbon markets or ecosystem service markets? There's a lot of overlap, of course, in those programs, and he'd like to discuss that with you.

- **Dustin Boles- Acting PFW State Coordinator –**

- Good question, Brian. The carbon markets are not something that we have not put any fundings towards or receiving and funding for these projects. It is definitely something that we would be glad to talk about and learn more about. It seems like carbon is an emerging market, and so I have a little bit to learn about in that regard, but I would be happy to talk with you individually about that.

- **Chris Wolkonowski- Acting State Conservationist –**

- Thank you again, and we appreciate you spending time with us today. The Partners for Fish and Wildlife program has been a huge benefit to NRCS, and especially our customers across Tennessee. We are going to switch gears a little bit. We have a couple of folks that would like to talk about the TennGreen Land Conservancy. Ms. Pell and Ms. Henderson, I am going to turn this over to you.
- **Allison Hudson Pell- Executive Director- TennGreen Land Conservancy –**
  - My name is Alice Hudson Pell, and I am the new Executive Director of TennGreen Land Conservancy, and I am excited just to have an opportunity to talk to you all wonderful conservationists that you are, about our nonprofit organization and what we do. Then Christy, is going to talk a little bit about some partnership projects that we've had in the past.
  - What is TennGreen Land Conservancy? We are the oldest statewide land conservation organization in Tennessee. We are accredited by the Land Trust Alliance. We've also earned the Platinum Seal of Transparency from Candid, which is the world's largest source of information on nonprofit organizations. I am especially proud that in 2021 we won *Best Places to Work* from the Nashville Business Journal for Small Organizations, and we are completely nonprofit. We are only funded through the generosity of our members and our corporate partners to get our important work done. Our mission is to conserve land where people and nature can thrive.
  - Why is land conservation important? I am going to touch on this very briefly because I am speaking to this great group of people. I think that we all know, but it's always one of my favorite parts of my presentations is to really be able to

demonstrate how the ripple effects of conserving land affect our daily lives. So, from carbon sequestration, the health of our citizens and ourselves, our mental health or physical health, obviously protecting our air and our water, protecting those ecological systems that we all need to thrive.

- And then some very interesting data from GNRC, the Greater Nashville Regional Council, which they actually took from Cumberland Region Tomorrow, but the value of having open space. They project \$16 billion annually in economic activity from agriculture and forestry that provide almost 200,000 jobs. \$15 billion impact on property values that helps generate an additional \$118 million in local property tax revenue and \$1.3 billion annually and recreation with an indirect benefit of \$214 million in healthcare savings, as a result of increased physical activity.
- Just to look at Tennessee and show the 2040 kind of business-as-usual scenario and what we're going to lose. So, it looks like we're going to pave over, fragment, or compromise over one million acres of farmland. This is specific to farmland and doesn't even include all of the wonderful forests and other resources that we have. 52% of this conversion is going to occur on what they consider to be Tennessee's best farmlands. That is the equivalent of losing 8700 farms, \$258 million in farm output, and almost 15,000 jobs just based off of the county averages. In middle Tennessee and East Tennessee, Sevier, Rutherford, and Williamson are the most at risk.

- TennGreen conserves land through 3 primary strategies. We have conservation easements. We acquire land on behalf of partners and agencies, and then we also do restoration and enhancement projects.
- A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement that permanently limit the land use in order to protect conservation values and of course, as you all know, these easements can be donated or can be purchased. TennGreen holds about 50 conservation easements all throughout Tennessee. A couple of those in recent years have been purchased through grant funding through the Open Space Institute and then also our restrictions. They might include limits on subdivision, residential development, and mineral and timber harvesting, so resource extraction.
- The benefits of easements are that landowners have a variety of reasons to protect their properties with TennGreen, so peace of mind. You love your land, you love the stories, you love the history. You understand what it means to you, and just being able to protect your sense of place. It's so important for so many people, of course with easements, it's all private land. They use their own property, they own it and they can sell it or donate it, or whatever they might do, and then there's really significant potential tax benefits as well.
- With land acquisition, kind of our second tool in our toolkit, we work on behalf of local and state and federal partners to acquire land largely for public use, but also natural resource protection. We do a lot with the state; TDEC, and TWRA. We work with local governments like Metro Parks. We've had four or five different park expansion projects, including one that we're just now wrapping up in a little



place called Lachlan Springs Park in East Nashville that is just adorable. If you have a chance to see it, that would be awesome. I'd love to take you out there. It's tiny, but it's kind of mighty in the neighborhood there. We partner with a lot of nonprofits. We have partnered with the Conservation Fund, the Nature Conservancy, the Swan Conservation Trust, and the Wolf River Conservancy. We've partnered with national groups, international groups, and small local groups. We know that partnership is really the key to getting more work done and conserving the best of what we can.

