Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

New Jersey State Office
200 Clocktower Drive
Suite 101
Hamilton Square, NJ 08690

Meeting Date: Wednesday, December 11, 2024
Meeting Location: Microsoft TEAMS

Evan Madlinger opened the meeting at 9:05 am. He welcomed everyone, thanked both employees and partners for their participation in the State Technical Committee, and those in attendance gave their name, position, and items each employee is looking forward to. Those present included:

Adam DeWolfe	Diane Kottas	Kasey Cummings	Rachel Deflumeri
Aishwarya Mukund	Don Donnelly	Katelyn Colon	Rafael Rivera Lugo
Anthony Bevacqua	Edwin Muniz	Kathy Hale	Rajani
Arelys Ortiz	Elizabeth McShane	Kristin Adams	Riley Blankenship
Barbara Spinweber	Eric Vanbenschoten	Lara Periard	Robert Nyman
Bea Sabouathone	Erica Rossetti	Laura Tessieri	Robert Pinedo
Benjamin Langey	Evan Madlinger	Liz Thompson	Ruben Perez
Brian Cowden	Gail Bartok	Lyla Kaul	Sandra Howland
Bridger Welch	Hilary Trotman Lane	Margaret Rivera	Sharon Petzinger
Brittany Welch	Hunter Ross	Maryann Tancredi	Stephanie Murphy
Bruce Eklund	Jacob Bailey	Michael Kent	Sylvia Kovacs
Cali Alexander	Jennifer McCulloch	Michelle Pedano	Tairi Melchiorre
Chris Miller	Jill Ott	Mike Bonham	Tara Walker
Chrisitan Bench	Jina Vandi	Mitchell Mickley	Tina Notas
Christine Raabe	Joseph Lomax	Morgan Devine	Trish Long
Craig Chianese	Julie Hawkins	Nicole Ciccaglione	Virginia Lamb
David Macaskill	Kaitlin Farbotnik	Nicole Miller	Zachary Nixon
Devin Cornia	Kara Hasko	Qiu Zeyuan	

9:49 AM **Opening Comments – Julie Hawkins, NRCS**
Julie welcomed all in attendance and began her opening with The Farm Bill. Last year's federal appropriations bill from Congress extended the '18 Farm Bill by one year, which has expired. Prior to last year's extension, the Inflation Reduction Act gave us the statutory and funding authorization for NRCS's four major programs through fiscal year 2031; This allows NRCS to use both normal funding from the Commodity Credit Corporation for programs as well as appropriations from the Inflation Reduction Act.

NRCS has a request for information on climate-smart conservation practices which is open right now, published in September, and open through December 23rd. NRCS is asking the public for input on how their conservation practice standards may be improved as supported by peer-reviewed scientific literature. Specifically, NRCS is asking for public input on improvements that can be made to our standards for maximizing climate change mitigation as well as adaptation benefits, which is to support building resilience to climate change.

A special thanks to the districts who have already announced and committed to their local work group meetings; the local work groups serve as the official subcommittees of the State Technical Committee. The efforts, work, and recommendations to consider technical assistance and financial assistance programs are significant. Additional thanks to Evan and the team for preparing this meeting; plenty of updates and agenda topics to share as well as opportunities on the horizon. Julie also thanked the partners (Cape Atlantic District, NJ Department of Agriculture, Duck's Unlimited, Farm Service Agency, and Rural Development) for their time and presentations. Final thanks go out to the State Technical Committee for their time invested in NRCS activities and the time spent engaging, providing advice, and recommendations.

9:54 AM **June Meeting Minutes Review – Evan Madlinger, NRCS and Tara Walker, NRCS**

Tara presented the June State Technical Committee (STC) Minutes. Previous STC Minutes can be found on the NRCS website: https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/conservation-state/new%20jersey/technical-committee. If there are any updates that are needed, please reach out to Evan Madlinger (evan.madlinger@usda.gov) and Tara Walker (tara.walker@usda.gov).

9:56 AM **FY2024 Program Recap – Gail Bartok, NRCS**

Gail Bartok started her presentation with the fiscal year 2024 wrap-up and easements. The Wetland Reserve Easement program was allocated $690,000. NRCS entered into 1 new acquisition agreement with an associated restoration plan for a total of $265,000 covering 30 acres; for the existing acquisition parcels, NRCS made payments of $40,443 for restoration practices, repairs, and maintenance. Additionally, NRCS obligated $160,167 to new restoration (most likely on parcels that NRCS has already acquired that need maintenance, repair on things that NRCS monitors, or need more restoration-type activity).

In the past, NRCS-NJ has worked on Hurricane Ida buyout easements. They had 2 applications: one from the town of Woodbridge (which will not be moving forward in the process) and one from the town of Cranford. NRCS has been in contact with the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and will no longer hold the easement for Cranford; NJ DEP Blue Acres is now the main partner in that acquisition. There are 6 homes/properties impacted for a total of 3.2 million dollars. If the 3.2 million dollars doesn't cover the people who are interested in the buyout program, NRCS is going to ask National Headquarters (NHQ) for more funds to acquire those 6 properties.

Next, Gail went over the FY24 obligations with breakdowns. The Agricultural Management Assistance Program (AMA) obligated $509,000 in financial assistance with 22 contracts, the Conservation Stewardship Program (CStP) both regular and IRA funds obligated $1,860,854 in financial assistance with 69 contracts, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) both regular and IRA funds obligated $26,034,780 in financial assistance with 470 contracts.

The AMA fund pool included cropland with $22,500 in financial assistance with 2 contracts, high tunnels with $217,000 with 8 contracts, and RMA-high tunnels with $269,500 with 12 contracts.

The CStP fund pool included Agriculture Lands – General with $133,435 in financial assistance with 6 contracts, Agriculture Lands – Beginning Farmer with $194,342 and 7 contracts, Agriculture Lands – Socially Disadvantaged with $40,000 and 2 contracts, Agriculture Lands – Organic with $86,508 and 4 contracts, Non-Industrial Private Forestland – General with $454,665 and 14 contracts, and Non-Industrial Private Forestland – Beginning Farmer with $222,092 and 9 contracts. Overall, NRCS had 42 contracts and spent the allocation of 1.1 million in the Conservation Stewardship Program.

For IRA – CSP applications, a total of 27 contracts spent the entire allocation with Agriculture Lands – General spending $412,301 on 13 contracts and Non-Industrial Private Forestlands – General spending $317,511 on 14 contracts.

For EQIP, non-IRA, obligations totaled $14,342,410 on Conservation Activity Plans (CAPS) which included Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP)/Nutrient Management Plan (NMP)/Forestry Management Plan

(FMP), and others for $688,759 in 159 contracts, New Jersey Pine Barrens Joint Chief Landscape Initiative for $166,306 and 1 contract, Organic Transition Initiative for $35,253 for 1 contract, and Organic with $293,200 and 4 contracts.

Under the regular Farm Bill, additional EQIP programs under the National Initiative that received funding include Energy for $86,150 with 3 contracts, Golden-Winged Warbler for $94,042 with 4 contracts, and the National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) Upper Salem and Upper Cohansey for $394,425 with 4 contracts. For the Golden-Winged Warbler and NWQI, NRCS spent all of the funds allocated from headquarters plus more from the general EQIP fund. Under the State Initiative, Aquaculture received $876,275 for 7 contracts, Livestock received $3,614,000 for 19 contracts, High Tunnels received $1,917,000 for 23 contracts, Irrigation received $1,600,000 for 11 contracts, Forestry/ Wildlife received $210,000 for 2 contracts, Urban received $64,000 for 5 contracts, Beginning Farmer received $631,000 for 11 contracts, and Socially Disadvantaged received $1,412,000 for 14 contracts. It is important to note that Aquaculture does count towards Livestock, which headquarters mandated that states obligate 50% of the allocation to Livestock. Headquarters also mandates NJ spend 10% of the allocation on wildlife, and 5% of the allocation to beginning farmers and socially disadvantaged. The local workgroup subaccounts were also reviewed. The North received $541,000 in financial assistance for 5 contracts while the Central received $571, In South Jersey, they try to capture any erosion control projects, agro-chemical handling facilities.000 for 4 contracts and the South received $923,000 for 9 contracts.

EQIP IRA Obligations totaled $11,692,370 and that went to the following subaccounts: IRA Soil Health with $6,859,700 for 69 contracts, IRA Tree Mortality with $4,450,100 for 74 contracts, and IRA Forestry with $382,570 for 34 contracts. For FY25, NRCS-NJ will be offering Soil Health, Tree Mortality, Irrigation, and Energy in their IRA Fund Pool.

Question from Laura - Can you share more on the local work group sub-accounts? What types of contracts are funded, and do they change yearly? Central and South have wildlife and forestry fund pools, North has a water quality fund pool and a wildlife fund pool.

Answer: There are separate fund pools for streams and irrigation. Michelle Pedano, District Conservationist of NRCS-NJ Vineland Service Center, had a comment. They try to use their local working group for practices that don't fall in any of those other funding pools. In South Jersey, they try to capture any erosion control projects and agro-chemical handling facilities. In previous years, they had forestry, wildlife, sub account, but this year everything is competing statewide. Moving forward, those priorities are going to be erosion and water quality projects that don't fall into either the Inflation Reduction Act funding or some other statewide funding pool. Nicole Ciccaglione, District Conservationist of NRCS-NJ Columbus Service Center, chimed in and said the Central is a mirror of what Michelle said for the South. Jill Ott, District Conservationist of NRCS-NJ Hackettstown Service Center, also agreed.

Question from Tina - will the tree mortality funding continue next year? What is the deadline for farmers to apply?

Answer: Signups for FY25 ended on October 18, 2024, and NRCS is offering soil health and tree mortality again. NRCS-NJ is also accelerating some of the fund pools into an ACT NOW program (accelerates the ranking process and the pre-approval process so that farmers and landowners will know of funding decisions earlier than some of the regular-style contracts).

Shifting gears, Gail presented her slide for Top 10 By Planned Amount and Top 10 By Dollar Amount. Mostly, these practices in the Top 10 for both categories do not change. However, the number 2 under the dollar column was a big dollar item and for FY24 was applied for IRA tree mortality; Obstruction removal is a supporting practice to Tree/Shrub Establishment as the main goal under IRA is that tree and shrub establishment as a climate-smart practice.

Top Ten By Planned Amount for 2024	Top Ten By Dollar for 2024
1. Cover Crop	1. Cover Crop
2. Residue and Tillage Management	2. Obstruction Removal (supporting)
3. High Tunnel	3. Waste Storage Facility
4. Heavy Use Area Protection	4. High Tunnel
5. Tree/Shrub Establishment	5. Sprinkler System
6. Fence	6. Irrigation Pipeline
7. Livestock Pipeline	7. Residue and Tillage Management
8. Irrigation Pipeline	8. Fence
9. Tree/Shrub Establishment	9. Roof and Covers
10. Obstruction Removal (supporting)	10. Tree/Shrub Establishment

FY25, WRE allocations are close to 1 million dollars in Farm Bill funds. The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), which contains Wetland Reserve Easements and Agricultural Land Easements (farmland preservation-type easements under the IRA program), was allocated 1.8 million dollars. This money can be spent on either Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) or WRE. There is a sign-up open until December 20 for ACEP; news releases have been sent to the group on the signup.

The AMA and EQIP signup closed October 25; CPS signup will go through March 14, 2025. Allocations for AMA includes $250,000 to cover 59 applications, CStP allocations include $2,050,000 (contract number to be determined after March 14), and EQIP allocations include $24,085,263 to cover 724 contracts. In FY25, NRCS-NJ will also be offering the Conservation Innovation Grant, which can use up to 5% of EQIP funds (1.2 million).

