

**New Jersey State Office**

200 Clocktower Drive  
Suite 101  
Hamilton Square, NJ 08690

Meeting Date: Wednesday, June 11, 2025

Meeting Location: Wertman Farms and the NRCS Mt. Olive Service Center

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Evan Madlinger opened the meeting at 10:00 am. He welcomed everyone, thanked both employees and partners for their participation in the State Technical Committee, and those in attendance gave their name, agency, and position.

**Attendance:**

Anthony Zotynia	Fran DeFiccio	Linda Peterson
Arelys Ortiz	Fred Schoenagel	Marc Virgilio
Bea Sabouathone	Ines Zimmerman	Michael Kent
Benjamin Langey	Jacob Bailey	Milton Vega
Craig Chianese	Jessica Henry	Nate Henderson
Daphne Bacon	Jill Ott	Robert Pinedo
Dave Clapp	Judson Kratzer	Samantha Loscalzo
Dianna Morrison	Julie Hawkins	Sandra Howland
Don Donnelly	Kaitlin Farbotnik	Tara Walker
Doreen Beruck	Kathy Hale	Trish Long
Evan Madlinger	Laura Tessieri	Virginia Lamb

**10:05 AM Wertman Farm Project – Anthony Zotynia, NRCS**

The farm's history is introduced by Anthony Zotynia, NRCS-NJ Mount Olive Natural Resource Specialist, and includes farm owner Kevin detailing its original dairy operation since 1967. Kevin spoke to the issues stemming from liquid manure storage and challenges related to waste management as the farm transitioned to a grazing operation. Kevin described the current state of the farm, including its beef cattle operation specializing in non-GMO practices, the variety of livestock being raised, and the difficulties faced with overgrown pastures and the need for rehabilitation. Kevin provided an overview of the operational changes, including the establishment of a rotational grazing system impacted by the terrain and previous overgrown conditions, and the economic challenges faced in funding necessary improvements. Discussion of the NRCS's involvement began with identifying problems related to stormwater management, particularly the flooding issue experienced by the barn, and outlining the conservation planning process to systematically address these problems. It was shared how flooding impacts both livestock and pasture productivity, illustrating the intricate relationship between environmental management and farming operations, leading to a proactive approach in seeking assistance.

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The significance of pasture restoration and ongoing assessments of resource conditions is emphasized, addressing the need for innovative solutions that consider the landowner's objectives and agricultural capabilities. A detailed examination of soil and water testing was provided, with the importance of understanding nutrient management and the results from previous tests guiding the planning of resource management systems.

The collaborative effort between NRCS and Kevin in developing a flooding solution is illustrated both in person as well as on the handouts Anthony put together, describing the technical methodologies employed in analyzing and planning the infrastructure to manage stormwater effectively. The narrative explains the implementation of practical measures to handle stormwater runoff, such as catch basins and proper drainage systems, while managing the complexities posed by existing structures. Reflections on the construction phase convey the importance of accurate planning and execution and address the challenges faced during the implementation of the designed water management systems. The presentation concluded with insights gained from the project, touching on the lessons of adaptability and flexibility in farming practices, particularly in light of increasing storm intensity and changes in climate patterns.

#### Highlights:

- Dairy to Grazing Transition - Focused on the repurposing of buildings and improving livestock management through innovative strategies.
- Stormwater Management - Highlighted the technical complexities of managing flooding issues and environmental concerns related to nutrient runoff.
- Collaborative Solutions - Emphasized the partnership between the farm owner and NRCS professionals in developing sustainable practices for agricultural operations.
- Economic Considerations - Discussed funding challenges and adaptive strategies, indicating the financial dynamics involved in agriculture.
- Soil and Water Testing - Underlined the importance of testing for effective nutrient management and sustainable farming practices.

