



Local Working Group Recommendations for Fiscal Year 2024 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, other vegetable crops, and pasture. 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 %), State lands make up 9.1%, the Mescalero Apache Indian Reservation makes up 4.7%, private lands make up 18%, and other municipalities make up 1.9%.

Local Working Group

The Local Working Group (LWG) met at the Smokey Bear conference room located at 3501 Mesa Village Drive, Alamogordo, NM at 10:30 a.m. on Tuesday, August 15, 2023. 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, organizations, and individuals who have an interest in this meeting. Twenty-three representatives of the LWG were in attendance (twenty-two in person and one via TEAMS).

The purpose of the LWG was to review FY 2023 programs and to discuss local parameters for the fiscal year 2024 program year with emphasis on the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Participants were given general information on EQIP (including the Inflation Reduction Act [IRA], Joint Chiefs, Strikeforce, Burned Lands, and WaterSMART), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG), and Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). Due to recent disasters from fire and floods within the LWG boundary, a general explanation of the Emergency Watershed Program (EWP) was presented to the group.

Fiscal year 2023 initial fund allocations for the National, State, and Area Initiatives, and for Team 9 were presented to the LWG. A breakdown of the total 2023 Team 9 obligation by fund pool that included allocation level, number of contracts, and total obligation dollar amount was presented. Post-Inflationary Supplemental Payments (PISP) were explained.

Conservation Needs Assessment and GIS Data

Conservation Needs Assessments are done informally within the annual workplans for each SWCD. The results of those informal discussions were presented to the LWG. As a part of the agreements 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. The development of watershed initiatives tied to needs assessments was discussed.

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 or future payment schedules 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 23 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 was changed from what was written in the FY 23 LWG Proposal. Fire Management – wildfire hazard from biomass accumulation was moved to position 1, Concentrated Erosion – classic gully was moved to position 2, and Wind and Water Erosion – sheet and rill was moved to position 3. Degraded Plant Condition – plant productivity and health and plant structure and composition stayed in position 4. The primary resource concerns identified by the LWG on **forested lands** include:

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

Primary resource concerns were accepted as written in the FY 23 LWG Proposal with the addition of a fourth priority resource concern, Plant Pest Pressure – invasive species. 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
4. Plant Pest Pressure – Invasive species

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 2023. with minor changes. It was further agreed that all guidance and/or direction as to meeting NRCS policy would be followed for developing ranking criteria.

Team Ranking Pools and Funding Allocations

The LWG discussed the allocation of funds for each designated land use. Consensus was that the funds allocation used in FY 23 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 2024 program 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 from FY 2023 with changes to questions and point values. Recommended changes included: Irrigated Croplands – split question 5 into two questions, each with 25 points; Irrigated Pasture – add a question 7 that addresses the newly added priority resource concern plant pest pressure -invasive species, and change points to question 1 from 75 to 65, to question 2 from 45 to 40, and give 15 points to question 7; Grazed Range – add the word allowable to question 1; Forested – remove question 7 and replace it with question 8 that is reworded from soil erosion to concentrated erosion - classic gully, change question 8 to address wind and water erosion - sheet and rill, add the language pervasive and/or noxious to question 9, and change points to question 1 to 60 (max) points, 2 to 40, 3 to 20, 7 to 35, 8 to 25, 10 to 15, and 11 to 15; and Animal Feeding Operation (AFO) – changed the language of question 8 to utilize the Farm Irrigation Rating Index (FIRI).

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.

/S/

Kristi Wright

District Conservationist, Team 9