10:18 AM RCPP Program Update – Brittany Welch, NRCS

Brittany is new to the RCPP position and began her presentation with an overview. First, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) is often mistaken as a grant; RCPP is a partner-driven approach to conservation that funds solutions to natural resource challenges on agricultural land. Partners must do the following: propose a project (which includes defining the project area and targeted conservation benefits), collaborate with NRCS on project delivery (working with the field offices for contracts or working with the subject matter experts; roles and responsibilities vary based on project type), delivering contributions through either financial assistance and/or technical assistance (financial assistance dollars can come through Land Management contracts and easements), and report on contributions and project outcomes (the lead partner should be bringing in additional contributions not as a match as the partner is bringing more value to the project outside of what NRCS can offer). In addition to what the partners must do, there are a few items they may do. Lead partners may earn RCPP technical assistance for providing eligible tasks to support the financial assistance delivery or for implementing those financial assistance activities that fit in the sales requirements.

Eligible entities for RCPP lead partner include: an agricultural or silvicultural producer association or other group of producers, state or unit of local government including a conservation district, a Native American Tribe, farmer cooperatives, an institution of higher education, a water district/irrigation district/rural water district or association/ or other organizations with specific water delivery authority to producers on agricultural land, municipal water or wastewater treating facilities, an organization or entity with an established history of working

cooperatively with producers on agricultural land (as determined by the Secretary) to address local conservation priorities related to agricultural production/wildlife habitat development/NIPF management or critical watershed-scale soil erosion, water quality, sediment reduction, or other natural resource concerns, and an eligible entity identified by NRCS pursuant to 7 CFR, Part 1468.

Eligible financial assistance activities are similar to NRCS's existing programs; conservation implementation is based on the standards and specifications. One flexibility to RCPP is there can be some program innovations to accommodate some change. NRCS can offer higher payment rates for some practice areas; they can also offer some waivers for eligibility criteria (such as adjusted gross income). Activity types that are eligible for financial assistance include land management (practice or enhancement based), rentals (actual cost forgone income, not an incentive), US-held easements (templated deeds), entity-held easements (templated minimum deed terms and requirements), and watershed projects (PR&G).

During FY24, NRCS has 5 existing projects that brought in 18 Land Management contracts and 1 US-held easement on 25 acres. In total, those projects had obligations of just over $670,000. Nationally, there were 323 applicants considered with only 92 projects selected for 1.5 billion dollars from The Farm Bill and IRA, with 9.68 million dollars leveraged from partners; Projects ranged from $250,000 to 25 million dollars. American Rivers was an awardee for this year, and they are the lead partner to improve aquatic habitat and restore river ecological connectivity benefitting native cold-water fish through restoring 8 miles of river and 100 acres of migratory fish habitat. Additional projects reviewed include COASTAL (Conservation Opportunities Advancing Sustainable Technologies for Aquaculture Leases). This is an aquaculture project that is delivering spat on shell to aquaculture leases, who then replenish restoration reefs throughout the coastal base of New Jersey. This project is using a new practice scenario that hasn't been used in New Jersey (with the help of Rhode Island). The hope is the practice will become an EQIP eligible project practice. Stockton University joined the project to assist in monitoring and reporting on outcomes. It is important to note that during evaluations, one thing NRCS looks at is the value the partner brings to the table above and beyond what NRCS can do.

The Salem River Bog Turtle Habitat Protection and Restoration project is another highlight. The lead partner, New Jersey Audubon, will help private landowners increase wildlife habitat and habitat suitability for the endangered Bog Turtle population in the Upper Salem Watershed by offering financial incentives to install and maintain conservation practices. The Programmatic Partnership Agreement (PPA) allows for Land Management contracts and US-held easements for forested and emergent wetlands with a restoration component; this closely mimics the WRE program but has some flexibilities within the program criteria where the landowners can be eligible for the bog turtle habitat ratio without bog turtle presence on the ground. The restoration component has a larger payment rate, 100% reimbursable for the restoration costs versus having per acre payment rates for the easement restoration piece. These producers that are interested in restoring habitat for the Bog Turtle are competing against other people wanting to do Bog Turtle restoration work in this really focused area of Southern New Jersey; that's a big benefit to the RCPP program (to get more conservation on the ground for a particular conservation purpose).

Another project NRCS is working on is the Mine Brook Gorge Twin Dam removal and floodplain restoration with the Musconetcong Watershed Association to restore habitat for cold water fishes, reduce stream temperatures, and enhance biodiversity. Another flexibility within the program allows for the lead partner to work with additional partners to contract a third-party engineering firm to help with design permitting and implementation of this large-scale dam removal dam removal. NRCS will still provide oversight and coordination, but it's allowing NRCS to get some of these larger projects to move forward that would really tie up a lot of time and resources otherwise. This project utilizes a higher payment rate for priority practices. In New Jersey, they have historically underserved rates and regular rates that equate to 75% and 90% (when NRCS went through the project negotiation for this project, the lead partner requested that 90% payment rate for the priority practices that will be implemented through this project). It is important to note that RCPP does not provide a funding cap overall per producer like in some other programs offered. However, the contracts themselves are capped.

For more information, NRCS will be holding an RCPP event. This is an opportunity to hear from current and past awardees, as well as meeting with others that may have similar projects in mind and also like-minded people that

may be a good fit to partner together towards an application. Information will be provided. Also, please visit www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/rcpp-regional-conservation-partnership-program.

10:32 AM **Local Working Group/Staffing Updates – Arelys Ortiz, NRCS**

Arelys reminded everyone that local working groups must convene before February 21, 2025, and those meetings should be advertised no later than 14 calendar days prior to the event. There are 5 local work groups that are already scheduled: Cape Atlantic, Atlantic, Ocean, Burlington, and Morris. Please reach out to Tairi Melchiorre for more information. January 21- Cape May SCD 4pm (355 Court House South Dennis Rd, Cape May Court House, New Jersey 08210), January 28- Atlantic SCD 4pm (6260 Old Harding Hwy, Mays Landing, New Jersey 08330), January 30- Ocean SCD 4pm (Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Ocean County, 1623 Whitesville Rd, Toms River, NJ 08755), February 13- Burlington SCD (1971 Jacksonville Jobstown Rd, Columbus, New Jersey 08022), and February 18- Morris SCD (37 E Springtown Rd, Long Valley, New Jersey 07853). Hunterdon District has agreed to participate in the Somerset/Union local work group.

NRCS-NJ has been staffing positions. For the Columbus Field Office, a recent graduate engineer position was advertised; recommendation made for selection. For the District Conservationist position in Freehold – the advertisement closes December 9 with certificates received (interviews taking place next week). Also vacant in the Freehold office is a pathways internship. Interviews have already been completed; recommendations will be made. In the Frenchtown office, certificates were received for the engineering position vacant, and 2 tentative job offers ware extended. In the Hackettstown Field Office, the soil conversation position was filled back in October 2024. However, there is still one position vacant through a partner agreement. For the Woodstown Field Office, NRCS filled 2 civil engineer technician positions (one through NRCS and the other through a partner agreement).

NRCS submitted a notice of funding, which is in the review process through The Office of the General Counsel (OGC). This will provide an opportunity for any partner interested in applying.

NRCS submitted review updates to the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) template. The meeting is scheduled between The Office of General Council (OGC) and the privacy officer will take place in January 2025.

10:39 AM **FY2024 and FY2025 Program Updates – Doreen Beruck, FSA**

Doreen stepped in for Sarah Lally for this presentation. Farm Service Agency (FSA) has the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). At the current time due to the farm bill, FSA can't take any new offers, but they do have contracts on the books they have been working on. Sarah has been working closely with NJ Department of Agriculture to update the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) agreement. Once updated, there will be 3 new practices being added: hardwood tree planting, field windbreak establishment, and an establishment of permanent salt tolerance vegetative cover. Once the agreement is set, FSA can resume accepting offers. Currently FSA has 194 CREP agreements on the books with an average rental rate of $164.00 an acre. Under the state program or State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement, FSA has 167.77 acres enrolled under the development of landscape scale, agricultural heritage, and habitat conservation plans. Under Grassland Habitat Restoration, FSA has 195.17 acres, and under the Raritan Piedmont Wildlife Habitat Partnership implementation, FSA has 186.3 acres. Starting with Signup59 and moving forward, FSA combined all three areas and has a total of 154.83 acres. FSA also has 12 CRP contracts under the Grasslands for 737 acres.

One thing to note – please keep CREP in mind when talking to producers about available USDA programs; CREP offers 50% reimbursable cost for practice installation with a 10% state cost sharing and 40% payment incentive.

If you are new to the agency or the State Technical Committee, the Farm Service Agency, which drives part of offers for similar programs to NRCS, offers rental payments to farmers who put their land in a conversation program; NRCS provides technical assistance on that.

10:43 AM **Resource Shop Updates – Evan Madlinger, Bea Sabouathone, and Trish Long, NRCS**

Evan started the presentation for the Resource Shop. As the State Resource Conservationist, Evan oversees the

Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG) program, funded through EQIP. This program is available to partners, universities, landowners, and even governmental agencies (like the state) can apply and the purpose is giving opportunity to innovative conservation techniques on the ground. Examples of project range from agronomics to aquaculture. States are not required to offer this program, it is optional. NJ did not offer this program in FY24. For FY25, NRCS-NJ is offering the program with 1.2 million dollars available. Jacob Bailey, NRCS-NJ Public Affairs, will be sending out an email notifying people of the availability of the grant and deadlines.

NRCS will be offering, through the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation, a notice of federal funding to the partners. Ideally, they are looking for forestry positions. There is already an agreement in place with Cape Atlantic to help the agency get forestry work on the ground. There is a lot of demand for forestry work on private lands, which depends on private consultants. Unfortunately, that pool of qualified private consultants has dwindled; the notice of federal funding should help build up the capacity for private landowners to get forest plans written and forest work implemented. There is $431,000 available for the partner proposals.

There is a new Climate-Smart Ag and Forestry National list for FY25; they update the list every year with the help of the public. For FY25, code 314 Brush Management is designed to be used to remove woody invasive vegetation in arid regions and the removed material will be left onsite (note – the practice is considered a mitigation activity only when implemented in a specified way. The practice is considered a mitigation activity only when implemented in the specified way as identified in the brief description. See associated narrative and additional planner guidance at the end of this document).

Bea was next up to present on the topic of conservation planning policy updates. Title 180 of the General Manual, Part 409 Conservation Planning Policy establishes policy for NRCS-designated conservation planners providing planning assistance to clients. It establishes the process to achieve conservation planner designation levels and specializations. The eDirectives platform, which houses the General Manual, was updated to reflect the change on August 7, 2024. The update reorganized the document into two subparts, formatting was adjusted, a new level 2 designation was created using existing training from levels 1 and 3 to bring levels 1-4 into a linear alignment, one online training course for level 1 was added, and one online training course for advanced communications was also added to the level 4. Additionally, under the previous national policy, planners were required to complete 40 CEU as part of the recertification process but that was eliminated during streamlining the recertification process. NRCS-NJ will not have the 40 CEU requirements under their supplement. The supplement has been submitted to NHQ and is under review. Once approved, the supplemental will be available on the eDirectives site.

The purpose of the NRCS-NJ supplement is to further define the certified conservation planning process and the policy for providing conservation plan assistance to planners in NJ. NRCS-NJ has also updated their training requirements and their conservation planning worksheet. For each designation level, there is a set of required national courses that a planner must take (as well as some on the job training that is part of the state-specific training). NRCS-NJ is also requiring planners to complete a Knowledge, Skills, and Ability (each designation has a proficiency level that they should be at for that particular designation). Additional changes include removal of the Job Approval Authority (JAA) requirements (previous version required the planner to get engineering job authority approval as part of the certified planner) as well as partner technical service providers now have to sign up through the NRCS TSP registry (completing specific courses and meeting the state specific requirement through said trainings).