#### Questions from the group

1. What previous operations did the farm focus on before transitioning into a grazing operation?
  - a. The farm originally operated as a dairy farm focusing on managing liquid manure, which later posed environmental challenges leading to its transition.
2. What are some of the difficulties associated with managing livestock in overgrown pastures?
  - a. Difficulties include inadequate grazing quality, loss in livestock productivity, and the complexities of managing overgrown vegetation for effective rotational grazing practices.
3. How do stormwater management issues affect agricultural production?
  - a. Stormwater can lead to flooding, nutrient pollution, scouring, and reduced pasture productivity, making proactive water management essential for farm sustainability.
4. What role does NRCS play in assisting farms with environmental management?
  - a. NRCS provides guidance, funding support, and resources for farmers to implement conservation practices that enhance sustainability and address environmental concerns.

#### **1:40 PM**      **Business Meeting – Welcome and Introductions, Evan Madlinger, Jill Ott, and Julie Hawkins, NRCS**

Evan presented Don Donnelly, Forester with NRCS-NJ, with his 5-years of service certificate.

Jill Ott, NRCS-NJ District Conservationist, welcomed everyone to the new service center in Mount Olive, formally Hackettstown. Mt. Olive Service Center services 7 counties, 4 districts, and hosts 10 NRCS employees and 2 National employees at this location. Mt. Olive has 320 active contracts, totaling just over 11 million dollars. These contracts cover a wide range, including forestry and livestock, and are picking up small scale farming and irrigation in the Newark area. Julie Hawkins, NRCS-NJ State Conservationist, addressed the group with a big thank you to all participating members, including Jill and Anthony. The farm project really shows how joining forces with partners can provide resources to implement conservation.

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Updates since the last State Technical Committee meeting:

- The new Chief of NRCS was appointed on April 7 - Aubrey Bettencourt. She is visiting states (Missouri and Kansas were first). She will be invited to the PMC 60<sup>th</sup> celebration being held at the end of September 2025.
- Inflation Reduction Act - NRCS will not be able to move forward with that funding for producer contracts for FY25. Technical Assistance dollars will not be swept and will have them in the budget. The Technical Service Provider needs that District Conservationists had expressed earlier in the year are now being submitted for funding approvals.
- NRCS does not have the final budget for the year, even though the continuing resolution was passed. The agency has not received a full apportionment.
- The Return to office continues. NRCS had a number of staff that have been incorporated into our field offices and our state offices. There are about 2,000 employees with USDA that are on the waiting list for seats in our offices.
- Items under review include: the partnership with Climate Smart Commodities (revision, realigning, and sending out new guidance) where NRCS hopes to get more guidance as those reviews continue, to see where the agency is headed with the new Farmer First focus; the Deferred Resignation Program (where NRCS NJ is down 17 staff, which is 23% of the positions), which is currently on hold in the court system; the Budget Reconciliation Bill (which eliminates NRCS Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA) funding, estimate \$800,000,000 as well as taking the inflation reduction act funding, incorporate that into the baseline, and raise the amount of funds per program); the President's Budget Plan for 2026 (which looks to eliminate the CTA funding in the private lands conservation operations funds with a focus on state and local governments doing conservation planning as opposed to NRCS, which would really force the agency more into program planning),

**1:45 PM December Meeting Minutes Review – Evan Madlinger, NRCS and Tara Walker, NRCS**

Only one change brought to the group – Dr. Qiu's name entry in the December Minutes needs to be revised.

**1:50 PM FY2025 Farm Bill Programs Update – Fran DeFiccio, NRCS**

Fran DeFiccio reviewed the NRCS-NJ allocations for the Programs division.

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funds in the amount of \$15,781,399 were swept
- EQIP allocation through the Farm Bill (FB)- \$8,533,864
  - Livestock – 5 contracts totaling \$1.3 million
  - Grazing – 12 contracts totaling \$850,000
  - High Tunnel - 10 contracts totaling \$750,000
  - DIA/CEMA - 126 contracts totaling \$766,000
  - Forestry – 6 contracts totaling \$185,000
  - Wildlife – 5 contracts totaling \$200,000
  - Tree Mortality - 9 contracts totaling \$772,000
  - Soil Health - 13 contracts totaling \$1.4 million
  - South Local Working Group – 2 contracts totaling \$420,000
  - Central Local Working Group - 3 contracts totaling \$300,000
  - North Local Working Group - 5 contracts totaling \$220,000
- General allocation - \$7,717,090
- National Water Quality Initiative (NWQI) allocation - \$486,774
  - Earmarked for Upper Salem and Upper Cohansey locations.
- Golden Wing Warbler Initiative (GWW) allocation - \$100,000
- Joint Chiefs Initiative allocation - \$230,000
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) IRA funds in the amount of \$935,228 were swept
- CSP FB allocation - \$1,050,000
  - Agland – 20 contracts totaling \$515,000
  - Nonindustrial Private Forestland – 19 contracts totaling \$460,000
- Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) FB allocation - \$250,000

