

Tennessee State Technical Committee Meeting

(TEAMS) Tuesday, May 14, 2024

Starting time: 9:00 a.m.

Members and Guests Present:

1. Boles, Christina – USDA FSA
2. Boles, Dustin - FWS
3. Bynum, Karina – TDEC Division of Water Resources
4. Commender, Katie (Guest, Appalachian Sustainable Development)
5. Daniels, Roger - USDA NRCS
6. Engle, Joshua – USDA NRCS
7. Fay, Conor - USDA NRCS
8. Friend, Aaron – USDA NRCS
9. Goff, Hannah - USDA FSA
10. Gupton, Kelly - USDA NRCS
11. Hawkins, Arthur – USDA NRCS
12. Honicker, Leslie – USDA NRCS
13. Hoskins, Pamela - USDA NRCS
14. Jones, Dennis – USDA NRCS
15. Kaaz, Spencer – Technical Service Provider
16. Lebron, Acevedo - USDA NRCS
17. Lincicome, David – TDEC Natural Heritage Inventory Program
18. Foster, Marlon (Guest, Knowledge Quest)
19. Mayberry, Robin – USDA NRCS
20. McClurkan, John – TDA
21. McAfee, Jason – USDA NRCS
22. Miller, Alton - USDA NRCS
23. Miller, Brad – TWRA
24. Mitchell, Melanie – USDA NRCS
25. Morris, Garrett – USDA NRCS
26. Nelson, Christopher – USDA NRCS
27. Pettigrew, Harold - USDA NRCS
28. Pitchay, Dharma – College of Agriculture, TSU
29. Powelson, Jeff – American Bird Conservancy
30. Quartey, Yvonne – Quartey Botanicals
31. Richardson, Joshua – USDA NRCS
32. Richman, Alexandra – Cumberland Springs Land Company
33. Robertson, Duane - EPA
34. Stefanick, Emily – Panther Creek Forestry
35. Taylor, Kasey - Taylor Acres Farm
36. Tippens, Joel – City Farms Grower Coalition
37. Warden, Angela - Warden Consulting
38. Wolkonowski, Chris – USDA NRCS
39. Womack, John – USDA NRCS

40. Wiley, Keisha - USDA NRCS

41. Woodcock, John - TDF

Grace Lutz – Acting State Conservationist

Welcome/Opening Remarks

- Introduction: I am currently the acting State Conservationist for Tennessee NRCS. Mr. Sheldon Hightower is currently on detail at the departmental level. My permanent position with the agency is, as the assistant state conservationist for management and strategy, so handling mostly the administrative and operational side of things for the Agency here in Tennessee, I've held that position for going on 8 years now and overall, I have 35 years of service with the Agency.
- I think most of you are aware that Sheldon Hightower has been on detail now for about a year on special assignment, working on the new Farm bill at our national headquarters, and that detail has really been extended now through the remainder of the fiscal year since we don't have a new farm bill yet. He will be in DC for a little bit longer. I will only be acting for another few weeks probably at the most, and then we will have somebody else taking over as acting state conservationist here in Tennessee to carry us through the end of the fiscal year.
- We're working hard to obligate our farm Bill Dollars received this fiscal year to assist as many customers as possible. When it is all said and done, the fiscal year comes to an end in September, we do stand to deliver around \$89 million in financial assistance funds across the state throughout all our programs of that amount, about \$43 million is the additional funding that we received through the Inflation Reduction Act this year.
- We also continue to focus on our staffing and our partnership agreements to increase our capacity to deliver all this financial assistance. We currently have about 260 federal employees working here in Tennessee right now and we will soon be advertising for an additional 30 new positions this year. We advertised for 34 positions last year and we're going to be bringing on hopefully another 30 new positions this fiscal year, most of them in the field in our field offices, again to help us deliver this conservation workload that we have. we are also working to continue to backfill vacancies that have occurred due to normal attrition or internal movement with folks moving around within the agency in and out of the state.
- I'd just like to welcome everybody this morning and especially any new members who may have joined us from the last meeting. I am looking forward to a great meeting today. I'm going to turn this over now to our assistant state conservationist for programs, Garrett Morris, and he's going to take us through the rest of the agenda.

