

Colorado State Technical Advisory Committee

09/12/2024, Began 08:03/Ended 11:03

Meeting was held virtually on Microsoft Teams.

8:03 Liz With, NRCS Assistant State Con. for Partnerships
Introductions and Welcomes, thanking everyone for participating.
Explanation of the plan of the meeting and the overall meeting agenda.

NRCS Updates

8:10 Liz With, NRCS Assistant State Con. for Partnerships

- Financial assistance programs saw major increases, especially in Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) with efforts to reach new participants and simplify program processes.
- The “Act Now” strategy speeds up funding through EQIP and CSP with reduced hurdles.
- Strong partner contributions were highlighted, with gratitude expressed for their support.
- Staffing gaps persist despite improvements. Further increases are expected in FY25.
- New Urban Agriculture office and subcommittee launched to support conservation efforts in Denver.

NRCS Programs Update

8:17 Renee Koch, NRCS Acting Assistant State Con. for Programs

- Introduction to the Act Now process, allowing faster approval of applications that meet a minimum threshold. This change streamlines funding allocation without altering other program rules. CSP minimum payment increased from \$1,500 to \$4,000 annually, significantly benefiting smaller operations.
- Feedback-led specialized projects included irrigation pilot initiatives and wetland wildlife habitat projects.
- **A poll was held (9 voted Yes and 0 no). Recommendation passed with majority vote.** The recommendation was to maintain current payment schedule rates at the maximum allowable levels: 75% for regular participants and 90% for historically underserved participants.

8:26 Amber Freouf, CSP Program Manager – Local Workgroup Meetings hosted by Conservation District Partners

- In 2024, a 61% participation rate was achieved.
- Practices that worked well were identified to guide future planning and training needs. Challenges with certain practices were mostly due to external factors such as drought, resistant weeds, and inflation, rather than misunderstandings.
- NRCS staff shortages have improved, but training new staff remains a priority to ensure they are equipped to assist participants. Engineering design time and staffing in key positions are still being addressed to reduced delays.

- Requests for cost-share on technologies such as virtual fencing, drones, biochar, and hydroponics were noted, with virtual fencing being actively reviewed at the national level.
- Participants asked for more outreach, success stories, and quicker program turnaround.
- Program and ecological science teams will meet to review the results and adjust priorities for fiscal year 2025.

8:37 Amber Freouf, NRCS Program Manager – CSP

- Local staff successfully broadened participation in CSP across the state, overcoming previous concentration in specific areas.
- Colorado implemented the “Act Now” process for CSP fund pools, which streamlined application management and workload for offices, particularly those new to the program.
- Fewer participants renewed their contracts this year due to Farm Bill funding limits. The issue is being discussed at the national level for fiscal year 2025.
- Significant increases in funding were received from national headquarters. \$11.5 million in Farm Bill funds and \$8.1 million in IRA funds.
- A unique tribal Alternative Funding Arrangement with the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, the first in the nation, was successfully developed, showcasing strong local partnerships.
- **A poll was held (6 voted Yes and 0 no). The listed practices for the CSP State Priority Resource Concerns passed with majority vote.**

8:47 Kindra Brandner – NRCS Program Manager - EQIP

- Significant increase in both obligations and contracts from 2020 to 2024. In 2023, Colorado received \$2.8 million in IRA funds, but this jumped to \$28 million in 2024, bringing total EQIP funds to almost \$57 million, with approximately \$28 million each from IRA and Farm Bill funds.
- Farm Bill and IRA funds must be handled separately, with 356 contracts using Farm Bill funds and 183 using IRA funds, covering nearly 95,000 acres and 113,000 acres respectively. The increase in workload was successfully managed through partnerships and field offices.

8:51 Stacey Eskew – NRCS Program Manager – Source Water Protection/EQIP Conservation Incentives Contracts (CIC)

- Feedback was sought from participants for the continued use of last year’s priority practices for Source Water Protection (SWP), which have higher payment rates for addressing source water protection concerns.
- Discussed setting high-priority practices within the EQIP fund pools, following manual policy requirements. Up to 10 practices can be designated as high priority, addressing specific resource concerns for higher payment rates. The recommendation is to continue using last year’s high-priority practices for FY25. **A poll was held (8 voted Yes and 0 no). Recommendation passed with majority vote.**
- In FY21, the EQIP CIC program was introduced, blending elements to CSP and EQIP. CIC requires at least one priority resource concern, last a minimum of five years, and have a \$200,000 contract limit. The program focuses on high priority areas, with Colorado’s

current emphasis on grazing land resilience to drought. For FY25, partners recommended to continue using the same high-priority areas. **A poll was held (7 voted Yes and 0 no). Recommendation passed with majority vote.**