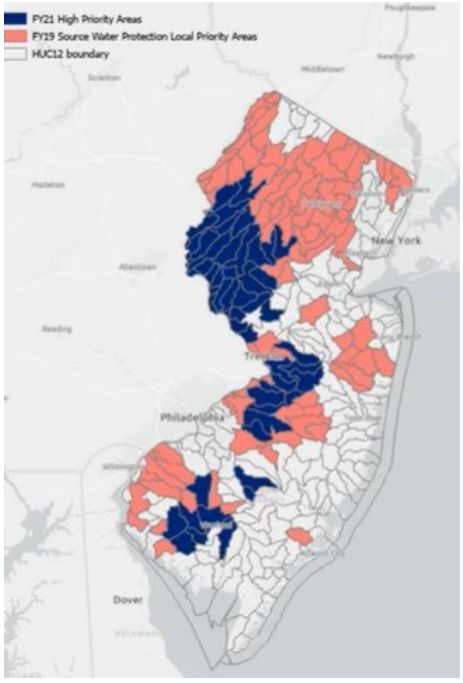
NRCS is offering training opportunities to any partner that is currently working with NRCS to become a certified planner via The Conservation Planning Course Part 2, with an estimated date of September 2025.

Trish Long presented next on spatial data analysis/decision making process for Source Water Protection Areas (SWPA). There have been a few national bulletins released over the past couple of years that provides instructions how to proceed (see 300-19-25, 300-20-37, 300-22-42, and 300-24-30 on the eDirectives site). There are 5.8 million acres in the state of NJ with 275 total HUC12s with an average HUC12 area of 22,000 acres. NRCS has the ability to prioritize HUC12 watersheds and a certain subset of practices that have water quality benefits, both

surface and groundwater. Farmers that adopt these practices within the prioritized watershed will receive an increased cost-share.

The map displayed was provided by National Headquarters giving an overview of the FY19 local priority areas, identified by the color pink. This area represents approximately 49% of the total land area of the state.

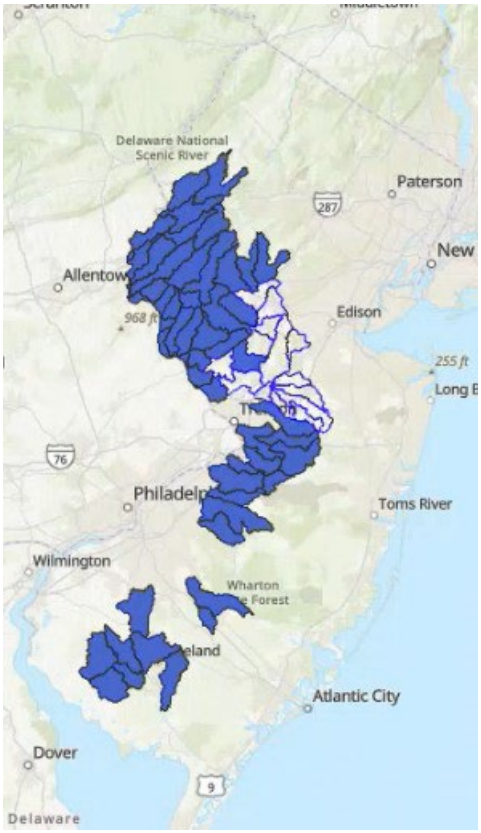
Since 2019, NRCS-NJ has sought to refine the layer every year. In FY21, they were asked to come up with a high priority area under 20% of the state's land area. The blue area represents this high priority area (19%).

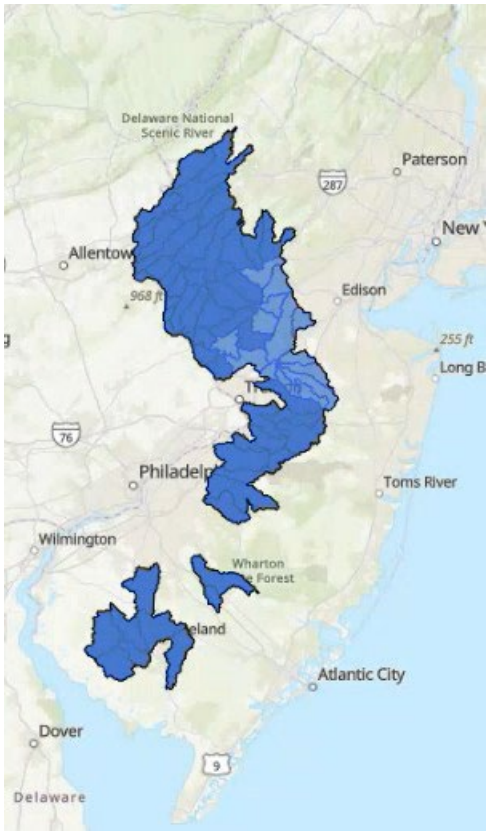


In FY22, National Headquarters released a bulletin (written policy and procedure used by NRCS employees) that assisted states in identifying the high priority areas. Additional information included risk factors to consider when selecting areas where agricultural land uses may impact source water (nutrients, sediment, pathogens, pesticides,

reported or liklihood of Harmful Algal Blooms (HAB), water system violations, size of population served by SWPA, ground water systems served by an aquifer designated as “sole source”, known areas of aquifer depletion or ground water manageent areas, and other risks that may impact source water (Karst geology, highly erodible soils, degraded habitat, livestock access to surface water, and wildfire risk).

For FY25, the source water analysis was conducted by the subcommitee (a team of employees from multiple agencies) including Ben Schwartz, Steve Domber, and Kent Barr from NJ DEP; Kathy Hale from NJ Water Supply Authority; Mike Flood, Katie Lynch, and Harper Stanfield from EPA; Mitch Mickley from NJ Water Association; Nancy Sullivan and Tracey Mehan from American Water Works Association, Christa Reeves from Musconetcong Watershed Association, Matthew Csik with American Water, and Gail Bartok, Dave Schaaf, and Trish Long from NRCS. A new resource tool from the US Forest Service was utlized called Forest to Faucets (a data explorer); this tool provided another layer of information that was used in determining the source water protection area.

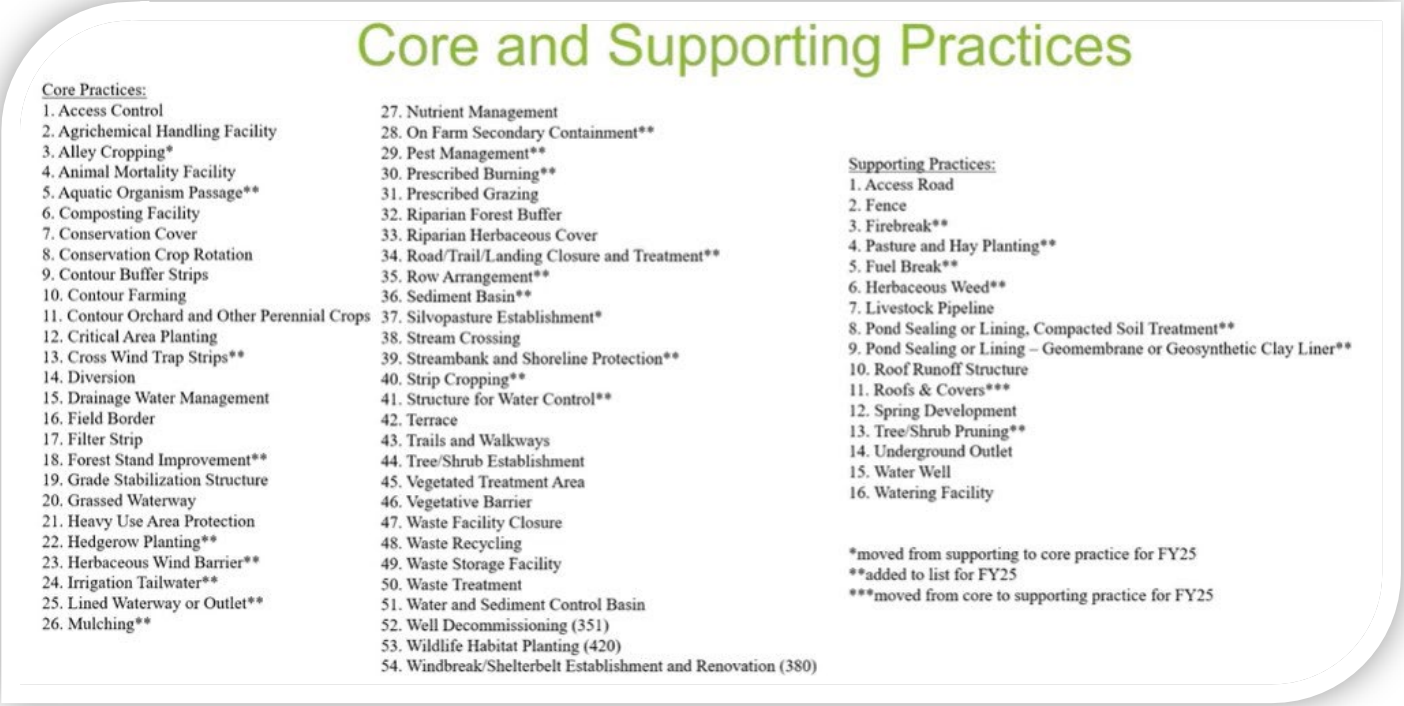




In the pictures above, the left picture depicts a map of NJ where the dark blue filled in areas represent FY23 source water high priority areas and the outlined areas in a darker blue are the watersheds that were added to the high priority area for FY25. The picture on the right depicts a map of NJ where everything outlined in black and filled in blue represents the source water high priority areas chosen for FY25. This gives a comparative look between the two years. If anyone uses Conservation Desktop (CD), the above maps can be accessed with a data layer for ranking purposes. One thing to note here is NRCS Headquarters requires the states to adhere to a 20% SWPA. However, NRCS-NJ requested a waiver to increase that percent to 21 for FY25.

NRCS Resources and Programs’ teams met to review core and supporting practices and internally revamped the list. Internally, they felt some items categorized as core should have been supporting and some supporting practices should fall into the core category. This is important information to the farmers and producers from a cost perspective. If the farmer is implementing a practice in a priority watershed, they will receive an increased cost-

share. Below is a screenshot of the practices that are on the list. You can also find more information through the NRCS Source Water Protection Fact Sheet here, as well as their National Water Quality Initiative website here.



Core and Supporting Practices

Core Practices:
1. Access Control
2. Agrichemical Handling Facility
3. Alley Cropping*
4. Animal Mortality Facility
5. Aquatic Organism Passage**
6. Composting Facility
7. Conservation Cover
8. Conservation Crop Rotation
9. Contour Buffer Strips
10. Contour Farming
11. Contour Orchard and Other Perennial Crops
12. Critical Area Planting
13. Cross Wind Trap Strips**
14. Diversion
15. Drainage Water Management
16. Field Border
17. Filter Strip
18. Forest Stand Improvement**
19. Grade Stabilization Structure
20. Grassed Waterway
21. Heavy Use Area Protection
22. Hedgerow Planting**
23. Herbaceous Wind Barrier**
24. Irrigation Tailwater**
25. Lined Waterway or Outlet**
26. Mulching**
27. Nutrient Management
28. On Farm Secondary Containment**
29. Pest Management**
30. Prescribed Burning**
31. Prescribed Grazing
32. Riparian Forest Buffer
33. Riparian Herbaceous Cover
34. Road/Trail/Landing Closure and Treatment**
35. Row Arrangement**
36. Sediment Basin**
37. Silvopasture Establishment*
38. Stream Crossing
39. Streambank and Shoreline Protection**
40. Strip Cropping**
41. Structure for Water Control**
42. Terrace
43. Trails and Walkways
44. Tree/Shrub Establishment
45. Vegetated Treatment Area
46. Vegetative Barrier
47. Waste Facility Closure
48. Waste Recycling
49. Waste Storage Facility
50. Waste Treatment
51. Water and Sediment Control Basin
52. Well Decommissioning (351)
53. Wildlife Habitat Planting (420)
54. Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment and Renovation (380)

Supporting Practices:
1. Access Road
2. Fence
3. Firebreak**
4. Pasture and Hay Planting**
5. Fuel Break**
6. Herbaceous Weed**
7. Livestock Pipeline
8. Pond Sealing or Lining, Compacted Soil Treatment**
9. Pond Sealing or Lining – Geomembrane or Geosynthetic Clay Liner**
10. Roof Runoff Structure
11. Roofs & Covers***
12. Spring Development
13. Tree/Shrub Pruning**
14. Underground Outlet
15. Water Well
16. Watering Facility