Garrett Morris – Assistant State Conservationist for Programs - NRCS

- Good morning, everyone, I am Garrett Morris and I currently serve as the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs with NRCS Tennessee.
- We'll go through the programs report first and we'll start off with our acting equip program manager, Mr. Andrew Quintana, and then we'll move forward from there.

Andrew Quintana – Acting Equip Program Manager - NRCS

- Good morning, everyone, as Garrett said, my name is Andrew Quintana. I am the acting equip program manager. I've been doing this acting role since the end of March and then I will give you a quick update on equip.

- Our total obligation percentage across the state sits at about 47 1/2%. This does not include some additional preapprovals that were sent out last Thursday evening, so we do have an additional preapprovals list of about 6 million additional which gets us to about \$72 million in pre-approved applications and still right at that 31 almost \$32 million and obligations. We sent out some new preapprovals on May 8th last week Thursday, and that's just like I said about \$6 million additional in preapprovals. So in addition to our IRA funds, our general funds and initiative, we did receive an additional \$15 million that was used in the Act Now socially disadvantaged fund pool, we funded all applications that were entered into the Act Now social disadvantage fund pool at that point in time and then we funded numerous beginning farmers to spend the majority of the \$15 million additional allocation that we received on top of our general our initiatives in our IRA funds as it said in that and in the previous slide 515 contracts have been obligated for 2024 equip that includes both IRA and general to a tune of \$31,211,000.

Hannah Goff –Acting CSP Program Manager - NRCS

- My name is Hannah Goff I'm the acting CSP program manager while Mr. Bill Norfleet is away on detail, and with that, we'll go ahead and cover the CSP update. Starting out here is the CSP timeline that we've currently had set up for this fiscal year. We're completely done with all our CSP renewal deadlines until next fiscal year.
- There's currently around 107 FY25 renewal applications entered into pro track, yesterday morning we released the CSP Classic RA and some additional Act Now preapprovals, I'll be going over the details of those preapprovals a little bit later in the presentation.
- Last year, we utilized the Act now approach in CSP. The fund pools selected included beginning farmer Agland, beginning farmer nonindustrial private forest land, socially disadvantaged Agland and socially disadvantaged nonindustrial private forest land. A threshold score of 15 points was set for each of these sub accounts and we began preapproving applications in these fund pools starting on April 4th. We were able to push out several \$1,000,000 ahead of our traditional program timelines.
- The obligation percentage target rate of 50% is set for May 24th and the 100% obligation deadline is set for June 21st. So, I know those dates will be coming up soon and we can't wait to get that money obligated. Our initial allocation this year for CSP was a little over \$25.2 million. That includes a little over 15.6 million in classic funds and 9.5 million in inflation Reduction Act funds renewal contracts were all obligated back in December. We had a little over \$2.8 million obligated in renewal contracts after a few contracts that we've recently had obligated in act now, we still have around 20.5 million remaining to get obligated before the end of the fiscal year.
- I have a few notes on this slide about MRBI funding. We currently don't have any applications in those fund pools and these fund pools must be utilized in the MRBI initiative or they must be sent back to national headquarters. They can't be redistributed into the other fund pools, so I'm currently trying to work on organizing a meeting/training event with areas of the field offices that fall into the MRBI areas to make sure that they are knowledgeable about the eligibility and the guidelines etc. My hope is that I can help bring some awareness and knowledge to the field and maybe we can potentially utilize those funds that we haven't been using historically in Tennessee. one other thing I'll note on this side is that the IRA funds that we get, they must be utilized within the state, and they cannot be returned to national headquarters.

FY2024 CSP Allocations

Initial Allocation

- Classic = \$15,678,800.00 (including \$1,383,800 MRBI)
- IRA = \$9,524,000.00
- Total → \$25,202,800.00

