

# STAC Meeting Minutes

May 1, 2025

Virtual Meeting

Meeting Opened at: 9:30 AM

**Introduction:** Nick Vira, NRCS State Partnership Liaison

**Attendance:** 44 Virtual Attendees: Roylene Comes At Night, NRCS; Nick Vira, NRCS; Robert Evans, NRCS; Angie Reseland, WDFW; Heather Wendt, WACD; Jennifer Boie, Palouse CD; Linda Lyshall, Snohomish CD; Mary Root, USFWS, Mike Baden, WSCC; Cameron Stoflet, Spokane Tribe; Kelsey Ketcheson, DNR; Randal Chipman, Northwest Horticultural Council; Lee Hemmer, Foster Creek CD; Rebecca Rollins, Quinault Indian Nation; Levi Keesecker, SCC; Elsa Bowen, Lincoln County CD; Andrea Cox WAWG, Sara Cossio, FSA; Kevin Davis, NRCS; Michael Crowder, Ducks Unlimited; Chelsea Cannard, WDOH; Chris Clemems, NRCS; Robert Compton, Northwest Region, Bureau of Indian Affairs; Dan Calvert, Joint Basin McCord Landscape Program; Carlie Elliot, NRCS; Eric Nelson, NRCS; Dani Gelardi, WSDA; Dennis Koong, NASS; Jeremy Nelson, FSA; Randall Chipman, NCT STAC Rep. & Tree Fruit Grower; Max Ross, NRCS; Laura Starr, NRCS; Kate Delavan, SCC; Nicole Berg, WAWG; Lynelle Knehans, NRCS; Kyrre Flege, AGR; Eric Nelson; Carlee Elliott, NRCS; Kevin Davis, NRCS; Jesse Brunner, Fifth Gen Farms; Cara Hulce, Adams CD; James Johnson; Ben Thiel, RMA; Aubrie Hoxie, NRCS

**Opening Remarks:** Roylene Comes At Night, NRCS State Conservationist

- 29 employees participated in the Deferred Retirement Program. We are trying our best to strategize and make sure that offices with high workload have coverage.
- Staff will be at the 2019 level, which was 165; we are currently at 141. We have a large hole to fill to get to the 2019 numbers.
- Staff is working extremely hard on contracting. 1700 applications have been reviewed for eligibility and ranking criteria. We are at 51% of the obligation for Farm Bill Funding.
- Continue to focus on efficiencies. Working with FSA on joint Fact Sheets.
- The agency has announced a new Chief, Aubrey Bettencourt, the first female Chief of NRCS. She comes from California and has a farming background.
- Colton Buckley is the NRCS Chief of Staff for the Chief and has a very strong ag background.
- Focus on Farmer first, so that the funding is going to producers.
- NRCS has been meeting with producers and are exploring new conservation practices.
- You are going to hear today about some new interim practices. We will continue to draft interim standards.
- NRCS WA has answered numerous data calls from National. We did have 3 locations slated for lease cancellations. Those leases are being transferred to NRCS to keep the offices in Dayton, Puyallup, and Renton open.
- Partnership agreement payments and IRA funds are being disbursed.

- \$62 million in IRA money may be back on the table. This would bring the total to \$220 million, which would need to be obligated by September.

**Partnership Update:** Nick Vira, NRCS Partnership Liaison

#### NWQI presentation

- The purpose of NWQI is to work with producers to implement voluntary conservation practices in an area-wide effort by incorporating multi-year implementation plans in high-priority areas based on the 12-digit HUC Watersheds.
- The goal of the program is to address water quality in surface waters, primarily looking at sediment, pathogens, and nutrients.
- NWQI partners include local work groups, tribes, conservation districts, Washington's Department of Ecology, and the Environmental Protection Agency.
- Partner roles:
  - Tribes & Local Work Groups - Identify Watersheds for NWQI Consideration
  - Washington Department of Ecology - Consults/Concurs on Watershed Selections and Removal
  - Tribes, Conservation Districts, & Others - Serve as Watershed Champions, Develop Planning Phase/Watershed Inventory, Assist NRCS with Implementation, monitoring, outreach, etc.
- A history of NWQI in Washington:
  - 2011: NWQI development began in Whatcom County Watersheds
  - Wiser Lake – Nooksack River (2012-2024)
  - Tenmile Creek (2012-2024)
  - Fish trap Creek (2012-2023)
  - Spring Creek Union Flats – Whitman County (2023-2026)
  - Mill Creek – Walla Walla County (2023-present)
  - Crab Creek – Grant County (2024-present)
- Spring Creek/Union Flats – expected removal after 2026
- Working with partners for new watershed identification for 2027
- Identify partners to develop “planning phase assessments” for new watersheds
- Primarily surface water, but it can include groundwater as well.

