

## **Maine State Technical Advisory Committee meeting June 18, 2025**

The third Maine State Technical Advisory Committee meeting for Fiscal Year (FY) 2025 was held in-person at the USDA State Office in Bangor and via Microsoft Teams.

### Attending in person:

Matt Walker, NRCS State Conservationist  
Chris Reidy, NRCS Acting State Resource Conservationist  
Leslie Nelson, NRCS Assistant State Conservationist for Programs  
Thomas Kielbasa, NRCS Public Affairs Specialist  
Felix Blinn, Landowner and STAC Subcommittee Member

### Attending via Teams (26 virtual attendees):

Carol Weymouth, Executive Director of the Maine Association of Conservation Districts (MACD)  
Joe Roy, Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife.  
Alexander Stace, NRCS  
Rachel Schattman, University of Maine  
George McLaughlin, Maine Potato Board  
Mark Hedrick, Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation & Forestry  
Megan Facciolo, NRCS  
Anna Biddle, NRCS  
Sandya Kesoju, NRCS  
Carrick Gambell, NRCS partner  
Peter Behringer, US Forest Service.  
Tom Gordon, Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry  
Caleb Goossen, Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association  
Nicole Rogers, Maine Forest Service  
Andy Reed, MACD and Waldo County Soil and Water Conservation District

The meeting commenced at 8:30 a.m.

Introductions (Tom Kielbasa, Public Affairs Specialist)

Welcome

NRCS Briefing (Matt Walker, State Conservationist)

Thank you for joining today and those who were able to join Regional Conservationist Kasey Taylor last month. It was an opportunity for her to get your feedback and take that back to headquarters, and that will benefit Maine and farms across the country.

Agreements - We are not pursuing new Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) producer contracts, farmer group agreements, or any new IRA partnership agreements this year. We obligated roughly \$4.5 million in IRA this year, but the remainder will be returned to headquarters. There will be no new IRA partnership agreements this year. Things could change, but that's where we are today.

We asked for another \$3.5 million traditional farm bill dollars both in Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and EQIP. We will hear about that next week. So, there may be some new contracts going out under traditional farm bill dollars.

Agency - We have no update on the agency reorganization and RIF plan (ARRP). We have 69 employees here in NRCS. There is no news on the ability for critical hires. Discussion on that will start with engineering to replace the five we lost.

There is no news about a new Farm Bill.

We do have a new Farm Services Agency, State Executive Director, Tommy Higgins, formerly with Rural Development. John Butera is the new State Director for Rural Development.

#### MACD (Carol Weymouth, MACD Executive Director)

\*Full report available as attachment.

This year, NRCS celebrates 90 years of helping landowners with conservation practices, improving, preserving and protecting natural resources. By providing technical assistance, education, resources and conservation awareness, Soil and Water Conservation Districts work to provide local leadership for site specific, appropriate priorities for each service area.

Congratulations to 2025 state of Maine Envirothon winners, The Maine Academy of Natural Sciences team, on their success in the regional and state competition.

The team is invited to compete at the international level in Calgary, AB, Canada.

Thanks to all who work to make Envirothon a successful natural resource competition in our state. This year, the competition saw an increase in registered teams and districts have noted high school age teams show a keen interest in natural resources and conservation. The involvement of Maine NRCS, State of Maine departments and agencies, experts and volunteers demonstrates to the team members how natural resource conservation can broaden from interest to career opportunities.

The National Association of Conservation Districts congratulates newly appointed Assistant Chief of the USDA NRCS, Jimmy Emmons. Mr. Emmons, a third-generation farmer in Oklahoma, has worked within USDA for many years, plus has served as a local soil and water Conservation District Board member and a president of the Oklahoma Association of Conservation Districts.

The National Association of Conservation District's President, Gary Blair, provided testimony to the US Senate Agriculture Committee at a recent hearing. Mr. Blair stressed the need for USDA NRCS staffing at local service centers, emphasizing the importance of locally prioritized voluntary natural resources assistance.

The National Association of Conservation Districts, with offices in Washington, DC, provides up to date information and news from the Capitol to its board members. Recent updates highlighted congressional and executive actions, which included USDA programs being worked on in the Senate Agriculture Committee concerning the budget reconciliation, future appropriations, agency staffing capacity decreases and workforce reductions and program funding.

We offer sympathy and condolences to the family of Pam Hardin, a long time Franklin County Soil and Water Conservation District supervisor and supporter. Pam passed away this past Saturday. A service will be held in Farmington on July 20.