Renewal Obligations: 82 Contracts

- Classic = \$1,997,437.00
- IRA = \$882,228.00
- Total → \$2,879,665.00

Act NOW Obligations: 11 Contracts

- Total → \$388,543.00

Remaining Funds

- Classic = \$13,292,820.00 (\$12,297,563.00 w/o MRBI)
- IRA = \$8,641,772.00
- Total → \$20,550,792
- Right now we have 1334 active contracts with over 57 million in obligations on those contracts. We've administered annual payments to our participants in excess of \$20 million and there are over 607,000 currently enrolled acres in the CSP program across the state of Tennessee. Last year, we also incorporated RA dollars for an additional 5,000,000 and obligations, bringing that total in FY23 to 19 million. In FY24 we expect to obligate around 24-25 million at minimum, assuming that we don't request any additional funding.
- We currently have over 1100 applications entered in Protracts and field offices are working to get those applications eligible and get them moved to contract once they're selected for funding. In beginning Farmer, we pushed out over 3.5 million in the Agland fund pool. In the beginning, former nonindustrial private forest land fund pool, we've pushed out over 3.7 million socially disadvantaged Agland 1.5 million and socially disadvantaged nonindustrial private forest land over 823,000. So that equals just over 9.6 million pre-approved so far since we began preparing these applications on April 4th according to program policy, we have to allocate 5% of our total allocation in CSP to historically underserved participants.
- For our initial allocation this year, that number would be 1.2 million to each of the historically underserved beginning farmer and socially disadvantaged farmers. As you can see, we have far exceeded those requirements this fiscal year. I mentioned earlier that we pushed out preapprovals for Classic and IRA funds yesterday morning. In the Agland fund pool, the Agland classic fund pool pushed out over 1.2 million, in the NIPF fund pool over 1.1 million, IRA Agland with over 4.6 million and IRA NIPF was over 3.7 million.
- Area one received around 6.9 million in these classic and IRA funds area two was around 1.3 million, area three was a little over 962,000 and area four was around 1.6 million. In IRA, we have pre-approved approximately 8.4 million and likewise over 12 million in farm bill funds. That brings us up to over 20.5 million in preapprovals. This funding is most of our allocation aside from just a little bit that we've held back for errors and things of that nature.
- We're currently less than 2% obligated to date & the 50% obligation target date is May 24th, which will be here before you know it. The 100% obligation deadline is set for June 21st. We talked about all the money going out, so I just wanted to take a second and show what still sitting in the system that isn't funded. There's still approximately \$10.2 million in the Agland classic in

assessments that are ranked in unfunded. Likewise, in NIPF, there's over 1.4 million in assessments that are not funded.

- Just a couple of things I wanted to mention that are kind of new for FY2024. We do have a new payment method and rates that were released for FY24 and that includes new rates for historically underserved participants. Another big change that happened in FY24 was the contract minimum payments increased from \$1500 a year to 4000. The third thing, in April we got a national bulletin that provided revised guidance for policy changes on requirements for control of land reviews. With that, there was a random list selected from national headquarters that was pushed out to States and we have to complete some quality assurance on those contracts and provide that information to FPD. We set the deadline in Tennessee to complete this task on May 24th. The second part of that Bulletin was a control of land review training. The national deadline to have that training is June 30th, 2024 and we completed that last week during our programs webinar.

Garrett Morris – Assistant State Conservationist for Programs & acting RCCP Program Manager – NRCS

- Our most recent program coordinator for RCPP or program manager was Mr. Robert Boettcher. He's since accepted a position as a CSP program manager with NRCS in California, so I've been serving in that position also until we have someone in place permanently. Moving into RCPP, not a huge number of slides, but some valuable information on the regional Conservation Partnership program none the less. RCPP is a program where NRCS in Tennessee has had room for growth across the past couple of fiscal years. This year, FY24, we have been witnessing that growth up to this point. The use of RCPP will likely continue to increase across Tennessee over the next year, and I'll talk a little bit about why across the next coming minutes.
- We'll start with the newly active RCPP agreement in Tennessee, and that's a title Ridges to Rivers. That's protecting the Cumberland Plateau and the Sequatchie Valley for Aquatic Resources management. 2753 is just the project number that's been assigned to it, but this RCPP project has been included in a few programs updates throughout the fiscal year, but one of the points that we've been emphasizing and wanting to discuss is the actual RCPP process with this being a newer program in the state, just at a high cut level from a couple of different perspectives. Those are working on RCP agreements with partners or potential partners and building those agreements and obligating landowner contracts after those agreements are in place.
- The program staff, myself, along with the incoming RCPP coordinator, had been preparing to give some area specific trainings for project areas as those proposals are accepted and these PPAs become active. This project Ridges to rivers is in Tennessee as a result of an RCPP proposal that was submitted by this partner the Tennessee Aquarium. Their proposal was reviewed on the national level by the national RCP team and on the state level by review board put together by the RCP program manager along with the selection of the state conservationist, and this essentially led to negotiations of their program agreement.
- The PPA, programmatic partnership agreement is a binding agreement that NRCS uses to formalize a partnership between our agency and the lead partner of any RCPP project. These negotiations essentially begin after their proposals are reviewed on the national and state level, through funding opportunity or NFO process. In developing each one of these PPA's the agency along with that lead partner are essentially putting together project deliverables, we're setting expectations for our obligations, we're looking at project resource concerns which resource concerns does that partner wants to address, which counties, which areas or which parts of the state and other states who are adjacent to us, which part of those areas do they want to address those resource concerns. We're also looking at establishing project budgets, how much money or