- Our restoration projects, when we are able to we love to work with our land owners on these enhancement projects or restoration projects. We've done quite a bit of treating of hemlocks, and removals of invasive species, and other land management things such as burning.
- I am going to toss it over to Christie to go over the finer details of some of these projects that we've done.
- **Christie Henderson- TennGreen Land Conservancy –**
  - So, I wanted to highlight just a few key projects to maybe think through ways that we can be a stronger advocate for NRCS, and work more closely with the great groups that we haven't really built a strong relationship with yet. But I think there's a lot of overlap, and so I am going to give an example of a project which is about 2,000 acres that we were gifted in 2020. It's along the Cumberland Trail in Ray, and Bledsoe counties. Right now, we are wrapping up a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant, and shoutout to Emily Stefanik, who I saw is on this call and has been our primary partner on this restoration work. The activities that

we've been doing out there, I think really align with the goals of NRCS, and I've been talking to Robby Cogburn about maybe aligning this with a partner's program restoration work in the future. I think there's a lot more things we can do. So far on this property we have burned a couple hundred acres, planted about 60,000 Shortleaf Pines, treated a crazy number in miles of hemlocks, and then we've been working with Southeastern Grasslands Institute, and Austin Peay on research at this property. So, this is a property that we are hoping to not own forever, just because that's usually when we acquire land we're a shorter term owner. We don't own properties of this size, at least for years and years, and so I think this particular piece of property has a great future where we could deploy additional conservation strategies and restoration tactics to further increase the importance of the landscape through either additional burns or possibly some repair and improvements and things like that. We definitely plan on reaching back out to the partners program and seeing what else we can deploy on this property, and potentially use it as a demonstration area of sorts.

- I was also happy to hear the RCPP mentioned the Ridges to Rivers initiative based out of Chattanooga, surrounding the Sequatchie River. TennGreen is a partner on that project, and I think my coworker Kristen is on might be on this call listening in. She is the lead from TennGreen staff trying to work through the Tennessee Aquariums, strategies, and things like that, figuring out how we can actively utilize NRCS funding to really increase the conservation pace in this highly important area. Obviously, we are very excited to continue to see how that continues to move forward and hopefully use it as a really strong way for us as an

organization to better utilize NRCS funding programs and various conservation strategies that are available that we haven't utilized as much in the past. We're super excited to continue to be a part of this and see how it evolves over the next five years.

- I just wanted to mention, TennGreen has had a historic approach that really seemed to center along forest land, and that is something that we are still very interested in continuing to conserve. We also have extended our footprint on farmland conservation easements. We want to make sure that if anybody knows us historically, to realize that we do have a farmland component that we want to focus on. This particular picture is a 700-acre farmland conservation easement we hold in Dyer County. So, if there's any thoughts on folks, who want to reach out maybe we can align a landowner with programs that are available to whether it's cattle exclusion, fencing or burning, or things like that. We'd love to be a bridge as well between landowners and these types of programs.

- **Alice Hudson Pell- Executive Director- TennGreen Land Conservancy –**

- As the Executive Director with a background in fundraising, I would be completely amiss if I did not applaud our annual fundraiser. As I mentioned, we do not receive government funding. We don't receive funding outside of our membership, and our big fundraiser, which is called a hike-a-thon. We just wrapped up this year's hike-a-thon in April, so if you're interested in learning more, now's a great time. We are currently in the process of doing all of our announcements about the winners, and all of the amazing things that our participants did this year, and we will be looking for sponsorships for next year.

So if you're interested in joining up with the hike-a-thon, in providing wellness opportunities to your employees or friends, or just being able to have a reason to get outside next April and get some miles on your boots, or paddle, or climb, or anything that you love doing, I would love to chat with you about it because it's such an awesome event.

- There are other ways that you can help as well if you're interested in TennGreen conserve land, is volunteer. We have some volunteer opportunities, but there are tons of other groups around that also have them. Every tire pulled out of a river is a win for us, so if you find yourself with some free time, and you really want to give back, I hope that you'll do that with your time. Again, the hike-a-thon we just finished is in April. It will be in April next year, and I'd love to talk more about that if you're interested. There's always being an ambassador for our environment, the voiceless need your voice, and so that wraps up our presentation. We have time for a couple of questions.