*moved from supporting to core practice for FY25
**added to list for FY25
***moved from core to supporting practice for FY25

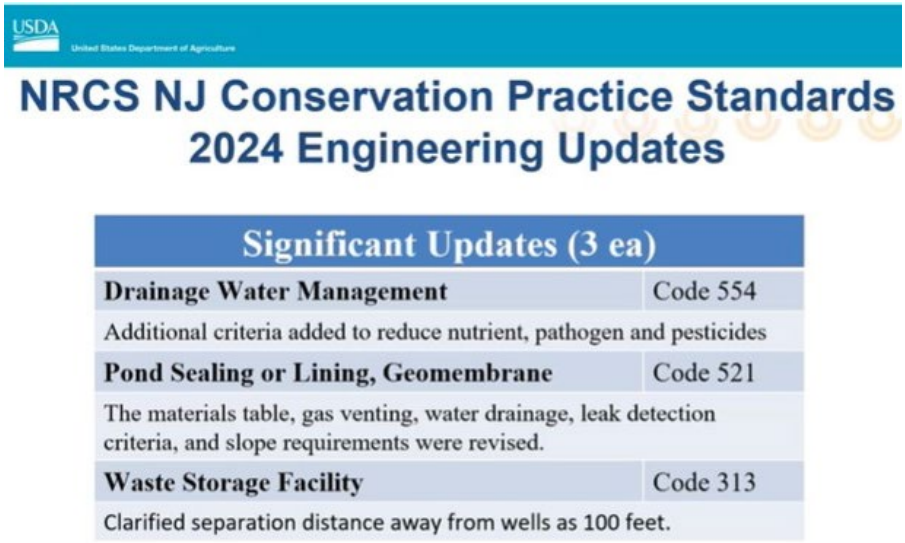
Question – is there a reason that wetland practices aren't listed or considered for source water protection? Examples include wetland enhancement and shallow water management.

Answer – For wetland enhancement or shallow water management, it may be due to the fact that NRCS-NJ isn't doing much work in those areas. However, they will look into those aspects as there are some benefits to restoration in groundwater and source water.

11:14 AM Engineering and Ecological Science Standard Updates – Hilary Trotman Lane and Kaitlin Farbotnik, NRCS

Hilary provided an overview of the standards that were updated for the year, as well as providing background on how standards and criteria are developed, reviewed, and updated to incorporate improvements in construction methods, equipment and materials, as well as findings and research and experience. The standards are reviewed and updated in response to immediate needs or on a recurring basis, often every 5 years. National NRCS discipline leads update the standards for states to adopt and then states could add or edit the standard to make the criteria more specific to their state. Changes made by the state cannot be less restrictive than the criteria the original national version. There were 14 engineering standards updated in 2024 with 11 of those having minor format changes and clarifications. No notable technical changes were made to those 11 standards being shown on the slide. The engineering standards are considered to be common practices that are used daily.

There were significant updates made to the drainage water management standard to provide more specifics about the operation of water control structures prior to spreading manure, fertilizers and other chemicals. Another significant update made was to the pond sealing or lining standard. There have been some more updates to the criteria for materials, gas venting, water drainage, leakage detection, leakage detection, and slope requirements. The final standard with significant updates was to the waste storage facility.



NRCS-NJ adopted an interim standard in FY24, Water Treatment Facility (724). An interim standard can be considered a trial standard. States have the criteria or new technology offered in the standard and provide annual reports to national headquarters about the effectiveness of the standard. New Jersey adopted this water treatment facility interim standard after hearing about concerns about E. coli and arsenic and drinking water for cattle; The standard specifies safe drinking water standards and typical components of the water treatment facility, which can include reverse osmosis and filtration devices. The service life of this practice is 10 years. This interim standard and improved standards can be found in the eFOTG, or the electronic field office technical guide.

Kaitlin Farbotnik began her presentation on the ecological sciences practice standard updates. The first practice standard reviewed was Cross Wind Trap Strips (589). NRCS-NJ doesn't use this practice often but the changes

within this practice include nutrient application information was removed from the plans and specifications section. Another change was the rewording of the purposes, conditions where practices apply, and considerations. Forest Trails and Landings (655) was also updated/revised to align with the NRCS-identified resource concerns as well as minor rewording throughout the standard to improve readability. Herbaceous Wind Barries (603) had its' purpose updated to go from "soil erosion" to "wind erosion", a requirement within the "Additional Criteria to Reduce Wind Erosion and Particulate Matter Emissions" was moved to the General Criteria section, and wording was edited in the sections of criteria, considerations, and operations & maintenance. The Soil Carbon Amendment (336) had no substantial update, but a new guidance document was completed to help determine when this practice is practical. Special thank you extended to Edwin Muniz and Stephanie Murphy from Rutgers. The Tree-Shrub Establishment (612) standard was updated with a new purpose and an additional criterion to the "Provide Livestock Shelter" section. The "Develop Renewable Energy System" purpose and criterion were removed since they do not directly address an agency-identified resource concern. One minor change includes reworking throughout the standard to improve readability.

There are some interim standards for ecological sciences that were updated. Amending Soil Properties with Lime (805) is being used for financial assistance for the first time in NJ (previously offered but not for financial assistance). Nonruminant Livestock Outdoor Management of Vegetative Cover (822) will not be offering financial assistance in FY25. Organic Management (823) had significant updates, most of which made the standard more applicable to more types of operations. Previously, this standard had limiting specifics as to which operations it would work for, however, the changes made will allow the CPS to be more useful and more accessible. The last interim standard reviewed was Wildlife Habitat Site Preparation (828). Financial assistance was built into this standard, but those scenarios submitted did not come through as of the date of this presentation.

11:30 AM **Urban Agriculture – Morgan Devine, NRCS**

Morgan began her presentation with an overview of NJ program deliveries. In fiscal year 2024, NRCS-NJ spent approximately $211,000 on urban projects through the EQIP Urban Fund Pool as well as the RCPP Small Farm Food Link Agreement Fund Pool. The EQIP fund pool had 5 applications approved for a total of $38,907 while the RCPP fund pool had 5 applications approved for $172,106. Morgan put together a slide overviewing the top practices used within the two fund pools: low tunnels, raised beds, irrigation systems, conservation cover, high tunnels and composting facilities. The average size of an urban farm is .75 of an acre and it took NRCS planners approximately 22 hours to go from application phase to contract. These projects are small, but there is a lot of nuances in these projects, and it still takes quite a bit of time.

In FY24, NRCS-NJ had a new scenario adopted, Composting Facility (317) Rotary Drum. This is a large unit which may not be typical on a lot of urban sites specifically but for some small farms it is very useful. In FY25, NRCS-NJ adopted the Rapid Composter for Composting Facility (317). The rapid composter is for garden waste only (not food waste) and is ideal for sites that do not have space for a bin system to store raw materials, in areas that might be in close proximity to buildings where raw materials and composting materials are not able to be held for long periods of curing time, and in areas where disease vectors from rodents are a problem. Next Morgan discussed Conservation Technical Assistance Community Garden Grants. FY25 will mark the 4th year NRCS-NJ is offering this CTA grant with $75,000 earmarked (floor $5,000, $20,000 ceiling). As of the date of this presentation, the notice of funding is in national review. This year the CTA grant it is focused on conservation, education, outreach, and People's Garden. Goals for the program include a focus on conservation, learning experiences, and increasing outreach to increase participation among Historically Underserved (HU) participants. Another objective of this program is to support The People's Garden Initiative at established People's Garden by implementing conservation activities. Eligible entities include city governments, county governments, independent school districts, nonprofit organizations, public and state-controlled institutions of higher education, and private institutions. Individuals and for-profit organizations are not eligible. Morgan provided a map of NJ that provided bullet points showing where the CTA

Community Garden/Urban Grants were located for FY22-24. The purple dots represent gardens established in 2022, the green dots represent gardens established in 2024, and the red dots represent gardens established in 2024.

CTA Community Garden/Urban Grants

The People's Garden Initiative is a USDA national initiative that started in 2009 with the goal of connecting gardens across the country that produce local food, practice sustainability, and bring people together in their community; it provides a network of resources and other materials. People's Gardens can take many forms, including food-producing gardens, wildlife habitat, conservation or beautification projects, or can serve as educational training space for wildlife or food production. The criteria to become a People's Garden include being a pre-existing garden, joining the People's Garden community by registering, growing the garden using sustainable practices that benefit people and wildlife, and teaches about gardening and resilient, local food systems. See www.usda.gov/peoples-garden for more information. Currently, NJ has approximately 30 registered People's Gardens. On a higher level, there is a nationally led opportunity available with 1 million dollars available in funding. The opportunity is being hosted through the USDA's Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production, in partnership with The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) 2025 Five Star and Urban Waters Restoration program. There is a grant open until January 30, 2025, available to nonprofit organizations, state government agencies, municipal governments, local governments, Tribal governments and organizations, and educational institutions. Applicant gardens do not need to be registered as People's Gardens prior to applying, but the applicant will need to sign up once funding is awarded. Projects must meet the People's Garden criteria and priority will be given to projects that educate and train local citizens, provide measurable ecological, educational, and community benefits, and supports the conservation of fish, wildlife, and habitat.

Finally, Morgan shared her "wish list" for future urban CIG, including gravity-fed irrigation systems in urban agriculture settings, nutrient/water cycling/water efficiency in Controlled Environment Agriculture (hydroponic/aquaponic) systems, and urban forestry.

11:43 AM Soils Update – Edwin Muniz and Adam DeWolfe, NRCS

Edwin started his presentation with Highly Erodible Land (HEL)/Wetland Compliance procedures and processes. The HEL Compliance Exemptions and Variances provide information and clarification about handling HEL compliance deficiencies, exemptions and variances. While this procedure was last fiscal year, the update is it is now available in the Electronic Field Technical Guide (eFOTG). Also available in the eFOTG is the NRCS-NJ Wetland

Functional Assessment and Mitigation Decision Procedures, which will provide a more consistent mitigation plan and functional assessment to customers. Another addition to the eFOTG this year is the Hydrology Indicators for the Identification of Farmed Wetlands. This is to provide procedures for the implementation of Farmed Wetlands (FW) Hydrology Indicators when the area is not a playa, pocosin, or pothole (according to the National Food Security Act). The final piece of information in the wetlands section is State Off-site Methods for Food Security Act Wetland Identification. This was submitted to the Federal Register for public comments before being published. Once published, it will be implemented in NJ. Note that this does not mean field work will stop, rather, these procedures and processes are to be used for specific instances.

The NJ Soil Science Program has been hard at work providing trainings to partners, such as the conservation districts. Requests for training are always welcomed; please reach out to Edwin Muniz. The NJ Soil Science Program has been working with Rutgers in their forest soils and carbon sequestration project. They also continue to provide technical soil services for urban agriculture as well as assisting in nationwide soil carbon sampling.

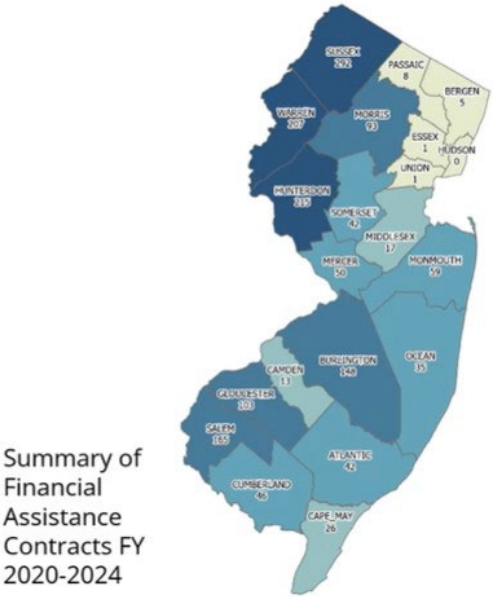
Adam DeWolfe took over the presentation and introduced himself and his teammates from the Hammonton MLRA office. One project that was significant was the Camden County Soil Survey, which involved updating the soil maps and mainly the urban portion of Camden County (including most of the area west of I-295 and had approximately 12,000 acres mapped into subsections). The subsections were originally mapped as urban land, but the NJ Soil Science Program team established 3 new urban soil series as well as correlated some areas to 3 existing urban series as part of this project. Also, part of this project was the updating or development of 30 soil map units. One example of a new series was the Barnegat series from 2023, which is mapped along the coast of NJ. The MLRA office is currently working on establishing new soil series to reflect soil conditions and include information of typical amount of carbon sequestration. Carbon stock and carbon values information is very important for a lot of uses, and that data is used by a number of partners for carbon stock accounting related to climate change and mitigation efforts.