#### Programs (Leslie Nelson, Assistant State Conservationist for Programs)

FY 2025 Recap - The application deadline was August 2024; those are the applications that we've been working on all year. Last fall, we had the Act Now signup, and we were

able to obligate money quickly before even January in both IRA and our conservation planning activities. We had the ranking in February for our traditional sign up and right now where we stand for our EQIP, with the pools such as wildlife, urban, tribal, and also the local pools, we have pre-approved \$8.7 million in that. And 95% of those have been obligated and that represents 290 contracts. Also, under EQIP IRA funds we obligated \$4.7 million and that was 63 contracts. For EQIP, that's about \$13 million total that has been pre-approved, obligated and into the hands of the farmers to get implemented. The Agricultural Management Assistance Program (AMA).

Only 16 states in the country get money, and it's for states that have typically had low participation in federal crop insurance. We had about \$675,000 in AMA. In Maine, we target that for high tunnels and irrigation, and we've got 99% of that pre-approved. That includes 16 high tunnel applications and 10 irrigation.

The Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) is a program for producers that have already done a lot of work on their land and are looking to go above. We had \$1.2 million in CSP funds that have been pre-approved and obligated. We started with about \$1 million and received extra from the National Office in April.

The \$1.29 million representing 23 contracts.

In total, that's a little over \$15 million. The national obligation target is 80% by June 30 and we exceeded that. Thank you to all the field staff, the state staff who support them and the partners who send people to our doors.

FY 2026 - We accept applications on a year-round, continuous basis with set batching dates. For Fiscal Year 2026, our next batching deadline is Aug. 22, 2025. That's for EQIP, AMA and CSP. Please, if talking to landowners, send them to their local field office to get their application submitted by that date. Field staff are working on planning applications in addition to implementing those already contracted. The summer months are a good time for the field to plan and work on things out in the field.

Not included in the obligation numbers reported, we are still working on the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program. Under that program, we have the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), which helps protect and restore wetlands and the Agricultural Land Easements (ALE), which protects working farms. We encourage everyone to spread the word that those programs have a set that batching deadline for Fiscal Year 2026 of Oct. 3, 2025.

Now is the time for subcommittees to get us your recommendations because we're working all on our FY26 guidance right now. Thank you all for your help and time and if you have any questions let me know.

Caleb Goossen - Is the requested additional traditional Farm Bill dollars for obligating more 2025 projects or is it for FY 2026?

Leslie - 2025

Joe Roy - Do you know what the status is for the amount available for the wildlife funding pool in EQIP for the coming year for the statewide funding pool, FY2026?

Leslie - I don't. There are a lot of variables, what the allocations are going to be and how the sub accounts are going to be split up. I don't have those details this early in the season.

Matt - By statute, we shoot for a minimum of 10% for wildlife.

To Leslie - And so, do you know where we are on our percentage for this year?

Leslie - We were right around 9.5.

Matt - So if you figure \$8.7 million for EQIP, that's \$870,000 for wildlife.

To Leslie from chat - Do you know it offhand for forestry?

Leslie - No, I don't know. I don't know how much was in those local pools off hand.

Matt – Thank you to the field. It's the best I've ever seen in my career for obligating at this point in the year. And for them to do that with all of the IRA that they're implementing, the practices that they contracted last year, the construction, all the planning that's going on. Also, to the partners, with growing CSP, we can't do that alone. Thanks all around to everyone for making that happen.

Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry on the Soil and Water Conservation program coordinator – Farmers Drought Relief Fund Update (Tom Gordon)

Thanks for having me. It's a delight to talk about drought when it's raining outside. The time to plan and prepare for drought is before it happens.

In 2016 we had a drought for the first time in many years, and we had a severe drought in 2020. As a result, Senator Troy Jackson proposed a legislative bill to provide financial relief for the potato industry that had suffered economic damage. That bill was transformed into what is now known as the Farmer Drought Relief Grant program. That was passed in 2022 without a substantial amount of funding. There were requirements for looking at streamlining of regulatory processes for irrigation systems and some funding for the department to work on planning, used to contract with Rachel Chapman at the University of Maine for peer-to-peer research regarding farmers' needs relative to water supply. That has helped to inform what we're doing here now.

Paragraph 2, of the legislation, is eligibility and expresses that the primary purpose of this program is to fund a source for irrigation water and to alleviate the risk of crop losses. This has been expanded, but it's primarily to provide water sources, not full irrigation systems. There's not enough funding available to do everything. Legislature gave us the guidance that the source of water must be sustainable, environmentally sound and affordable.

We have in legislation a non-lapsing fund to achieve the purposes of the program.