any kind contributions does that partner or lead partner want to contribute, whether it be in cash or any kind of contributions and also how much financial assistance will be geared towards actually getting conservation of put on the ground from their project funding.

- During the PPA, funding is not obligated to a specific project or a partner rather, the PPA's are used to establish those project budgets and they also reflect NRCS budgets that are available for future obligations. NRCS uses producer contracts, individual producer contracts, supplemental agreements and other instruments to obligate funding throughout the term of the programmatic partnership agreement.
- Moving deeper into the Ridges to Rivers project, the lead partner again is the Tennessee aquarium in Chattanooga. The counties they selected to cover are mostly in Area 3 & some counties in area 4. Those are Bledsoe, Cumberland, Hamilton, Marion, Ray, and Sequatchie. The PPA for this agreement came into place September 6th, 2023, and is set to expire September 6th, 2028. There's \$10 million allocated in the budget for this project. That includes both percentages for financial assistance and technical assistance, and for this project, 70% of the 10 million will go towards financial assistance and 30% will go towards technical assistance, which will pay for staffing hours supplies and things like that. Some of the practices that the partner has elected to use and address those resource concerns are herbaceous weed treatment, residue and tillage management, conservation crop rotation, conservation cover, forest buffers and Gray stabilization structures and a few others.
- Up to this point from a financial standpoint it's a \$10 million allocated budget overall. The PPA does last across five years, so we must work carefully with the partner to make sure that we kind of evenly spread those financial assistance dollars across the length of the PPA without running out of FA or technical assistance before the agreement is over. up to this point, we have pre-approved \$402,800 for Land Management contracts. Those are applications (that will be contracts) that landowners have submitted through the agency or through the partner, and mirroring the equip program, this kind of serves as a supplement to the equip program, but a stand-alone program nonetheless. Those applications were submitted to the agency through the partner. They were ranked using the similar ranking process as we would for EQIP or CSP. They were pre-approved, and we have those dollars and we're set to have that \$402,000 obligated in the next coming weeks, so essentially out of that \$10 million agreement we're getting a good start to getting some conservation put on the ground there once those dollars are obligated.
- Earlier I talked about the program RCPP growing. There is a funding opportunity that has been announced for RCPP and it's nationwide. This opportunity is available now. The announcement is shown on grants.gov and it was announced in April and is set to be closed for final exceptions for any proposals on July the 2nd, 2024. Along with this funding opportunity, NRCS entered into an agreement with the consulting firm to assist RCPP applicants in developing their proposals. We're not set to write their proposals, but we are helping them develop them. Before that July 2nd deadline, NRCS is hosting webinars that help prepare potential applicants and partners in preparing their proposals.
- The national RCPP team is directing those applicants and those folks who are interested in becoming partners with NRCS towards the state RCPP coordinators with the intent to have some meaningful discussions to help frame their ideas for their proposals and offer help with understanding the narrative questions associated with submitting a proposal and that includes the proposal narratives, the budget narratives, again looking at which resource concerns they want to address, which areas they want to cover and exploring some of the flexibilities that RCPP has as a program. The RCPP review process starts once these proposals are received at the national headquarters or national RCPP team level. These applications or proposals will be filtered down

to each state. An application doesn't necessarily have to have their project area reside just solely within one state. NRCS Tennessee has had projects in the past with partner states or adjacent states, and one of the states involved will be a lead state, so we have had agreements through RCPP with the partner, Kentucky, Virginia and other states.