There was a request by the Cape Atlantic Soil Conservation District to map and inventory the coastal zone areas of Cape May and Atlantic counties. This project will include mapping the subaqueous soils and tidal swamp marsh soils in those counties. For FY25, the NJ Soil Science Program has a project set up that will map Absecon, Reeds Bay's, and the adjacent salt marsh areas. They will also be setting up additional projects for FY26 and beyond until they have completed all the coastal zone areas of Cape May and Atlantic counties. This is the sort of project that has multiple benefits in terms of supporting a wide range of coastal activities and conservation programs including aquaculture, dredging operations and beneficial reuse, salt marsh protection restoration, and submerged aquatic vegetation restoration efforts (such as eelgrass and blue carbon accounting). In the next field season, Adam and the team will be assisting NJ DEP with their project looking at soil carbon sequestration and carbon flux in freshwater lands by doing soil samplings and several habitat types of freshwater wetlands in southern NJ. Finally, Adam reviewed their Dynamic Soil Properties (DSP) Project, which is a relatively newer initiative in the swampland's science division, where they are looking at soil properties that respond to management in that change on relatively short human time scale. This project is looking at croplands that are intruded by saltwater due to sea level rise in southern NJ/northern Delaware. the ultimate goal is to provide additional information on the chemical and physical properties that are affected by this saltwater intrusion and ideally, develop an interpretation and/or mapping phases for soil series that are affected by saltwater intrusion.

11:55 AM **Public Affairs/Outreach Updates – Jacob Bailey and Tairi Melchiorre, NRCS**

Tairi started her presentation with a review of outcomes from FY24. NRCS-NJ was very busy during the fiscal year, including hosting events, attending events, and participating in webinars. In total, they participated in 50 events, reached 15,241 contacts, and recorded 58 new customers. Moving into FY25, three priorities that were identified include increasing participation (to new customers, socially disadvantaged customers, and urban agriculture), increase awareness (with tools like YouTube videos and direct mailings), and increase collaboration with soil conservation districts, other partners, and local working group meetings. Tairi is working on a series of NRCS videos to introduce the community to NRCS and answer the most frequently asked questions. Tairi then shared a short video, the first of the series can be found here.

Next, Tairi shared a slide showing a summary of financial assistance contracts that span between FY20 through FY24. There is a prioritization for counties that have low financial assistance through utilization of the soil conservation districts as well as partners in those areas to see more collaboration.

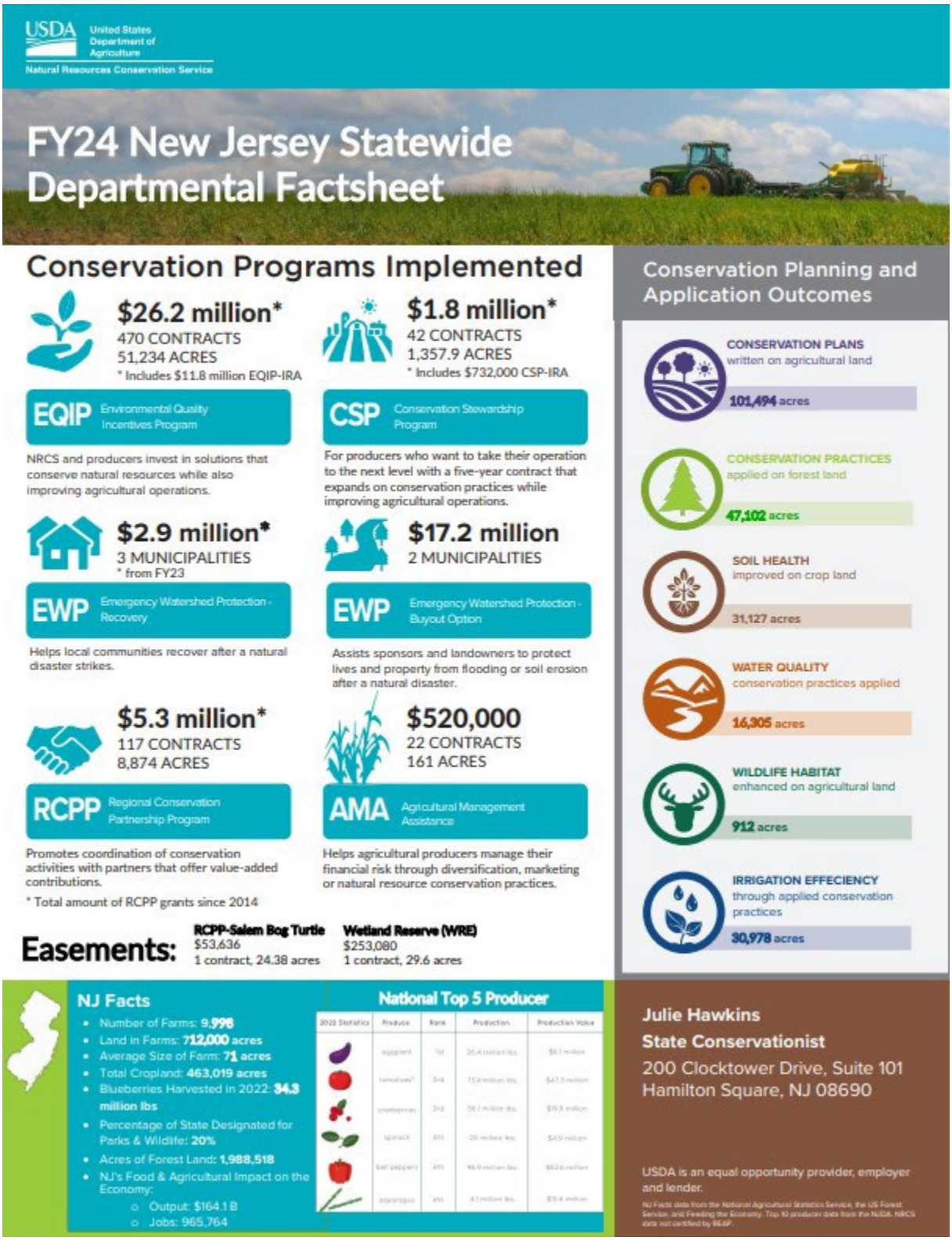


Summary of Financial Assistance Contracts FY 2020-2024

In Fiscal Year 2025, NRCS-NJ has participated in 11 events within the boundaries of the state which reached a total of 10,111 people. Approximately 9,000 registered farms received postcard mailers for topics like forestry in the north, forestry in the south, and from NAS. Please note that this data does not include information across state lines.

Local work group meetings that have been scheduled include Cape May Soil County District on January 21 at 4pm, Atlantic Soil County District on January 28 at 4pm, Ocean County Soil County District on January 30 at 3pm, Burlington Soil County District on February 13, Morris Soil County District on February 18, and the Hunterdon/Somerset/Union LWG will take place February 20 from 9am-11am. If any district managers need assistance with scheduling their local work group meeting, please reach out to Tairi Melchiorre. On Additional outreach events that have been scheduled include NOFA-NJ winter conference on January 25 in Asbury Park, Mid-Atlantic Fruit & Veggie Convention from January 28-30 in Hershey, PA, Aquaculture Symposium on January 31 in Cape May, NJ State Agricultural Convention from February 4-6 in Lancaster, PA, and RCPP Networking event on February 12 at the NRCS-NJ State Office.

Jacob Bailey, Public Affairs for NRCS-NJ, presented some of the technical updates. The FY24 New Jersey Statewide Department Factsheet was finalized. This data shows how NRCS contributed from a programmatic standpoint as well as from engineering, soil health, water quality, and wildlife enhancements to name a few.



Traditionally, this factsheet is used during the Congressional Fly-In, where NRCS partners with NACD. However, since NRCS-NJ is ahead of schedule with their factsheet, a new factsheet will be created for that purpose. As previously mentioned by Trish Long, there is a Source Water Protection factsheet available on the NRCS-NJ

website. The National Water Quality Initiative site was also updated to include previously mentioned core and supporting practices. As Gail Bartok mentioned earlier, there is a FY25 Agricultural Conservation Easement Program press release active until December 20, 2024.

Finally, there was a press release in Urban Mayors Press that featured some of the urban agriculture programs that NRCS-NJ has partnered with STEAM Urban on; STEAM Urban is a Newark-based non-profit organization that helps install a love for natural spaces and the environment in students who might not have had the opportunity otherwise. Morgan Devine, James Strehse, Don Donnelly, Edwin Muniz, and partner-pollinator employee Kass Urban-Meade collaborated on this project. A few additional shout-outs to partner employees include Kristin Adams who was featured on Stockton.edu on the Oyster Reef Restoration project, Ben Langley working on new contracts for Ducks Unlimited, and Alyssa Bright and Hunter Ross working with the Joint Chiefs initiative.

12:06 PM **Changes from LWG Feedback – Kaitlin Farbotnik, NRCS**

Kaitlin prepared a few slides to address comments made in previous local working groups. First, the comment made was "practices should be combined so they are most effective and sold that way to the producer". In FY25, NRCS-NJ updated all of their ranking pools (with the help of the entire state staff) to ensure planning is taking place in the correct areas and projects. Prioritization took place for systems planning instead of single-practice planning. Questions that were added to the ranking process include how many resource concerns are going to be addressed, are these practices in conjunction with the system, is it a stand-alone practice, and if there's any mitigated measures that needs to be planned, are those going to be contracted. Additionally, NRCS-NJ staff Bea and Fran worked on thresholds for the rankings for different cutoffs and looked at using practical examples/hypothetical situations and ran a bunch of trials. Another change made was to some of the rankings; they were separated. Prior to the change, wildlife was a general pool but has since been broken down into wildlife, forestry, and stream. The general livestock fund pool was separated into farmstead and grazing. These changes allow the NRCS-NJ staff to identify the specific types of operations and figure out what questions need to be asked to ensure those projects that need the funding will rise to the top of the list.

Second comment made was "cover crop rules allow/incentivize fall tillage, creating erosion to plant late season cover crops". This has been a known issue; NJ EQIP program rules allow for late season planting as long as 70% coverage is achieved in the fall and resource concerns are treated. That policy was changed for FY25 with a state instruction issued with the details. Additionally, NRCS-NJ has a practice guidance document that the planners use when contracting that was updated to read if somebody has not planted by designated planting date and it comes before an event or season that is a high erosion risk, they have to use no till or broadcast methods to do that (no tilling up the ground to achieve). Planting rates are required to be adjusted if going from a drilled to broadcast situation.