Timetable - We did adopt rules and conducted a public hearing in January of this year, received comments and revised the rules accordingly. The rules were published on April 8 and the request for applications opened on May 2.

On May 9, we received approval from our Office of Procurement Services to do a blanket contract with Soil and Water Conservation Districts for 2025-2026. This allowed quick obligation of funding for the fiscal 25 year for assisting with the agricultural water planning aspect. The initial round of applications is due June 20 at 5 p.m., I anticipate a second round this winter. Application review though robust, will be turned around quickly with scoring before July 18 and notification of award decisions by Aug. 1 or sooner if possible. For our planning contracts with the conservation districts, we need to complete the invoicing for any of the FY funded plans by June 1, 2026.

There are two categories. Category One is water management plans with \$300k available. That money will be contracted through the conservation districts. Planning can be done in consultation with the approved applicant farmers, that planning can be done by district staff, by district contractors, pre-qualified vendors. We know there's a lack of technical service providers who specialize in this area, and we're going to try to enhance that process.

The second category is water source grants, and that's for wells and storage ponds. We have \$1.3 million available for that.

#### Funding - Summary

FY25 - \$300k - Plans

FY26 - \$300k – Wells and Plans

Non-lapsing - \$1million – Ponds and Wells

There are not restrictions on how quickly the non-lapsing money needs to be spent, so will be used for planning wells and ponds. The design, permitting and installation of ponds may take longer than one state fiscal year.

The website <https://www.maine.gov/dacf/ard/grants/farmers-drought-relief-program.shtml> has more about the drought relief program, the rules, the questions and answers, the application forms there.

Eligibility - The program is intended for Maine residents and primarily landowners.

However, we can support the use of leased fields if the landowner is supportive of the proposal from the applicant. We set an eligibility requirement of annual farm sales of at least \$10,000. Exceptions allowed if a farm with gross sales of \$2,000 or more can demonstrate unique benefits to the local food economy or if there's an ancestral history of disinvestment or land dispossession. Emphasis is on cropland, not primarily for livestock, processing or residential use. Altered in rule making process to allow the use of grant funds for farms that are dealing with livestock or processing, as long as those additional uses will not impair the primary intent of cropland irrigation, and that there'll be no increased environmental impact from the water use.

Online application - Using a Microsoft forms online application with supplemental materials submitted by e-mail including: an aerial photo or location map, NRCS soils map, price quote for an installation project and an IRS schedule F or C to demonstrate their financial eligibility. Additional information needed includes the number of acres, the crops that grow, evidence of past drought losses, information on their current water source, current water management practices and current soil health practices that they use.

Allowable Costs – For category one, it is primarily for an agricultural water management plan, either prepared by the conservation district or another qualified technical service provider.

For category two, funding can be provided to install or deepen a dug water well, to install a drilled bedrock well, install gravel packed well, construct, expand or improve an existing or new water storage pond, and also to provide water pumps and other equipment for a water storage pond.

Field irrigation equipment such as center pivot systems and micro irrigation systems are not allowed. Water supplies for livestock, dairy, residential use of commercial processing outside the intended purpose are not included, apart from possible exceptions by the Commissioner were projects might involve some component of those as long as they do not impair the use of the system for crops.

For agricultural water plans, funding up to \$7500 for any individual plan to a conservation district. There is \$300,000 allocated to this which would allow for approximately 40 plans.

The planning can be done by a district employee or by a district contractor, or by a third-party technical service provider. Coordination with the NRCS Field Office is very much encouraged. We're not intending to compete with NRCS but extend federal funding by



utilizing the aspects that we can fund possibly with more speed and flexibility. For water source development, 90% of the cost will be funded, leaving a 10% match for each producer. Dug wells can be funded up to \$15,000, drilled wells up to \$25,000, water storage ponds up to \$50,000 and a gravel pack well up to \$50,000. Updates and revisions to rulemaking, including relating to these dollar amounts for future rounds, are possible if necessary due to price increases.

Note that compliance with the DEP low flow rule and all relevant environmental permitting is required. There are some exemptions on groundwater wells for agricultural purposes.

The rules prohibit duplication NRCS financial assistance for the same specific practice

Felix - In past years at different levels has been a concern from landowners that if a drilled well came up dry, the funding would be canceled and the landowner would be stuck with the total cost of the failed well drilling. Has there been any relief or changes on that?

Tom Gordon - Yes, this is something that we heard in our peer-to-peer sessions with farmers. Matt and I have talked about this and there's a way for the NRCS to work out issues with under-producing wells. In the State's rules, if a well does not produce water, the farmer can request a second well to be drilled. If we have funding available in our funding categories, it will be considered. We will not withhold funding if a well does not produce. We wanted to have assurance for farmers that they would not be at risk if the first attempt at a well drilling didn't work.