- **Chris Wolkonowski- Acting State Conservationist –**

- Thank you, Alice, and Christie! There are a couple of questions in that chat, and I'll read those back to you. One of them actually ties into the questions that I had for you all as well, and I may have missed it earlier in your presentation, but my question was more related to who typically holds the easements? Is it typically TennGreen, or is it another entity? And actually, our ACEP Program Manager, Pam Hoskins asked if TennGreen is an eligible entity to hold easements to ACEP ALE.

- **Christie Henderson- TennGreen Land Conservancy –**

- We have held all of our conservation easements ourselves. Pam, you might remember when we chatted about a year ago about a potential project, and as of yesterday it has bubbled back up and the landowner's interested in considering his property for that program specifically. I am going to reach out soon, or Kristen is, to see if we can re-engage that. I've honestly been a little uncertain of all the parameters to the funding mechanism because it's just not something we've utilized yet, but I think we're definitely eligible for it. It's just something that we haven't tapped in to quite yet, but for all of our conservation easements, we are the holder or TennGreen, whatever term you want to use. Occasionally, we have a couple wetland mitigation easements where I think the core is either a third-party enforcer or maybe a coholder, but otherwise we're the primary holder on all of our easements.
- **Chris Wolkonowski- Acting State Conservationist –**
  - Thank you both. You know, you've touched on some of the statistics that we're looking at down the road for Tennessee by 2040. The potential of losing an additional one plus million acres, 8700 farms, that's staggering and somewhat depressing to be honest with you. NRCS is a huge advocate for easements. We hold a lot as a federal agency and definitely rely on our partners to do the same because a lot of people want to live in Tennessee nowadays and we've seen a huge influx, especially in the last five years. There's a lot of open space. There's a lot of green space in the state that people enjoy, and they love, and we're trying our best to try to keep as much as that in place as possible especially when we

start talking about working farms as well. So, we appreciate what y'all are doing at TennGreen and thank you for being on the meeting today.

- The last presentation that we have on the agenda for today, is Brian who has been asking some questions in the chat and providing some great information to us during the meeting. So, Brian, I am going to turn the floor over to you and let you talk about some of the efforts in watershed restoration that EPA is currently doing in the Southeast.

- **Brian Hummel- EPA Southeast –**

- Thank you so much for having me. I just wanted to talk about some synergies that are going on, and to give a shout out to some of your efforts in Coffee County that have won the Governor's Environmental Stewardship Award. As we all know, soil health is a very strong determinant in water quality, and anything that we can do to make our soils healthier will make our crops healthier, make our livestock healthier, make our watersheds healthier, and make our local communities and more resilient. So going back to Coffee County, they've now started doing regenerative Ag, and these climate smart agricultural practices on about half the acres in the county which is, I would say, way above your national averages. They're find out that infiltration rates are going up in many cases from one or two inches an hour to over ten inches an hour. So, they're literally helping soak up that rainfall as an agricultural asset, and they're also helping mitigate downstream flooding. Tennessee has been in the news quite a lot recently for flooding, and I think there's plenty of ways that these types of partnerships and tapping into some of these climate smart Ag opportunities, working with some groups that are doing

land conservation, there's just a variety of different ways that we can regenerate healthy land and regenerate healthy watersheds so we can protect our groundwater supplies. There is a couple of projects that are outside of Tennessee that I think are worth looking at. I've left some of those in the chat. One is in Arkansas with the Restore the Earth Foundation. They're getting RCPP funding. They're helping landowners. Apparently, there's a backlog of landowners who are interested in wetland easements and riparian forest easements, and so that's helping get those landowners funding. The thing that's so interesting about that particular project is that they plant the trees, the trees grow, the landowners still own the land, and they're just not doing row cropping down, right next to the river. They're letting the forest return back to that area, and in many cases, they're making more money on the hunting leases that they were on the farming. But on top of that, those trees grow, and there's people in the private sector that are willing to fund and pay for that. Those trees, as they grow and mature, there's a really interesting project in Mississippi with Wildlife Mississippi. I believe they are also doing some land conservation work in Tennessee as well, but they have gone and protected about 30 miles of the Pearl River just upstream of Jackson Mississippi. They are getting funding to do some habitat restorations so they can bring both sides of river for about 30 miles into its historic context. Not only is it helping protect their water supply, it's biologically filtering the water before it ever makes the city using nothing but solar power, gravity, and biology, but it's leaving room for the river. That also opens yourself up for all sorts of outdoor recreational opportunities to diversify the economy in the area. I think that's a

really interesting project because you're on so much carshed land. There's a great RCPP project in Florida that I am trying to replicate with the 319 program. The EPA 319 program that tries to reduce nonpoint source pollution. The RCPP in Florida, I don't remember the exact name of it off the top of my head, but they are protecting the recharge zones for these economically vital springs. They are getting funding to protect and restore and do habitat restorations on some of these recharge areas so that the land will be super healthy. Therefore, as the water converts from rainfall into recharge, that water is nice and clean and comes out of our springs a very clean. I think there's a lot of potential opportunities for partnership between USDA and EPA. I am relatively new to the EPA. I've only been here for about five years. I am very new to Tennessee, and I've been doing this 319 program in Tennessee for just over a year, maybe approaching two years. I sort of wanted to say hello, let you know that you have a huge advocate for agriculture and soil health, and looking forward to learning more about what you guys do and finding spots for different synergies because again as we know soil health equals water quality and that's our main mission here.