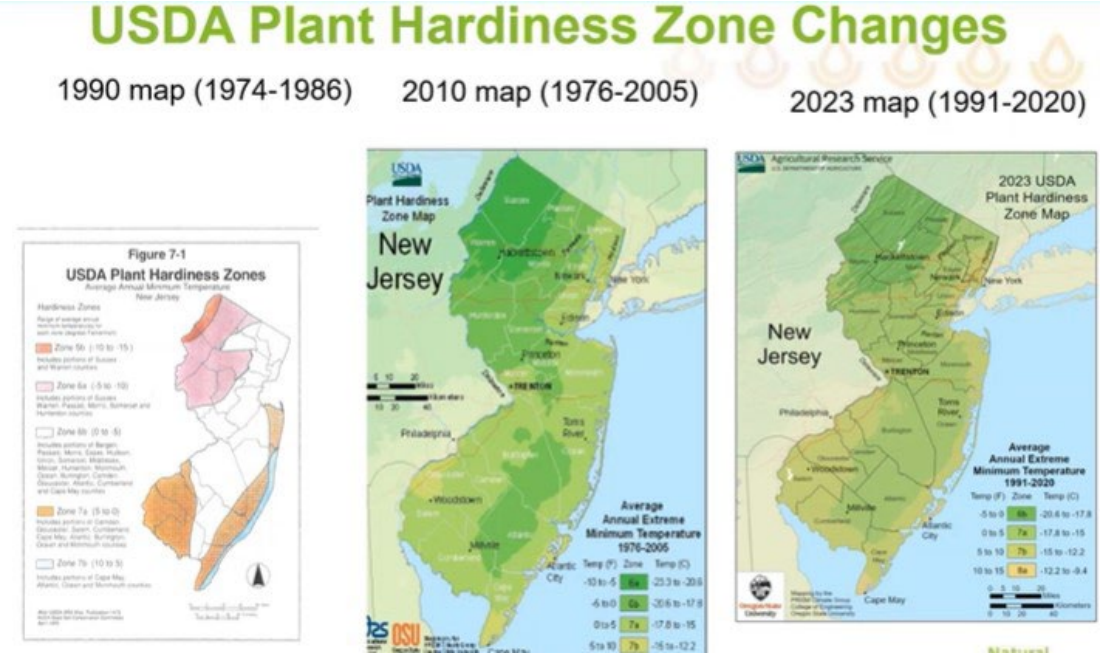
The third comment Kaitlin wanted to address was "programs for drone spraying, cover crop seeding, variable rate fertilizer and lime application should be pursued". There has always been an allowance to use drones for applications, although no specific scenario for it. NRCS-NJ officially adopted the interim standard for amending soil properties with lime.

Fourth comment addressed "Composting for community food waste – while there are leaf mulching programs, is there a way to work with farmers, local businesses, and municipalities to provide funding, resources, and education to make this possible?" NRCS must work within federal, state, and municipal regulations; food waste is a role for the state of NJ. However, if the reference is garden waste or field waste, NRCS-NJ has a new scenario for those.

Another comment that derived from the local working group was "Offered practices do not support perennial growers and perennial growers are unaware of practices/programs". This year a bunch of new scenarios were added with new enhancements that focus more on small fruit growers and orchard growers. Outreach materials were also developed for and used at the County Board of Agriculture and District meetings as well as for the people at the extensions.

12:15 PM **Cape May Plant Materials Center Update – Chris Miller, NRCS**

Chris started his presentation talking about the Plant Materials Center (PMC). His location in Cape May, NJ has been there since 1965, and their function is to select and evaluate plants for successful performance in coastal restoration projects. More recently they have been focused on the climate change and adaptation and saltwater intrusion issues. First, Chris provided a slide for USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Changes with 3 points of reference for NJ in 1990, 2010, and 2023. It shows the average annual minimum temperatures for a specified range of dates where the meteorological data and temperature data has been analyzed. In 1990, we had five zones in New Jersey (with the coldest zone being zone 5 in the northwest corner of the state). 20 years later the map was updated, and New Jersey lost the cold zone as it migrated into NY; this left four zones, 6A to 7B. 13 years the map was updated yet again and NJ lost another cold zone, zone 6A, to NY. However, in 2023 New Jersey gained a warm zone, zone 88A. You can see how rapidly the temperatures are changing in New Jersey now. There are some predictions that by the end of the century, under continued higher emission scenarios that NJ summers are going to be much like Savannah, Georgia by the end of the century. If the emissions are lower, the extreme scenario won't be as bad.



In summary: the cold temperatures are getting warmer, and the warm temperatures are getting even warmer in NJ. This aspect impacts plant adaptation and plant migration. Dr. Steven Handel, Restoration Ecologist with Rutgers University and editor for the Ecological Restoration Journal. After Superstorm Sandy, one of his editorials stated that successful restoration may require new genotypes of plant species from different locales that can tolerate the much-changed conditions of the coming decades (i.e. we need to take a proactive approach in introducing potentially adaptive and resilient plant species to solve natural resource problems). The Cape May PMC is located in southern NJ and is considered to be part of the transition zone between southern plant communities and northern plant communities. As such, they have brought in southern materials to see how well adapted they are to conditions in our state to see if said material can help us solve a natural resource problem in the future.

One of two plant products the PMC is working on is sea oats, which is a southeastern plant not indigenous to New Jersey, but is naturally migrating north. It exists naturally on the lower eastern shore of Maryland, Delmarva Peninsula, and lower eastern shore of Virginia. Approximately 30 years ago, the PMC started collecting seeds from that area, began propagating, evaluating, and testing. Now, they have genetic material that will tolerate NJ climate and will also help with dune stabilization efforts as well as adding a more diverse component to the frontal dune systems. They have noted issues with American Beach Grass as it is a cool season grass and the Cape variety that is being used commercially (planted by the Army Corps of Engineers) is from Cape Cod, much further north. As the

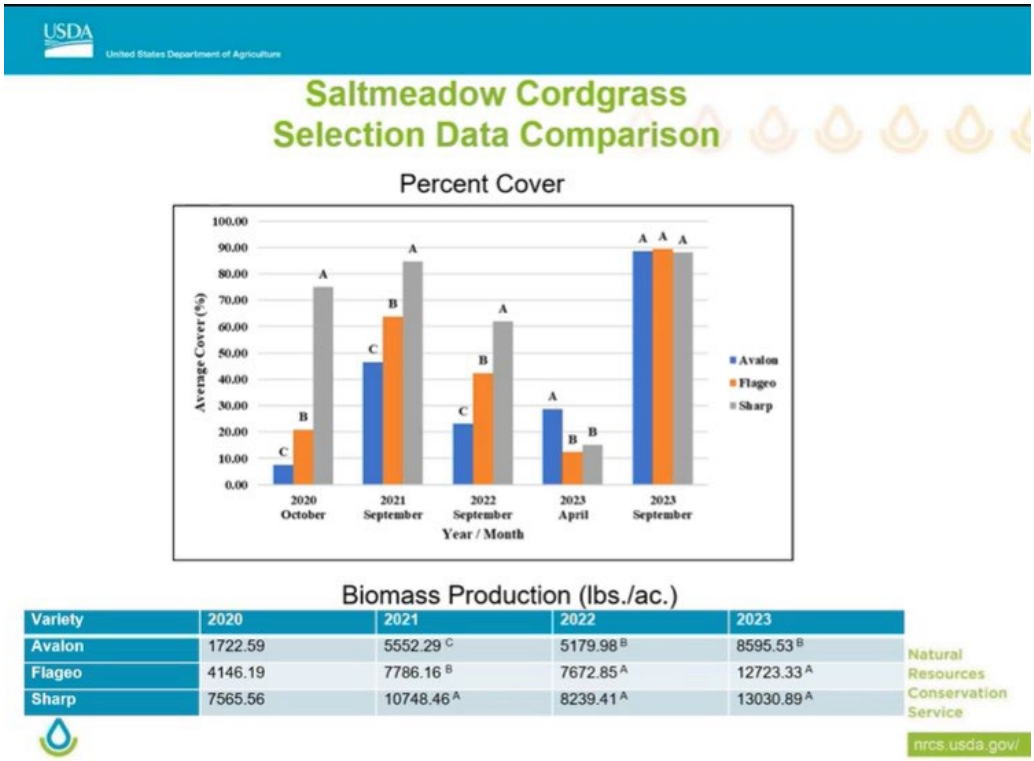
climate warms in the Cape May area, they are seeing bigger issues with the beach grass. The solution is to have a warm season grass, like sea oat, to provide a good, complement to American beach grass in the mid-Atlantic area.

The second plant product the PMC is working with is seashore mallow, which is a salt marsh plant. This is salt tolerant and flood tolerant, which can also be a value-added pollinator plant. There were two professors there at the Marine Science Lab in Lewes, DE, who back a couple decades ago made extensive collections of this plant from the Texas Gulf Coast all the way to Delaware and had done some initial evaluations at their facility. The PMC made 2 selections from their data, received the germ plasm and seed material, and now is working with two genetic lines (Delaware and North Carolina), both being selected for higher salt tolerance, longer flowering periods, great seed yield, flood tolerant, and has some value-added traits. You won't find it growing in solid stand in the marsh. This plant could potentially serve as a good transitional plant for farmland that you can no longer produce corn, soybeans, and wheat. It may have the ability to hold off the invasion of frag, as well as adding wildlife habitat value, pollinator habitat value, and has potential other uses if markets could be developed for it; the USDA ARS Innovation Lab in Peoria, IL has done some work with this plant, looking at the seed as it is a very oily seed. It could be used for production of biodiesel and potentially ethanol. Other potential uses include a bio absorb or biodegradable absorbent material, hydraulic mulch, chemical absorbent oil, absorbent material, and even cat litter.

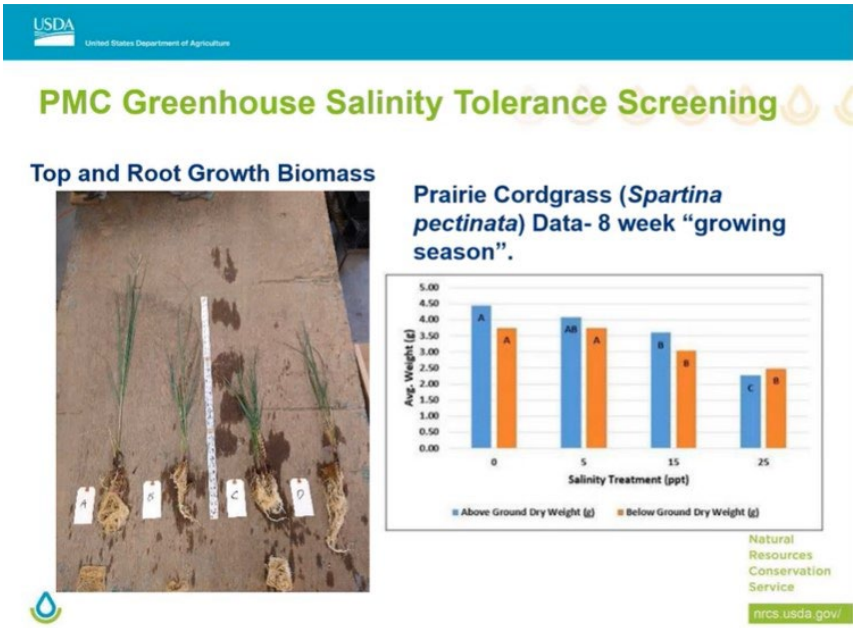
Trying to promote value-added uses to some of the conservation plans for the saltwater intruded areas has been one of the focuses Chris at the Plant Materials Center has been working on for the better part of the last decade. These saltwater intruded areas will be no longer be able to produce a commodity crop and will instead need to do something else with the land, whether that is abandon it, convert it to an easement, or do an alternative specialty/value-added crop.

There are a few trials that the PMC has been working through that were mentioned in the last State Technical Committee meeting by Scott Snell. They are looking at salt miter cord grass for the potential use in marginal cropland, perhaps as a value-added crop that could be planted in the transition area where farmland is being impacted by coastal flooding and saltwater intrusion. It could also be planted as a salt tolerant salt hay crop (historically, farmers went into the marsh and harvested the salt marsh plants for salt hay; that can no longer be done as levies and dikes have been destroyed by storms and sea levels rising causing the area to become too wet to go into). The PMC is looking at 3 different varieties of saltmeadow cordgrass: Avalon, Flageo, and Sharp; these are all plant materials varieties. The Avalon variety is derived from Avalon, NJ and was released by the center in 1986 for marsh habitat restoration and dune stabilization; the Flageo variety derives from North Carolina and was evaluated by the Georgia PMC and subsequently released in 1990 for stabilization of high salt marshes and coastal sand dunes; the Sharp variety (which was named after the PMCs former national program leader, Curtis Sharp) was Louisiana materials that were released by the Florida Brooksville PMC in 1994 for shoreline dune, inland waterway, and gully stabilization.