9:05 Kindra Brandner – NRCS Program Manager – EQIP Funding Opportunities

- Our policy requires that 5 % of budget be allocated to socially disadvantaged and 5% for beginning/limited resource farmers. Also, 10 % of total allocation for wildlife-related projects.
- Discussed possible shift from 21 resource teams to 10 watershed-based funding pools to streamline and potentially increase funding per pool. These larger initial allocation per watershed could fund more applications and reduce administrative workload. The recommendation was to shift to 10 watershed-based funding pools in FY2025. **A poll was held (8 voted Yes and 0 no). Recommendation passed with majority vote.**

9:25 Marissa Markus – NRCS RCPP Coordinator

- RCPP was established as a standalone initiative under the 2018 Farm Bill. Colorado ranks 17th nationally in RCPP agreements and funding, with expectations for growth in FY25.
- RCPP works with partners to leverage skills, capacity, and technology. Projects can be partner-inspired or partner-le, with technical assistance provided by either NRCS or the partner.
- FY24 Accomplishments: \$1.5 million in producer contracts. \$950,000 for conservation easements and \$500,000 for in supplemental agreements, with partners providing technical assistance.
- Many partnership RCPP projects were highlighted for partner awareness. See presentation.

9:45 Renee Koch, NRCS Acting Assistant State Con. for Programs - ACEP

- ACEP has two main programs: Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) and Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE). The State Conservationist receives recommendations from subcommittees on various technical aspects such as WRE valuations and ranking criteria.
- FY24 Accomplishments: Over 13,000 acres and \$11 million, covering grassland for sage grouse, general ALE, and RCPP easements. New obligations: Nearly 14,000 acres and \$10.8 million, focusing on sage grouse and general ALE projects.
- FY25 Plans: Two batching periods for IRA ACEP are set for October 4, 2024, and December 20, 2024.
- Partners then reviewed GARC rates and recommended to increase the GARC rate to 95% of estimated fair market value (up from 80%) not to exceed \$5,000 per acre, to encourage program interest. **A poll was held (7 voted Yes and 0 no). Recommendation passed with majority vote.**

Partners Update

9:54 Rakel Sanchez, District Operations Manager for the Colorado State Conservation Board

- Staffing: Two grants administrator positions closed on September 11, 2024, with hiring expected soon. A new Western Slope field specialist, Callie Savas, started last month. Other field specialists are Garth Schaefer (southeast), Carissa Whittington (upper east plains), and Callie (western slope).
- Urban Agriculture: Emma Hardiman, Urban Ag Specialist, is developing a survey to gather District input and creating a resource for the Urban Ag Connectors Meeting attendees.

9:57 Ray Aberle, Private Lands Program Manager for Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW)

- CPW has created and fully staffed a habitat unit with four positions focused on on-the-ground habitat work across different regions.
- CPW continues to work closely with NRCS on programs like EQIP and RCPP, including hosting joint training sessions.
- Texas A&M is developing a national program to train future private lands managers, supported by CPW and other institutions.
- CPW helps co-fund 13 partner biologists, including through Pheasants Forever and Bird Conservancy of the Rockies, to support USDA-NRCS field offices.
- Senate Bill 24-117 gave CPW authority for pollinator management, aligning efforts with NRCS programs.
- CPW continues its challenging wolf reintroduction efforts, with important partnerships in place to support livestock producers affected by wolves.

10:10 Ray Aberle, CPW Subcommittee Chair (Wildlife Subcommittee Report)

- The guiding principles of the Wildlife Subcommittee aims to focus on specific geographic areas and practices, welcomes landowners and producers to join and contribute to guiding wildlife initiatives and provides recommendations to the larger state committee and state conservationist, who make final decisions.
- The Wildlife Subcommittee has had ongoing conversations about Playa lakes, with an increased focus in 2024 due to recent moisture in the Eastern Plains. Playa lakes are critical for wildlife habitat, groundwater recharge, and water quality. The subcommittee has reviewed Playa definitions and restoration practices to support wetland easements.
- Colorado leads in black-footed ferret restoration on private lands, playing critical role in the species' recovery. The NRCS, through its EQIP program, supports these efforts by offering financial incentives to landowners.
- The discussion on lesser prairie chicken conservation in Colorado is evolving, particularly following their re-listing as a threatened species. CPW is focusing on targeted areas with suitable habitat and identified three areas: South Prowers, Comanche-Baca and Big Sandy.
- CPW has been developing a statewide habitat and connectivity plan over the past year and a half. This guiding document, designed for CPW, aims to focus resources, energy, and funding on wildlife work driven by data. It addresses climate considerations, current vegetation, resilient landscapes, and incorporates data from partners like the Bird Conservancy of the Rockies.