Tom K- Good question, Felix. The link to that program is the chat and the Q&A section there answers that question and a lot of others.

Matt - Tom G, Thank you for this. And you hit on a few things there that are incredible. This is a game changer with flexibility, speed and payments. This program, and DACS healthy soils program are not competition. This is all about the farmer, so we're all in this together. We're committed to working with you and providing support however we can. Thank you for this and for speaking today. This is great news.

Tom G - Super. If there are folks who are looking to do last minute application, the form is relatively easy and I encourage NRCS staff, if they can, help people with requested maps. We'd love to see as many applications as possible that will build the case for future funding. Thanks for the opportunity to talk about this.

Caleb with MOFGA, - I imagine this is a big ask, but wondering if the department has done any work to consider and make recommendations for a future iteration of the program. The last time there was funding like this was a long time ago and a lot of people have been waiting a long time to see it come around again.

Tom G - The bureaucratic wheels turn slowly. The time to get this up and running has been frustrating. Given the tight budget that the state is facing right now, we did not feel it was appropriate to make an ask when we hadn't committed any of the funding yet. We're going to try to get this first round of funding out quickly and depending on how that goes, we might be making proposals to the legislature in the upcoming legislative session. That will be a decision by the Commissioner, but we do want to demonstrate that there's interest in the program. Obviously, if we had a run of dry weather, that's the best way to demonstrate interest in this program. We've got to show some results on the ground to justify seeking more money. We are aware of this and we want to make sure that we are able to keep the program going. To clarify, in addition to the \$1 million non-lapsing fund, the \$300,000 that I've referenced, that is an ongoing

appropriation. So unless the legislature changes its mind, we anticipate having \$300,000 a year on an ongoing basis. Hopefully that will provide some amount of support for keeping this program running.

#### Subcommittee Reports (Chris Reidy, Acting SRC)

Kira Jacobs, Source water protection - NRCS headquarters issued the bulletin, which the subcommittee, needs to work on this summer. Ashley Hodge from the main CDC drinking water program couldn't be with us today. We have not convened the subcommittee. Our source water protection work in Maine has been, in a good way, on autopilot due to hard work going back 5-6 years to respond to the source water protection bulletin where thoughtfully, using data and meeting with the main DEP person, Tony( Jenkins) and Tara King we came up with a robust source water protection plan.

In the 2018 farm bill, 10% of conservation dollars (Matt - This year about \$15 million total.) with some exceptions would need to be directed to what we call source water protection areas. Source water protection areas are the state defined areas, both groundwater and surface water that supply drinking water to our public water supplies. It does not include private water supplies, which are important as are irrigation wells, but for the definition of the safe Drinking Water Act and how the language is written in the farm bill, it's for public water supplies such as Bangor Water District, and all the others that exist in the state of Maine.

NRCS headquarters has responded to our request for better graphics and mapping so we can look at this. What we're also working on is getting better data. I might ask for a little bit of input. Since Tony retired, the new contact for source water protection?

Matt - For about another week or two, Chris Reidy and then Chris Phinney.

Kira - [This is an interactive map](#) on NRCS's headquarters site. Blue represents both groundwater and surface water. These are the areas we have chosen as the state of Maine drinking water program worked with NRCS to create these source water protection priority areas. It's related to the population in the state of Maine. This is a combination of both groundwater and surface water for the most part. And then we have a lot of groundwater systems.

So why is this important? What this means is that in these areas we have prioritized this area. The 10% of the conservation dollars in the farm bill that NRCS receives needs to be directed to these priority source water protection areas. The concerns are water quality and quantity and this relates to what Tom just presented. Previously we were focused on water quality so that's a conversation we could have. That should be updated for Maine.

Now looking at [the Refining Source Water Protection Local Priorities bulletin](#). Matt must get all of contracts committed by a certain date, which I think is in April. So, any changes to this round of the bulletin, we'd be looking at federal fiscal year 27 because you've already made your plans for 26.

I feel good about the areas that we've chosen in Maine. We are focused on the 12-digit watersheds we call HUC, hydraulic unit code, and we're looking at water quality, resource concerns, nutrients, sediments, pathogens and algal blooms in Maine. We need to look at water system violations, the size of the population, all these things.