The PMC is evaluating the three varieties on center to see how they perform against each other and also looking at the plant adaptation. It was noted that they have different morphologies. For example, the Avalon is much finer stem and kind of flops over and lays over the sharp where the Flageo have stiffer stands/stands more upright. It was also noted that they have different plant structures. After a 4-year period, the PMC evaluated percent cover in the plots and statistically they were all the same. They also harvested the biomass and did biomass production of these varieties. After 4 years, the Flageo and Sharp produced more biomass than the Avalon.



The PMC has also been working on a greenhouse salinity tolerance screening study for the past few years. The objective of the study is to examine the degree of physiological effects to native warm season grasses resulting from varying levels of salinity treatments in a hydroponic growth system. The species list to be studied included prairie cordgrass, eastern gamagrass, switchgrass, coastal panicgrass, FL paspalum, and saltmeadow cordgrass. There is approximately 8 weeks of growing season in the greenhouse and the PMC employees are growing these hydroponically in perlite (which is an inner material that won't accumulate salts in the root zone). The salt that the plant is exposed to in these ebb and flow tables can be adjusted through the water reservoir underneath each of these tables to a different salt salinity and then evaluated by pulling the plants out of the pots and looking at the root biomass, top growth, and compare. For example, in the prairie cordgrass, they are starting to see an impact that assaulted about 15 parts per thousand, which is considered brackish (not high salt, not low salt). For reference, the ocean is approximately 25 parts per thousand. This type of study will be done with multiple species mentioned above, with greenhouse screening being done first followed by in-field screenings. The PMC has a cooperative project with the University of Delaware, the University of Maryland, and George Washington University of DC. They will be looking at coastal buffers using these warm season grasses and the impacts of the saltwater intrusion.

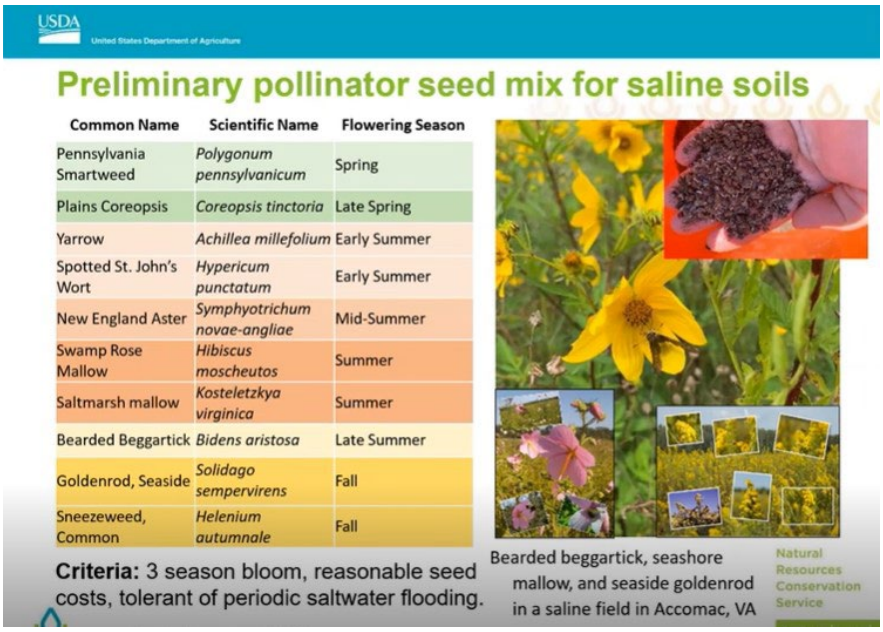


Around the lower eastern shore of Maryland and Delmarva Peninsula are extensive networks of drainage ditches, which were designed to drain fresh water to allow for crop production. However, with sea level rise, these ditches are serving as conduits to bring the saltwater further inland. It is interesting to see a salt marsh community growing in these ditches right next to a soybean, corn, and wheat field. When the tide hits high, the ditches overflow into the fields and impact crops. The University of Maryland are finding, through the cooperative agreement and research, that the salt water is releasing nitrogen and phosphorus that may have a legacy in the soil because the sulfides and some of the other compounds in the salter water (and all the minerals in the salt water) are solubilizing the nitrogen and phosphorus.

On the lower eastern shore, the PMC and the University are doing a project looking at multi-functional riparian buffers on multiple sites. Chris shared a picture of a section of farm where the dirt road is along the left by the woodland, followed by a ditch, the herbaceous riparian buffer, and then the crop field. The project participants would like to see more of this occurring in that environment to help them plan the appropriate plant recommendations. Varieties being looked at and considered include switchgrass, coastal panicgrass, prairie cordgrass, mid-Atlantic Florida Paspalum, and New York meadow crest eastern gamma grass. These grasses are all warm season grasses. There were some questions about the salt tolerance of these warm season grasses; the project and research being done should help in understanding the performance of these plants. Recent data from this project suggests eastern gamma grass accumulated phosphorus more than the other native grasses. In volunteering on some of the salt affected sites, some cases seem to be competing with phragmites in some sites.

Common name	Latin name	Salinity tolerance	Flood tolerance
Mid-Atlantic Germplasm Florida paspalum	*Paspalum floridanum*	**TBD**	med.-high
'Atlantic' coastal panicgrass	*Panicum amarum* var. *amarulum*	high	medium
High Tide Germplasm switchgrass	*Panicum virgatum*	mod-high	high
Southampton Germplasm prairie cordgrass	*Spartina pectinata*	**TBD**	high
'Avalon' saltmeadow cordgrass	*Spartina patens*	high	high
'Meadowcrest' Eastern Gamagrass	*Tripsacum dactyloides*	**TBD**	med.

In summary, they were successful in transplanting the native grasses via bare-root planting into saline farm fields. The survival rate was a minimum of 50% but was impacted somewhat by the size of the propagule they used in the planning depth. In proper planting and proper propagule size, would result in close to 80%-100% survival on all of these plant species. They all have good potential for riparian buffer applications in coastal environments and have some value-added potential uses. Moving beyond the grasses and diversity of wildflower species and their respective tolerances to these conditions, these warm season grasses can be used for biomass production for burning directly or pelletizing, forage for some livestock, and poultry house/animal bedding. Material erosion control products are already being used for erosion control blankets and provide long lasting mulch material because of their cellulose and hemi cellulose components of their stems. Now, they are looking for what is a desirable pollinator mix for the saline areas taking into consideration the three season bloom, having reasonable seed cost, and species that are tolerant of the periodic saltwater flooding. The NRCS-Maryland biologists are assisting with trial plantings in the coming year as well as looking at how these various species are performing.



As previously mentioned, the PMC is working with the salt marshmallow, which is a summer blooming plant. The seed is not extremely available in the commercial marketplace. One company was priced at $380 per pound, which is not a reasonable cost. Hopefully, with the efforts of evaluation, they can get the salt marshmallow into the commercial marketplace thus bringing costs down. It is important to note that there is small amount of the seed used in any one mix, so that will keep costs down as well (producers won't be buying pounds of seed). This grass has very

good ceiling vigor. This was seen in on-field planting down in Crisfield, Maryland, whereby the end of the summer it appeared the salt marshmallow was germinating the most and showing itself more than any other species that were in the mix.

12:37 PM **Cape Atlantic SCD Partner Update – Michael Kent, CASCD**

Michael started by talking about the importance of the local working groups from a partner perspective. The local working group in his district has changed over the last few years and has been able to identify resource concerns beyond the NRCS programs. This has allowed the Cape Atlantic Soil Conservation District the opportunity to work with additional partners, grants with NFWF, NJ Department of Agriculture, NJ Audubon, as well as sharing service agreements with other districts to provide more boots on the ground for implementation. Conversations with Don Donnelly from NRCS brought about the identification of shortcomings. Since then, CASCD has worked through NACD for technical assistance grants and now they have foresters on staff.

One item CASCD was tasked with was reidentify the roles of districts and revitalize what the districts could and should be doing. This identification has provided the opportunity to do more with the partners as they can't do it all themselves. Districts need partners such as NRCS and the NJ Department of Agriculture to provide training not only locally but regionally as well on state-wide initiatives. For example, there are approximately 7000 landowners who have forests that need a forest management plan. With only 15 foresters qualified or still writing plans, it is difficult to identify those without the help of partners. Additionally, Michael said collectively we need to talk better amongst the partnership as we share the same goals and do a lot of the same work. That is where local working groups come into play and why they are so important. At the end of local working group meetings, CASCD puts together a report of findings that includes who was in attendance, what was asked of the group, and then focus on those items. Another example of this type of work comes with Camden Soil Conservation District and the Cape Atlantic Conservation District entering into a merger to blend resources to be more effective. Michael thanked NRCS for as he sees the value in training district staff to be conservation planners, foresters, and helping with aquaculture.

12:47 PM **Rural Development Partner Update – Maryann Tancredi, RD**

The USDA Rural Development has three mission areas: Rural Business Cooperative Service, the Rural Housing Service, and the Rural Utilities Service. Through those three missions, RD is able to provide financial assistance to rural communities, businesses, nonprofits, and residents. There are many programs that Maryann oversees that benefit agricultural producers and rural small businesses, but she is also looking to find areas where those programs and services intersect so they can leverage funds to help projects cross the finish line.

One priority for FY25 for RD is to focus on mitigating the impacts of climate change. One method Rural Development is using is the utilization of the Rural Business Cooperative Service through the value-added producer grants. These types of grants are meant for small businesses in rural areas and agricultural producers (location not dependent). Renewable energy and energy efficient grants and loans are the focus. Additionally, there are guaranteed loans for businesses and agricultural producers and non-profits.

One example of a value-added grant that made a difference is when Two River created an award-winning mushroom broth. The project commenced in FY21 and recently won gold at a food show. Another example of a value-added grant that made a difference is with Gorgeous Goat Creamery where they have partnered with Stoogler Farm and Forest and Rutgers to help the creamery utilize the goat's milk to make lotions, soaps, and specialty cheeses. There is a Rural Energy for America program, funded in large part by the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). This program assisted in the project of installing solar canopies at car dealership in southern NJ.

Another loan available is the guaranteed loans, specifically for business and industry and renewable energy and energy efficiency. One example is an indoor flower producer in Allamuchy, NJ where RD provided the business and industry guaranteed loan to refinance their debt, approximately 9.5 million dollars. The renewable energy guaranteed loan was provided for strawberries grown vertically at a hydroponic growing facility in Phillipsburg, NJ, which created approximately 50 jobs in that area.

The Rural Utilities service offers water and environmental programs, direct loans, grants, and guaranteed loans. They also offer a telecommunications program with distance learning and telemedicine grants, as well as a reconnect loan and grant for that as well.

Recapping FY24, RD has put almost 20.3 million dollars back on the streets with approximately 18 million of that within the Rural Energy for America program. 3.2 million dollars in grants and 15.2 million in the guaranteed loan for the strawberry facility.

12:53 PM **Duck's Unlimited Update – Benjamin Langey, DU**

Benjamin is employed with Duck's Unlimited through a joint grant between NRCS and Duck's Unlimited supporting the Black Duck Initiative. Duck's Unlimited conserves, restores, and manages wetland and associated habitat for North America's waterfowl. One initiative they are working on is Conservation for Continent, which is an aggressive goal of raising 3 billion dollars for wetland conservation in North America by 2026. As of April of 2024, they have reached 2 billion dollars. This initiative has five priorities: breeding landscapes, migration and wintering landscapes, conservation research and education, wetlands forever, and conversation legacy. Duck's Unlimited is focused on wetland conservation and providing enough wetlands and habitat for all types of waterfowl and water birds.

Duck's Unlimited has conserved over 18 million acres over a period of 87 years. For the first time ever in the history of Duck's Unlimited since inception 1937, the organization conserved 1 million acres in a single year (during 2024). Wetlands America Trust is one of the nation's largest lands trusts and holds all of Duck's Unlimited conservation easements. Benjamin highlighted an interactive online map that shows active Duck's Unlimited projects. The green dots represent habitat projects, and the yellow icons featured habitat projects. Currently New Jersey does not have many projects on the ground but the projects that are listed are featured. If you click on the featured project, it will provide updates.