- For this announcement, Tennessee has a potential to take on a number of new partners for fiscal year 25 with an award ceiling for each individual project of 25 million and the minimum amount for each proposal is \$250,000 for those that are awarded. NRCS has entered into agreement with the consulting firm to help those RCPP applicants and that consulting firm is Metaphase, they're based out of Virginia.
- We're also working through the final stages of PPA negotiations for an additional project that will be featured on the West side of the state in the area that sits between the Mississippi and Tennessee rivers all those counties for Area 1 NRCS we're looking at potentially around \$15 million for their project. I've taken several meetings across the past few days with potential partners. So that opportunity is still open, if you have anyone out there that's interested in applying, please feel free to direct them my way and we'll work them through their proposal process.
- One last piece of news and that is we will have a new RCP program manager incoming; it's going to be Mr. Devin Ross. He currently serves as one of our very own in area 3 Tennessee. He's a soil conservationist, and he'll be joining the program staff in Nashville on May the 20th, so we look forward to him and working alongside him and continuing to grow this program RCPP.

Pamela Hoskins – Easement Program Manager - NRCS

- Good morning, everyone this is Pamela Hoskins and I am the easement program manager in Nashville at the State Office. The ACEP program is divided into 2 parts. One is the WR - general which is the wetland reserve easements which is available statewide. Our allocation for FY24 was a little over \$4 million. The second leg to our ACEP program is what we call the ALE that is our agricultural land easements. That is also available statewide. We had an initial allocation of \$600,000, but we were able to request and receive an additional, \$2,165,000.00 for a special project that we're working on. The ACEP FY24 initial sign-up period had a cut off date of November 3, 2023. Second ACEP sign-up cut off date was January 5, 2024. You can expect the cut off date for FY25 to be October 2024.
- We are currently moving forward on obligations on five of our wetland reserve easement applications, which with those five contains about 427 acres. Additionally, we have one ALE, agricultural land easement application that has been pre-approved for funding and that is in Rutherford County. That was our additional funds that we received that I discussed previously.
- I want to talk about AWMA GARC which stands for the area wide market analysis and the GARC is the geographical area rate cap. Those have been posted to the Tennessee NRCS website and if you receive a copy of these presentation slides, there is a link down below the blue highlighted link to our Tennessee website. We'll talk about the GARC map. It is used to create a basis for the purchase of conservation easements through the ACEP-WRE by placing a value per acre in different geographical areas of the state. The way that map is developed, we take that area wide market analysis which is conducted by a private certified appraiser. The appraiser gathers data from property sales over the last 12 months on properties that fit the different categories that are on the map. Once the data is collected, the appraiser summarizes the data to calculate an average value for each geographical area. Tennessee has decided to provide compensation based on 95% of that average value. Then we take that and round it down to the nearest \$50.00. We had changes to the FY2024 GARC map and it's significant changes that we've had from the last

several years. So now our GARC does include some individual praise appraisals in the market area. This change is due to the lack of comparable property sales in those market areas in which we use to develop the dollar rate per acre. The market areas that do not have a dollar rate per acre, the amount has increased considerably or the ones that do have a dollar rate have increased considerably from the past few years due to higher property sale prices in Tennessee. Just to give you a little context on that, there are eight states that border Tennessee, and four states use the dollar per acre method, and four states use individual appraisals for easement purchases, and some of these states use a combination of methods depending on the county location. We will be using a combination of the rates per acre and appraisals this year.