- I also have some pretty good connections to other federal agencies that are interested in soil health and nature-based resilience including FEMA. FEMA has started funding some projects in Kansas, where they're looking at where can we put strategically placed regenerative Ag practices? Where can we improve soil health within a watershed to help mitigate flooding downstream? And in this particular case, they're trying to mitigate flooding in Manhattan, Kansas. I think there's some exceptional opportunities to do that here in Tennessee, and I'm



happy to discuss with anybody on the call or on your staff ways that we can tap into some FEMA funding to help get some climate smart regenerative Ag practices implemented on the ground. I think Tennessee really has in a way, an advantage on some of that Climate Smart Ag funding because your soil health specialist, Matthew Denton, has moved up the chain a little bit, and he's now the project officer for the Partnership for Climate Smart Commodities, so he's very familiar with the work you're doing in Tennessee. I think with this relatively large pot of money there might be some ways to help our partners in Tennessee tap into some of those funds, so we can turn flooding liabilities into biologically filtered groundwater assets and do it at enhanced agricultural profit.

- I think that is all that I have, but I see a question about carbon popped up in the chat: carbon programs and ecosystem markets, could you speak on some of those projects you may have worked with? I did a little bit on that Restore the Earth Foundation project. There are some great RCPP projects in Nebraska. I think it's working with the Nature Conservancy; I think it's called Resilient Soils for Nebraska futures. There are projects interspersed. I've been so incredibly impressed with NRCS and their RCPP program. It's leap and bounds ahead of what other federal agencies are doing. It's really tapping into these public private partnerships. There's a long list of them that are starting to tap into the private sector carbon markets. I've been trying to push FEMA for that. I've been trying to push the EPA for that, but honestly, I don't think we're as advanced as the RCPP program is. Again, there's multiple areas where they are or basically getting additional funding from people that are trying to sequester carbon, whether it's

through soil carbon sequestration or through trees. The really cool thing about carbon and I'll dive into this in just a little bit, is that it's not really about the carbon you're sequestering in your soils. That's great. The benefit comes from what a lot of people call carbon plus, and the plus are all the ecosystem services that you get by making your soil better a better sponge. It's the cleaner water. It's the cleaner air. It's the mitigation of flooding. I also think that with communities making all these carbon neutrality pledges, we have some advertising and marketing to do to those communities to say, hey, you know, Nashville, if you're trying to make this carbon neutrality pledge instead of sequestering carbon with this group that's doing work in Australia, Alaska, or Argentina, why not work with the watersheds upstream from you? Let's make those into a carbon bank. Let's improve the soil and improve the forests upstream. So now your investment goes into projects that are going to help mitigate your flooding and provide you cleaner, healthier water for years to come. Let's just look at New York City for example. Many, many years ago, New York City decided that they needed water and that protecting their water resources was valuable, so they made the investment again. It was over 100 years ago, but they made the investment to protect most of their watershed, and that's one of the reasons that New York City was able to have a good, secure water supply. I think there's some excellent RCPP examples in the main 2020 alternative funding project in Maine got funding to protect 10,000 acres of forestry, active forestry land, protect it from development, and it's within the Lake Sebago watershed, which protects drinking water for about 1/6 of Maine's population. The next thing from Greg, he mentions a private

sector ecosystem service market available at this time, have you heard of that? Yes, I have. I'm not as smart on that as I would like to be. There's a gentleman that is really rocking that, his name is Ed Pinero. He's with the company called Econometrics, and Ed has some other things up his sleeve. Like under the Bush administration, he was the federal sustainability officer for the entire government, so he knows what he's talking about. He's got some really great connections, and I would suggest reaching out to Ed Pinero at Econometrics. I appreciate your time, and I look forward to working more with you guys.