#### Source Water Protection

- Overview of priority source water area. Looking at public drinking water sources. We agreed to maintain the basic priority areas for the duration of the Farm Bill. Waiting on the new Farm Bill to determine if the program will still exist. Areas are identified at the 12-digit HUC Watershed level. Provides increased payment rates in the priority boundary for water quality/quantity practices, including programs except for CRP. In 2023, areas in Yakima County were added, and portions in Grant, Franklin, and Benton Counties were reduced.

**Action Item:** Send Nick Vira comments by May 15<sup>th</sup>

**Watersmart Program Update:** NRCS Carlee Elliott, Acting ASTC for Programs

- NRCS's EQIP Watersmart Initiative (WSI) is a collaboration with the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) Watersmart (<https://www.usbr.gov/watersmart/>) to coordinate investments in priority areas for improving water conservation and drought resilience. BOR makes their Watersmart programs available across the Western US to help states, tribes, and local entities plan for and implement projects that increase water supply by providing funds to modernize existing infrastructure and otherwise build drought resilience.
- NRCS uses EQIP WSI funds to complement BOR Watersmart-funded projects by helping eligible farmers and ranchers make improvements that align with the paired BOR Watersmart project.
- Eligible farmers and ranchers with operations in a selected EQIP WSI priority area will be automatically ranked in the EQIP-WSI targeted fund pool when they apply for EQIP funding.
- We are unsure of what the funding level will be this next round, but we wanted people to start thinking about projects.
- Carlee reviewed the requirements of a proposal packet.
- Currently offered in areas of Kittitas, Grant and Franklin, and Okanogan.
- FY26 areas covered by this program include – Sunnyside Valley Irrigation District and the Odessa Area.
- Contact your local District Conservationist if you are in an FY26 area. You can use last year's application as a template. FY27 proposals should come out in March of 2026.

**Ecological Sciences Update:** Robert Evans, NRCS State Resource Conservationist

- Practice Updates – NRCS practices are reviewed on a five-year basis, once approved by National, states have a year to adopt them. States can be more stringent, but not less. There is a public comment period during this process. You can sign up for these public comment periods by going to the Federal Register and subscribing. Find: National Handbook of Conservation Practices and subscribe for the alert.
- Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) – There is a new SharePoint-based system. NRCS is still working through the bugs. The new FOTG Content Manager is Josh Madison. SharePoint is not accepting new 800 codes (new interim practices). There will be a temporary repository in Section 1 FOTG.
- National Handbook – Notices 176 & 177. We do not anticipate that Washington will add additional language.
- Numerous practice standards, implementation requirements, and guidance documents are being finalized.
- There are new practice standards for Irrigation Pipeline, Spring Standard, and Water Well.
- Prescribed Burning Training Information:



<https://events.gcc.teams.microsoft.com/event/1cb50099-8ad4-4c3e-8772-979c92782022@ed5b36e7-01ee-4ebc-867e-e03cfa0d4697>

**Conservation Harvest Management:** Kevin Davis, NRCS

- Harvest or management techniques that optimize the amount, orientation, and distribution of plant residue left standing or lying on the ground

- Harvest or management techniques that optimize the amount, orientation, and distribution of plant residue left standing or lying on the ground.
- On cropland, leave residue standing through periods of precipitation and snowfall. Minimum crop stubble height during winter months will be:
  - 10” or 80% of the plant stalk height for crops with row spacing of less than 15”
  - 15” or 80% of the plant stalk height for crops with row spacing of 15” or greater
  - These heights shall be present over at least 80% of the field.
- Considerations are goals or recommendations for being more successful, which include:
  - Planting success is usually completed with a single disc or double disc drill.
  - 10-degree seeding offset from the previous crop will assist in reducing hair pinning.
  - Leaving stubble vertical reduces instances of hair pinning.
- Benefits of Conservation Harvest Management:
  - Increased non-fragile residue provides Soil Cover.
  - Decrease soil disturbance
  - Increasing organic matter increases biodiversity.
- An interim conservation practice standard has a 3-year life span, at which time it is either requested to become a practice or it does not become a practice. Special circumstances could extend to 5 years.
- Currently two potential directions.
  - Become a conservation practice under Soil Health.
  - Covered under additional criteria/considerations to “Increase plant available moisture” in our residue management practices.
    - Would probably require a conservation practice update for Residue Management Reduced till.
- Jesse Brunner, Fifth Gen Farms
  - Two-year rotation of fallow-seeded crops, stripper header since 2014.
  - 1/3 more acres per hour, residue distribution is better, and the erosion reduction is significant.