Sarah Smith – Conservation Program Specialist – FPAC - FSA

- I am the State office conservation specialist with the Farm Service Agency. I'm going to kind of give a quick overview and some updates of some of our programs. I'm going to start with the Conservation Reserve program. CRP is a voluntary land conservation program. The goal is to reestablish valuable land cover. This helps with wildlife resources, water quality, wildlife habitats. We have three options, we've got general, continuous, and then grasslands. All of these are a 10-to-15-year contract except for clear 30, which is 30 years. All the participants get annual rental payments for the life of the contract. Continuous CRP sign up 61 began on January 12th and it goes until July 31st. This is going to be accepting offers for any new land that producers want to put in, or any land that comes out at the end of the fiscal year or any combination of the two.
- We're doing things a little bit different this year. The 2018 farm bill is what we're working off an extended 2018 farm bill, which requires no more than 27 million acres to be able to be enrolled. We're doing this in batches so that we make sure we don't go over that limitation. We've already been through three batching periods and the next one will be June 7th. Producers have to have those offers in by June 7th and then we've got another one July 12th. July 31st is going to be the deadline for producers to offer up land into the continuous CRP. August 7th is when we have to have all of those offers to NRCS so they can do a plan and then NRCS has until September 6th to get those back to us and September 30th is the deadline for us to have those loaded in the system.
- An overview of the offers we have right now for sign up 61, as of yesterday we have 192 total offers. 43 of those are in our highly erodible land initiative, four of them are in clear 30, and I think those four are first clear 30 in the state. We have not had any clear 30 yet, so that's great. Then 120 are in our just regular continuous and then we have 25 that's in our safe acres total of about 2500 practice acres coming out of 33 counties. We've got our general sign up 62 which began March 4th and the deadline for it was March 29th. All of these contracts are going to have the October 1 start date. These are done a little bit different; these are ranked based on an EBI process based on however many points they get in and now we're just waiting on ranking for that to see who got in and who has not gotten in. Again, as of yesterday, 24 total offers for general 607 acres and that's in 10 counties.
- Then we also have CRP grasslands and right now we're waiting on a sign up to open. It was supposed to come out the end of last month, but it's been delayed a little bit, so we are just waiting on that.
- I know John is going to be on a little bit later to talk about the Tennessee Riparian Incentives program (TRIP), but I wanted to touch on it on how it relates to the Farm Service Agency. It is an alternative to CREP. TDA provides a one-time \$3000 per acre incentive to producers who sign up in our riparian buffers CP22 which is the conservation CRP continuous offer. There is a 5-acre cap per applicant. Only lands that are physically inside the Tennessee River watershed are eligible. This incentive is on top of everything that we are already paying them to install or

practice and our rental payments. We're already working on some outreach efforts for this and I've been in contact with a handful of counties that do have interested producers. We think East Tennessee is going to be where a lot of these are coming out of, so we had a training there to kind of give an overview of the process and how it needs to work so that this is run as smooth as possible.

- So, the next two programs that I'm going to talk about are the emergency Conservation program, ECP and the Emergency Forest Restoration Program, which is EFRP. Both are going to be very relevant now with all the storms that kind of came through last week. ECP helps provide emergency funding to farmers, to rehabilitate their land that was damaged by natural resources. We're going to pay cost share up to 75% or 90% if it's a limited resource or socially disadvantaged producers, this is going to help with debris removal, restoring fences, grading, and shaping if there was flooding. ERP is basically the same thing, except this is going to be on non-industrial private forest land. It still helps with the debris removal site prep, planting, if they're going to replant those trees and this is just to help restore forest health on those lands.
- We had signups from the disaster we had on December 9th 2024. We had five counties with ECP disasters and three with EFRP disasters and about 1.5 million estimated funds are needed. We expect to have a lot more coming in from these last storms that have come through.

John McClurkan – Tennessee Department of Agriculture

- I'll start my brief remarks with just talking a little bit more about TRIP. Thanks to FSA very much for having trainings on this and for promoting this valuable and we think beneficial program. The funding that we are using for these incentives or is coming from the Tennessee Valley Authority so thank you to TVA if anyone's on from TVA today, appreciate that and we're happy to partner with you.
- We are currently working with our Communications Office on a newsletter or an article that explains trip we hope to get that out to some partner outlets. We're looking at the Tennessee Forestry Association, we're considering TWRA and also the Tennessee Wildlife Federation, just to try to get this out to as many different types of landowners across the Tennessee River watershed as possible, trying to encourage or to make people aware so they can make a choice to participate.
- The other point I want to make is about our programs and the land and Water stewardship section with TDA is our agricultural Resources Conservation Fund. Right now, conservation districts have submitted proposals to us for fiscal year 2025, which begins July 1 and we have been evaluating those and making funding decisions. Unfortunately, our funding is a bit reduced from the last couple of years. Many of you all are aware that fiscal year 2022 was an all-time high for us. Our funding is tied to the real estate market and so as real estate market goes, so goes our revenue and revenues have cooled off and so we are taking steps at the department to ensure that when we're allocating funding that we are confident we'll have that much revenue coming in. We have to kind of lower the amounts we allocate to match our revenues and so we're in the process of doing all that. Hopefully, conservation districts will begin seeing their Fiscal year 2025 amendments as early as next week, so we're working this week to finish up and to get all that paperwork started for the fiscal year 2025.
- We'll also talk about contribution agreements. For NRCS benefit, we have a contribution agreement with NRCS to provide funding both state and federal funding out to conservation districts to support entry level technician positions. This year, we've received applications from 42 districts for those contribution agreements. There's a two or three, as my memory serves, are new agreements.