10:41 Renee Koch – Easement Subcommittee

- The easement subcommittee, after discussions with Clint, and acknowledging overlap with the wildlife subcommittee, has decided to allow the wildlife subcommittee to handle wetland easement input.

10:42 Robert Murphy – Source Water Protection Subcommittee

- The Source Water Protection Subcommittee has reviewed water challenges across Colorado and decided to maintain last year's nominations for increased incentives. Key areas include Ogallala Aquifer (Addressing depletion issues), Lower Arkansas (Managing radionuclide mobilization and increasing salinity), South Platte (Addressing rising salinity, Front Range Mountains (Protecting water infrastructure from wildfire impacts), Western Slope (Addressing wildfire and salinity issues).

10:49 Liz With - Urban Agriculture Subcommittee

- The Urban Agriculture Subcommittee chaired by Nikki Brinson and Abbey Gray, is seeking new members to help with prioritizing funding and understanding participant needs. They are looking for individuals interested in urban agriculture and supporting projects, specially to engage underserved groups like beginning farmers. Please contact Liz With if interested in joining.

10:51 Christina Burri – Deputy State Forester of the Colorado State Forest Service

- Emphasis on partnerships, water, and collaborative forestry efforts.
- Participation in the Forestry Collaborative Summit and upcoming events like the Society for American Foresters convention and the Connecting Colorado Rocky Mountain Restoration Initiative.

10:59 Christina Burri – Forestry Subcommittee

- The Forestry Subcommittee, re-established recently after a period of dormancy, focuses on advancing forestry science, policy and practice.
- Discussed action items and feedback on ranking questions related to forestry actions. The consensus was to keep the current questions, with particular attention to clarifying qualitative aspects of ecosystem function.
- The subcommittee will meet at least twice a year and welcomes additional participants.

Open Discussion

- David Anderson highlighted that they are collaborating with NRCS to provide statewide access to precise data via CODEX (Colorado's Conservation Data Explorer). This tool will be available to NRCS staff, allowing for detailed public lands data and reports across Colorado.
- Peter Ismert highlighted that a South Platform event will be held on November 21st in Greeley.
- Susan Lohr asked for more information regarding Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) waivers for projects.
- Thanked all for participating. Partner feedback, concerns and ideas are critical for conservation project priorities and financial assistance program management. All partners

are encouraged to reach out to Liz With or any member of the Colorado NRCS leadership Team, including Clint Evans, at any time.

Meeting Adjourned at 11:19

Partners in Attendance

1. Ray Aberle- Colorado Parks and Wildlife
2. Susan Lohr- Gunnison Ranchland Conservation Legacy
3. Peter Ismert- US EPA Region 8
4. Kristen Hughes- CDPHE
5. Matt Smith- Playa Lakes Joint Venture
6. Kyle Balint- Trout Unlimited
7. Sarah Dideriksen- Colorado Cattlemen's Association
8. Dominic Barrett- USFWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife
9. Allison Johnson- Natural Resources Defense Council
10. David Anderson- Colorado Natural Heritage Program at Colorado State University
11. Cary Aloia- Wetland Dynamics, LLC
12. Garrett Stephens – Jefferson Conservation District

NRCS Staff in Attendance

1. Amber Freouf- NRCS CSP Program Manager
2. Kindra Brandner- NRCS EQIP Program Manager
3. Stacey Eskew- NRCS EQIP Program Manager
4. Frank Falzone- NRCS State Conservation Forester
5. Patrick Naranjo- NRCS Program Manager
6. BJ Shoup- NRCS State Soil Scientist
7. Bailey Rapp- NRCS Area Conservationist for Area 2
8. Cody Robertson- NRCS Easements Program Manager
9. Eugene Backhaus- NRCS State Resource Conservationist
10. Rony Aguilar- NRCS Administrative Support Assistant
11. Deric Clemons- NRCS Area Conservationist for Area 3
12. Sean Forehand- NRCS Management Analyst, Technology
13. Lisa Hunt- NRCS Executive Assistant
14. Alyson Keaton- NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Management and Strategy
15. Marissa Markus- NRCS RCPP Coordinator
16. Theresa McGovern- NRCS NOWCC/ACES Resource Conservationist
17. Patrick Naranjo – NRCS Program Manager
18. Christine Newton – NRCS State Conservation Agronomist
19. William Shoup – NRCS State Soil Scientist
20. Clifton Simmons - NRCS Administrative Support Assistant
21. Kirk Whitehead – NRCS Natural Resource Specialist
22. Liz With - NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Partnerships