- **Chris Wolkonowski- Acting State Conservationist –**

- Thank you, Brian. I saw that Linda Ortiz, our State Resource Conservationist, also put some information in the chat as well for our group and the fact that Tennessee, we're going to have about 24 projects with multiple partners as part of the \$3.1 billion that USA provided through the partnership with climate smart commodities. So, we're going to have 24 projects that touch Tennessee, Brian, that tie into a lot of what you just talked about as well. Great opportunities, and Brian, you mentioned the great work that we're doing in Coffee County, and you're exactly right. Adam Dougherty, a district conservationist down there, has been doing work in regenerative agriculture and is doing some fantastic things across the landscape over there. We've got some folks as well in Middle Tennessee, I see Nathan Hicklin is on this teams meeting with us as well. He was our District Conservationist in Robertson County and did a great deal of work with the University of Tennessee extension with some soil health projects up there. Now he's moved on to our ECS staff, and he's a water quality specialist.

You touched on infiltration rates, and that's one of the take home messages that we try to give our customers is try not to get too confused about the science behind soil health but look at some of the immediate benefits that you'll see once you start to implement soil health practices and infiltration rates is one of those things as well as water holding capacity of that soil. If you create good soil structure so there's multiple benefits from doing soil health practices. And as we've talked about for most of the morning, there's going to be some great opportunities coming up in the near future to continue doing that through the USDA and NRCS funding also through our partners as well. I see someone has a hand up, so go ahead Jonathan.

- **Jonathan Wilson- USACE Memphis –**
  - This is Jonathan Wilson. I'm from the Memphis District Army Corps of Engineers. I'm a biologist permit manager for the regulatory division, and I was asked by my supervisor to let you know that we don't get a whole lot of permits coming from NRCS, USDA, stuff like that to the Memphis office. There's a lot of agriculture exemption, so there's not a lot that have to come through us, but there are a lot of things that if they impact the rivers, lakes, creeks, anything that could be considered through waters of the US, they do need a permit through the Army Corp of Engineers. Since you are doing a lot of outreach and trying to get ahold of a lot more landowners, not just farmers. I have a lot of things coming up where there might be some presentations coming around showing everybody what y'all have been doing looks awesome, but if you all need some people to hold some time, we've got some presentations we can give during these meetings, and kind

of give everyone that might not know that they need a permit to contact us. We can let them know we can give them a site visit, or we can do it over the computer and a phone call. Then it's much easier to take care of beforehand than it is afterwards to mitigate what might be an impact. We do anything from solar farms or if you're putting in a culvert sometimes that could need a permit with us. So, we just wanted to tell you all that the Memphis District does more than just Tennessee. We do west Tennessee from Henry County straight down towards the Mississippi River, and then we do a little bit of Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky, and Mississippi. So, it's a large area, but just specifically west Tennessee is in the Memphis district. We do have people that send permit requests to the Nashville district, and then the Nashville district must send it to us. So just to try and cut out that middle part, letting everyone know that Memphis is here, and we are taking requests for permits to review. I will put my phone numbers here in the chat, and my email in case anyone wants to contact me and let me know, hey, we would like you all to give a presentation just to know what the regulatory division does and anything else that you want to ask.

- **Chris Wolkonowski- Acting State Conservationist** –
  - Thank you, Jonathan, and I know that we definitely work with the core of engineers, and all of our regulatory agencies in Tennessee every year on trying to host some joint meetings as well. So, we can discuss the permitting process and we definitely appreciate y'all's help in that arena too. I've worked in middle Tennessee the majority of my career, and we've got a lot of projects that need to

be permitted to our partner agencies, and so we appreciate the support that you give us and especially to our customers.

- I appreciate the opportunity to have a chance to talk with all of our partners on the State Technical Advisory Committee, you know, and NRCS I know, relies on you all to provide some guidance. In regard to our farm bill programs, how we structure those, how we deliver them to our customers, how we get them out on private lands. But you know, when I looked over the agenda today, it really keyed in on partnerships, and we realized how valuable those partnerships are in this state. We've got some great ones that we're very fortunate to work with, each and every one of you. You know, John, talking about TDA and the ARCF program. Also, some of the new initiatives with the Tennessee Department of Agriculture as well, it's just some great opportunities. The Fish and Wildlife Service, also TennGreen, we appreciate your presentation on easements. They are a valuable asset to our private lands here in Tennessee when we look at the number of farmland acres that we lose every year. So again, I appreciate everybody being on the call today. John, I know that you mentioned in the chat about having the recording available after this meeting, so if you have access to the chat once the meeting wraps up, we'll stop the recording, and it should be available. If not, just reach out to me or my staff, and we'll make sure to get that recording to you as well.
- It was great to see everyone, and we appreciate the presentations today. We look forward to seeing you again in the very near future, and I hope you have a great rest of the week. Take care.

Meeting Minutes Prepared by: Hiliary Morrow.