- Finally, I want to talk a bit about cultural resource reviews and archaeology. There is a change coming, for years & years NRCS has done cultural resource reviews for state funded projects and that is going to come to an end. We are working with the Tennessee Division of Archaeology, State Archaeologists Office that's within T deck to negotiate a memorandum of understanding about how we will proceed as of October 1st of 2024. NRCS has agreed to keep performing the cultural resources reviews up until the end of this current federal fiscal year, which everybody knows is September 30th. That gives us a little bit of time to negotiate these agreements going forward and I want to thank Linda Ortiz and Chris Nelson for helping work us work through this.

Katie Miesse –Conservation Agronomist Manager

- First off, thank you guys for having me today, a little bit about myself, I'm a conservation agronomist manager for Agri Center International in Memphis, TN. I'm also the state technical assistant lead for grant, called farmers for Soil Health, which is what I'm going to talk to you about today. A little bit about the Agri center, we're a Memphis based nonprofit. We're also the world's largest urban farm. The Agri Centers mission is to advance the knowledge and the understanding of agriculture. We have about a total of 1000 acres out there located right in the city of Memphis. We also happen to be the US's largest agritourism destination, we get about 1 1/2 million visitors each year. We are also home to the North American headquarters of Ducks Unlimited, Helen Agra Enterprises has got their product development group out there. BASF has got a cotton and soybean breeding facility and then case has also got a training facility out there.
- Out of those thousand acres, about 600 are dedicated to research and half of those are irrigated. It's a great place to have a field day or a tour. We also have an Expo Center event venue, so we host things like boats RV shows, spring and fall markets, things like that. We've got a farmers' market and RV park. We're proud of our newly renovated theater so we can have things like musical guests or corporate trainings, things like that, but also our innovation district. So, we want this to be a spot for leaders in AG tech space to be able to come and we want it to be a collaborative campus where really companies can come up with innovative AG solutions.
- So, about the grant, Farmers for Soil Health is a program that's created by farmers. We're committed to enhancing soil health practices like planning cover crops, basically to improve environmental reasons and the profitability of farmers. We're a collaboration between the soy checkoff, the port checkoff, and the National Corn Growers Association. We're also in partnership with state commodity groups like Tennessee Soybean Promotion Board and then also conservation groups. We just started in our second year, but we're aiming to double cover crop acres and trying to reach 30 million by 2030.
- There are 20 states total that are participating in the program. Initially the focus of the grant was on farmers with corn and soybean acres, but we've asked them to amend this. For Tennessee relevant row crops, we've asked them to add things like cotton, rice, dry edible beans, tobacco, we're also currently working on sweet potatoes.
- Benefits and incentives, we offer financial incentives basically for farmers to plant cover crops. this is supported by the USDA's Partnership for Climate Smart commodities, and we also offer Technical Support to help farmers with their transitions. Also, a participant gets access to a marketplace that's currently in development. The purpose of the marketplace is to connect farmers with supply chain partners that are interested in supporting sustainable farming practices. then, of course, the real benefit cover crops are the practices themselves, things like erosion control, improve soil health, and minimizing compaction.