The target species for Benjamin at Duck's Unlimited is the American Black duck. New Jersey's salt marshes and coastal back bay habitats host approximately 1/3 of the wintering black duck population. The American Black duck is limited to the Atlantic Flyway and into the Mississippi Flyway, meaning it is a local bird (endemic to the East Coast). From the 1950s to the 1980s, the Black Duck experienced a 50% population decline. One cause of this was habitat loss due to wetland loss and degradation, but also harvest contaminates like lead shot, heavy metals, and competition and hybridization with mallards. Important to note that mallards are not native to the East Coast. Even though there was a massive decrease from the 50s to the 80s, there has been a stabilization point. However, the goal is to recover the population through protecting and restoring wintering habitats.

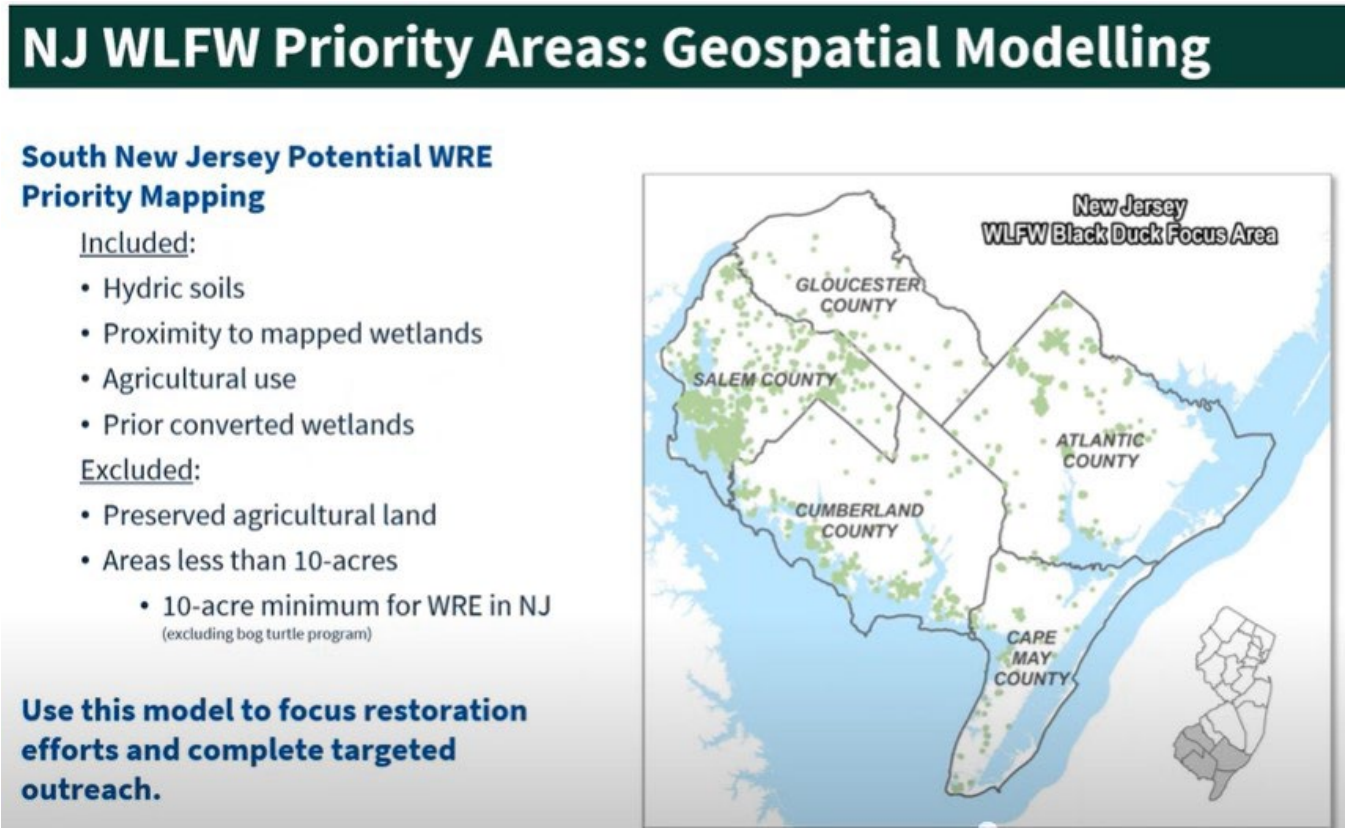
The Working Lands for Wildlife program is a national partnership with a collaborative approach that prioritizes these large and intact landscapes. There are both national and state initiatives under this partnership. Some of the focal species include migratory big game, sage grouse, monarch butterflies, and northeast turtles. The Working Lands for Wildlife program works through offering technical and financial assistance to agricultural producers through farm bill conservation programs, and it is the largest funding source for conservation on private lands in NJ. There are 4 priority species that have been identified: bog turtle, northern bobwhite (quail), Golden-Winged Warbler, and black duck. NRCS has significant impact on wetland and grassland habitats across the nation. Duck's Unlimited recognizes this and pursued a partnership to expand the impact to ensure dollars were hitting the ground for habitat protection restoration.

Working Lands for Wildlife habitat restoration is partly delivered through two conservation programs: Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) and Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). The WRE program offers 100% of easement value to the landowners who still own the land with the tradeoff of giving up developmental rights. This program also offers the option for the landowners to protect their land permanently or a 30-year easement. However, the cost-share offering for restoration with the 30-year easement would hit approximately 75% of restoration costs whereas in permanent easements, they offer up to 100% coverage of costs. The EQIP program offers up to 75% coverage of conservation practice costs. EQIP is best for smaller projects and typically the conservation practices would include shallow excavated wetlands, shallow water management, wetland creation/restoration, and herbaceous weed control.

The focus is restoring hydrology to areas that used to be wetlands, just facilitating the germination of hydrophobic species. It is not a matter of building ponds but rather building shallow water wetlands. If there are any projects you feel would meet this need, please reach out to Benjamin Langey. Keep in mind that when talking to producers or if you have a project in min for shallow water management, Duck's Unlimited is looking for emergent vegetation, emergent wetlands and not farm ponds.

The map shows hydric soils that were close to already previously being mapped wetlands that are in agricultural use and contain prior converted wetlands or agriculturally modified wetlands. Then, excluded areas that were already preserved and agricultural easements as well as areas that were less than 10 acres. This map will be used to complete targeted outreach to landowners utilizing postcard mailings and brochure mailings, hosting outreach events in high density areas, and trying to get the word out that this program is available for producers.

Benjamin shared geospatial modelling of NJ WLFW priority areas, which provides a starting point to get producers



Benjamin shared a slide on a project in Delmarva. This project utilized EQIP. The shallow 18" 24" berms that hold back an average of 6-10 inches of water facilitate wetland vegetation growth.

Project Highlight: Virginia EQIP Project

Another slide shared highlighted Maryland's use of EQIP where the shallow ditch that's draining what used to be wetlands with some marginal growth in the cropland vs afterwards after plugging the ditch.

Project Highlight: Maryland EQIP Project

If anyone has questions, please contact Benjamin Langey directly 315-412-5272 (Benjamin.langey@usda.gov).

Question from the chat – is there an opportunity for a joint black duck/golden-winged warbler project in NJ?

Answer – currently Duck's Unlimited is focused on southern NJ but are working on getting the program established there first before moving to the north as there has been a high need for restoration.

1:05 PM **NJ Department of Agriculture Update – Sandra Howland, NJDA**

Sandra is with the NJ Department of Agriculture, Division of Agricultural and Natural Resources. The department's mission is to promote, protect, and serve the Garden State's diverse agricultural and Agri business industries. NJDA offers a variety of programs to support production, agriculture, and manage programs that range from feeding school children, protecting farmland from development, and the preservation program, aquaculture industry, as well as Ag education. The department is made-up of five divisions: Agricultural and Natural Resources, Animal Health, Food and Nutrition, Marketing and Development, and Plant Industry. Their public involvement ranges from attending monthly county board of Ag meetings, assisting producers with compliance issues or questions (with many of the programs they offer including voluntary compliance assistance and planning for things like animal waste management plans and animal health), as well as National Poultry Improvement audits program. The staff at NJDA work with other regulatory agencies to increase understanding of agricultural activities, such as NJDEP Recycling (exempt recycling activities like leaf mulching and on-farm composting, solid waste and recycling to water), Highland and Pinelands with agricultural activities, and Water Supply (most recently working on drought concerns).

Opportunities through the Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources Programs are available. There is a new deer fencing program on non-preserved farms. This is a cost-sharing program for deer or bear exclusionary fencing and will match up to 50% up to $50,000 cap. Currently the signup is open and ongoing, enrollment will close June 30th. If you'd like any information, it is up on their website, or you can reach out directly to Sandra. Another state-wide opportunity comes in the form of animal waste management plan development and best management practice implementation grants. These come from the Soil Conservation Districts, and it is not only for district staff to work with producers to develop an animal waste management plan but also to potentially assist with implementation of said plan. The implementation can be a standalone activity, or it can work with funding from NRCS or other like agencies. Sandra Myers (Smyers@upperdelawarescd-nj.com) with the Upper Delaware Soil Conservation District is the POC for the northern section of the state while Riley Blankenship (farminspections@capeatlantic.org) with Cape Atlantic Soil Conservation District is the contact in the southern portion of the state.

The department also has a 319 grant from DEP that is specific to the Papakating Creek watershed; in this area they are working with producers to protect water quality from impacts from livestock. At this point in the grant, NJDA is trying to identify producers that are interested in such practices as riparian buffers, fencing, pasture management, and nutrient management. They also have an active listing for grant funding opportunities from partners up on their website (www.nj.gov/agriculture/divisions/anr/agriassist/animalwaste.html). The site was launched late calendar year 2023 and they try to maintain this as a as a live resource where producers or other organizations could go to see what funding there is available, where in the state it is offered, a brief description of the funding, as well as a link for more information. If you are interested in submitting information to be displayed, there is alive template to input your information that will then be added to the grant table.

NJDA provided an update to their New Jersey ManureLink Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG). First, ManureLink has gone live. It is a free listing service for manure and compost. They currently have 105 registered users and as of the date of this meeting, the site included 17 manure ads and 2 compost ads. NJDA hosted their first annual webinar on July 10, 2024, on Zoom as a collaborative effort with division staff, New Jersey Composting Council staff, NRCS, and KES. They had 25 participants and the recordings of all the presentations are up on the ManureLink website under resources (www.njmanurelink.rutgers/edu). In August of 2024, NJDA hosted their annual hands-on field day in Kingwood, NJ. If anyone knows of a farm who would love to showcase what they are doing for composting or are in the learning process and would like to show, please reach out as NJDA is looking for a location for 2025. The field day was hosted by Dave Defranco Creek Landscaping in Kingwood, New Jersey. The New Jersey Composting Council (NJCC) led the education and hands on activities along with the department staff as well as Dave. There was a variety of partners in attendance and included a total of 23 participant. The partners in attendance include Kluthe Environmental Services (KES), New Jersey Natural Resources Conservation Service (NJ NRCS), New Jersey Water Supply Authority (NJWSA), Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA), and North Jersey Resource Conservation and Development (North Jersey RC&D). Each participant learned how to make compost incorporating

manure and received a bucket of compost to take home. Two additional initiatives that that they have through this CIG are adapting practices and educational materials for New Jersey farms. As those are developed, they will be posted to the website under resources. There is also a cost share pool to assist producers with implementing compost practices.

If anyone has questions or wants more information, please reach out to Sandra at Sandra.howland@ag.nj.gov.

Question – is the cost share money just for manure farms? Yes, the money is for manure and manure management.

1:16 PM **Open Discussion – Evan Madlinger, NRCS**

Erica Rossetti made a comment that SACD is currently updating the formula value they use to preserve farms and should be ready in the spring of 2025. SACD is also trying to update the formula they use to determine how much money they give farmers for soil and water conservation grants on preserved farms only. They also have a new next generation farmer program with a survey asking what services are available for beginner and historically underserved farmers.

1:20 PM **Adjourn – Evan Madlinger, NRCS**