I want to emphasize that I feel good about what we have in place. We need to focus on how we communicate this to landowners because the second piece of this is that in those priority source water protection areas, Maine NRCS has almost every single practice eligible for the 90% payment rate, but landowners and producers may not know this. How we can do an even better job getting the word out is a conversation for the source water protection subcommittee. I will convene a meeting next month. Input is encouraged and if anybody would like to be a part of this conversation about protecting drinking water supplies in the state of Maine, that would be great. Also, this sub-committee is looking for a co-chair. Questions for me?

Matt - Thank you for sharing that information. You coming up with these proposals and running them through the committee is the perfect example of what we need out of the State Technical Advisory Committee. So, this program ranking, if you want to see some different priorities in the ranking, please share your thoughts. Thank you, Kira.

Kira - You're so welcome. Thank you, Matt.

Chris Reidy, Acting State Resource Conservationist since Tony Jenkins stepped down in May. I'll be here for a couple more weeks and then Chris Phinney will begin the acting state resource conservationist position. We will continue with the sub-committee reports.

George McLaughlin, Irrigation – No updates from irrigation subcommittee at this time.

Nicole Rogers, Forestry – The forestry subcommittee decided not to have a formal meeting of the subcommittee, while we're waiting for some additional updates on the structure and funding available through NRCS. Would like to reiterate what we had talked about at our last subcommittee meeting in terms of the forestry practices we would like to see NRCS support. Those include crop tree release, precommercial thinning, planning for insect outbreaks, brush management and anything that can be done in the realm of invasive plant control. Also want to reiterate how important this funding is for landowners and for the forestry professionals that help write the plans and help with the implementation. We will tentatively meet next quarter to see where things stand with NRCS before we ask folks to convene.

Matt- Nicole, thank you. One thing you might consider with the subcommittee is taking a look at our payment scenarios and identifying which one of those would be priorities for each of those practices. If you're not familiar with that, Jerry can walk you through those and help with that.

Joe Roy, Wildlife - Met in late January of this year to discuss a few things. We got a presentation on WRE and ALE to get people up to date on what opportunities there are. We also talked about the statewide wildlife funding pool and strategies of getting more people to access that. We appreciate having that funding pool. We're looking forward to seeing how that works out at the state level then have discussions in the future about what practices we would like to see kept in that or added and how it's working for the end user. We also had a presentation on Act Now that was given back in January to give people more information on that whole process.



Matt - Joe, thank you for that. I spoke with Amanda Cross with Fish and Wildlife Service last week and she's going to look at the WRE ranking and mention that she would get with you on that and if there's any potential changes, run that through the wildlife subcommittee to get your thoughts. So, you might be hearing something from her on that. Thank you.

Joe - That's great to hear. My agency has started to identify a list and some potential partners to help reach out to people who could be interested in WRE projects.

Carrick Gambell, Urban and Small Scale - Congratulations to Chris on your move. The urban and small-scale ag subcommittee has met twice so far this year. We last met in May we discussed the ranking questions and decided to suggest some changes to the FY26 ranking questions to prioritize giving more points to practices providing opportunities for growing in otherwise contaminated soil. Also we suggested adding a question prioritizing applicants that are providing community engagement. We also talked about small scale scenarios for practices that improve pollinator habitat, because that's a good opportunity in urban and small-scale settings to improve the pollinator habitat and the benefits that occur. Jeremy Markson talked a little bit about those practices and that's something that we want to talk about going forward in future subcommittee meetings

Matt - Thanks Carrick. Please do send up those recommendations on those practices and whatever you find out about scenarios too. Thank you.

Carrick - Yes.

Chris - Thanks, Carrick

#### STAC Issues and Input (Chris Reidy, Acting SRC)

NRCS remains committed to sticking with our roots and keeping our folks on the cutting edge of technology. We're going to do the best with what we've got and keep folks up to speed on, providing technical assistance and helping people help the land

#### STAC Feedback (Matt Walker, State Conservationist)

One of the highlights of these meetings is hearing from the partners. Tom Gordon's presentation was amazing and it's a great new program and opportunity to get that word out. We are looking at Sept. 10, possibly for the next STAC meeting. I would really like to see any changes you want to see to our financial or technical assistance priorities be submitted up to Tom, me and the acting SRC. Then we could run through that as a whole state technical advisory committee and collect any thoughts. Ideally, we'd send those out ahead of time and then we could discuss thoughts at the meeting, and we can get that incorporated potentially for FY26 incorporation as we roll out into our new programs in October.

But again, I really want to hear from you all and respond to the local needs that you all identified. These meetings are important. Next time we'll maybe know more about what our staffing and our future organization will be, but also how we want to prioritize programs in the future. Thank you for your time and commitment joining today.

Meeting ended