- So, there's two different types of payments transition incentive payments or what we call tip payments, that's for planting new cover crop acres that pays \$50.00 an acre, which is spread over three years, the first year they get \$25.00 an acre, the second year they get \$15.00 an acre the third they get \$10.00 an acre. Then we've also got signing incentive payments or sip payments, and that's for acres previously planted with cover crops and that pays \$2.00 an acre. as far as guidelines are concerned, one of the requirements that enrollees have to follow are the NRCS cover crop standards for that particular state. Enrollment itself is simple. When they initially enroll, all that they need is their farm, track, and field number. At some point they are required to upload copy of their subsidiary print, their FSA maps, 156 EZ for those enrolled fields and then also their W9.
- The program does have some flexibility; they can enroll either before or after they plant their cover crops. For example, the cutoff date for cover crops that were planted last fall wasn't actually until March 15th of this year, and then so the cutoff date for fall 2024 planted cover crops actually won't be until February 28th of next year. Enrollment is continuous though, if a farmer wanted to enroll today, they certainly could. As far as verification goes, they do that through remote satellite imaging. We have been told that there will be a handful of participants that'll be randomly selected for further field level verification.
- So, just to wrap up, it's a really unique program, enrollment is simple, it was created by farmers for farmers and we're trying to assist again with the cost of cover crops and assist with that learning curve. At the end of the day the overall goal is to improve the environment and the profitability of farmers.

Brad Miller- TWA private Lance Program Coordinator

- I'm the TWA private Lance program coordinator and I'm joined here with Dustin Boles, US fish & Wildlife service state coordinator of the partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. We are the Co-chairs of the Wildlife subcommittee. The Wildlife subcommittee met on February 13th and we have a couple of items to report on and the first item it ties in very well with what Katie was just talking about, Doctor David Mueller from UT Knoxville gave report during that meeting about USDA funded research project and it was a Masters project that was conducted in spring of 21 and 22 by Brittany Panos. It was titled avian use of agricultural cover crop fields during winter migration stopover and the breeding season in Tennessee.
- So why the interest in this project from NRCS, well EQIP as Katie mentioned commonly uses cover crop conservation practice 340 and we have seen steep bird decline since 1970, particularly in those birds that you've grasslands or early vegetation communities. The project looked at 70 study sites with cover crops and had several about a dozen control sites that did not use cover crops and those sites were all located in Robertson Coffee, Crockett, Lauderdale and Dyer County. So, the findings were our current crop termination dates can be detrimental to early ground nesting birds. The mean termination date was April 20th to the 30th, but they found that nesting could initiate as early as April 10th. Based on the large number of acres that are enrolled in this practice and the fact that it could be detrimental to these ground nesting birds, and we've seen declines in birds, the recommendation was to move those termination dates up about 2 weeks earlier to April 1st or so before nesting activities begin. Now again, that's largely dependent on landowner objectives and ability to get in the field and field conditions and that sort of thing, but we might be able to provide incentives for those farms that could terminate those cover crops earlier.
- The second item, Brittany buyers from Quail Forever and Toby Sharp, NRCS Area 3 led a discussion titled revising and enhancing Conservation Practice Code 643 restoration of rare or

declining communities. Rare or declining communities can be things like glades or Woodlands or prairies or savannahs. Our current EQIP practice scenarios for Tennessee or conservation practice 643 are only for monitoring. There are no actual habitat improvement scenarios, so the recommendation is to update our current list and adopt some of the existing practice scenarios from other regions and a few examples of those practice scenarios from other regions would be, slated restoration savanna or Prairie restoration, woodland restoration, high species richness on cropland, flash grazing through bog turtle habitat restoration, and a few others. So essentially it would just be updating our existing list with what some other states are currently using. So that's the two items and that's the report from the Wildlife subcommittee.

Grace Lutz – Acting State Conservationist NRCS

Closing Remarks

- I just want to say thank you to everybody today for a great meeting. Thank you to all the presenters and if I could ask for the presenters who had PowerPoint slides, if they would send those to Roger Daniels. He's our public affairs specialist here. We're going to post those on our website, our Tennessee website, with the official meeting minutes. If there are no more questions, comments, or suggestions then we will adjourn. Our next meeting is scheduled for August 13th, 2024, and I would like to share with you all that we we're looking at scheduling these future meetings in person in the near future. We've heard from several of you all and in various other meetings that we've attended that these the State Technical Committee meetings are more desirable for better interaction. Thank you, everyone.