**Soil Survey Project Proposal – Central Columbia Basin Andic Properties Investigation:** Max Ross, NRCS

- NRCS WA has conducted an assessment of Washington State’s soil survey.
- Looked at the age of surveys and usage based on contracts issued.
- The soil surveys identified as high priorities are in the central and southeast areas of the state, specifically Adams County.
- Adams Co. Soil Survey was published in 1967
  - Significant changes have occurred such as the eruption of Mt. St. Helens in 1980
  - 2-5 inches of ash deposited
  - Concerns about the reliability of the soil survey data, and ash was not accounted for
- Significance of Andic Soil Properties
  - Unique mineralogy – Allophane, imogolite, ferrihydrite
  - High water holding capacity
  - Low bulk density
  - High susceptibility to erosion and compaction

- Low available phosphorus
- High organic matter retention
- Survey Options:
  - Comprehensive update of soil survey for Central Columbia Basin – 5 years
  - Dynamic Soil Properties (DSP) Evaluation Project
  - Take no action due to limited resources
- Staff recommend Option 2.

**Action Item:** Send Nick Vira comments by May 9th

**NRCS Soil Health Update:** Laura Starr, NRCS Regional Soil Health Specialist

- Changes to the Soil Health Division: Lost 5 out of 10 Regional Health Specialists, and our team leader, Joe Williams, took the Deferred Retirement Program.
- Division had rolled out several different training courses, based on a tiered structure.
- Trainings have been cancelled, but all of the materials will be made available.
- Rolled out CPS 336 Soil Carbon Management Practice, ICPS 825 – Culturally Significant Plantings for Soil Health, and ICPS 809 – Conservation Harvest Management.
- Last year, they purchased 4 demonstration trailers; the one in the west is in Pendleton, Oregon. It will be moving to Washington State. There will be a tech note on how to use the trailer.
- Created rangeland in field soil health assessment, forestland in field soil health assessment, revised cropland in field soil health assessment, soil carbon amendment calculator and conversion tool, soil health assessment protocol, and evaluation tools.
- Not an NRCS tool, but similar to the SHAPE tool is – WaSHI State of the Soils.
- They have also been developing several IT Projects, including a soil health scorecard and a predictive soil health economics calculator.

**Partner Update, Farm Service Agency:** Jeremy Nelson, Acting FSA Director

- ARC/PLC – Just concluded the sign-up for these programs. There are only 17 commodities for which you can hold base acres. ARC is based on yield and price. Payments for this program are always a year behind.
- MASC Program – for specialty crops, like fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, tree nuts, etc. The base for this program is in Yakima, Whitman, Chelan, and Grant Counties to name a few. To date, 3,051 applications have been filed. The payments disbursed to date are almost \$60 million. A second round of funding has just been announced.
- ECAP – 5,524 applications statewide, primarily targeting the dryland commodities. \$57 million has been paid out since mid-March. Payments are based on what was planted in 2024. The deadline for this program is August 15<sup>th</sup>.
- CRP – No announcement to date on a CRP signup. During the 2026 calendar year, there will be a significant number of acres expiring.
- Acreage Reporting – almost 8 million acres have been reported to date. On average 10 million acres are reported annually.
- Current hiring freeze. They are waiting on the appointment of a new State Executive Director, and they are gearing up for County Committee elections.

**Partner Update, National Agricultural Statistics Service:** Dennis Koong, NASS Regional Director

- Dennis oversees the Northwest and Pacific Regions.
- NASS has lost about half of its employees, and they are under travel restrictions.
- They are not eliminating programs; in fact, they are adding programs that were discontinued a couple of years ago.
- NASS is working hard to create efficiencies and reduce redundancies across all of its operations.

**Partner Update, Risk Management Agency:** Ben Thiel, RMA Regional Director

- RMA regulates and supervises the Federal Crop Insurance program. There are 10 regional offices in the US. There are three divisions: Product Management, Insurance Services, and Compliance.
- RMA previously had 400 employees, and they are now at 350.
- RMA covers production risk and price, and market risk.
- If crop insurance did not exist through the government, it would be too expensive and otherwise may not exist. Crop Insurance reduces disaster insurance.
- Crop Insurance is sold and serviced through private insurance companies, premiums are set by RMA, so agents compete on service.
- There are different forms of crop insurance:
  - APH – Actual Production Cost (yield protection)
  - Revenue Protection
  - PRF (Pasture/Rangeland/Forage Rainfall Index) – You are insuring a portion of rangeland for a rainfall index. It is a form of disaster insurance.
- Single Peril – insurance companies, on their own, will insure for fire only or hail only.
- Multi Peril – Natural causes of loss (fire, wildlife, earthquake, volcano, failure of irrigation infrastructure).
- Crop Insurance has an open enrollment window just like health insurance.

**Closing Remarks:** Roylene Comes At Night, NRCS WA. State Conservationist

- Roylene thanked everyone for attending and for providing input to NRCS.

Meeting Closed at: 12:51 PM