- High tunnels – 3 contracts
- No AMA Risk Management Agency funds received this year
- Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)
  - NJ Coastal Aquaculture Project – final year of contracting
    - Includes 18 contracts totaling \$672,000
    - Primary focus on restoration of coastal reef – spat on shell
  - NJ Small Farm Food Link – final year of contracting
    - Includes 3 contracts totaling \$200,000
    - Primary focus on soil and air quality, source water protection
  - For FY25, no date for partner proposals were announced for RCPP.

Fiscal Year 2026 – EQIP, CSP, and AMA signup cutoff is to be determined (TBD).

#### **Fiscal Year 2025 Easement Update**

- Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) and Wetlands Reserve Easements (WRE) allocation - \$1,872,106
- ACEP ALE – Farm Bill allocation - \$1,040,916
- ACEP WRE - Farm Bill allocation \$822,082
  - 2 eligible applications estimated at \$480,000
  - 99 acres
- Current Stewardship:
  - 276 Agricultural Land Easements Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (ALE/FRPP) preserving 23,000+ acres
  - 47 Wetland Reserve Easements Wetlands Reserve Program (WRE/WRP) preserving 6,000+ acres
  - 3 Emergency Watershed Protection Floodplain Easements (EWPP-FPE) preserving 580+ acres
  - 2 RCPP US Held Easements preserving 23+ acres
  - 1 Grassland Reserve Program Easement (GRP) preserving 19 acres of grassland

Reminder – if anyone wants to sign up for the NRCS programs, even though there is no cutoff date, the signups are continuous.

#### **2:08 PM Farm Service Agency Program Updates – Doreen Beruck, FSA**

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) update –

- Submissions of offers for general signup and continuous signup ended June 13, 2025.
- The second batch of general signup and CRP grassland signup to be announced.
- Currently has 1,959.33 acres enrolled in all the various options of CRP, whether it's continuous, conservation reserve enhancement, the state acres for wildlife enhancement, general, and grasslands.
  - 264 contracts with an average rental rate of \$78 per acre
- Contracts expiring 2025 – 31 covering 182.38 acres
- Contracts expiring 2026 – 33 covering 138 acres
- Contracts expiring 2027 – 20 covering 150 acres

Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) update – 194 contracts, average rental rate \$164 per acre

State Acres for Wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) update –

- NJ SAFE - Development of Landscape Scale Agricultural Heritage and Habitat Conservation Plans (NJAS) – Contract Acres 167.77
- NJ SAFE - Grassland Habitat Restoration and Management (CWF) – Contract Acres 195.17
- NJ SAFE - Raritan-Piedmont Wildlife Habitat Partnership (RPWHP) Implementation of Grassland Conservation Plan – Contract Acres 186.3
- NJ SAFE- Signup 59 and forward- Contract Acres 139.34

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CRP Grassland update – 12 contracts, average rental rate \$33 per acre, total contract acres 737

**2:10 PM          Soils Reference Map for Animal Disposal in New Jersey – Milton Vega, NRCS**

Milton provided a demonstration of the soils reference map for animal disposal. NRCS-NJ State Soil Scientist Edwin Muniz created the tool in the wake of bird flu as a way to quickly determine sites for farmers to dispose of carcasses. This application correlates eleven soil survey interpretations related to animal disposal suitability across New Jersey. This information should be considered as an additional source of information and not a replacement for any local or state requirement for animal disposal. Website address: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/state-offices/new-jersey/new-jersey-soils>. Layers available include, but are not limited to:

- Large Animal Mortality Burial
- Large Animal Disposal Pit
- Large Animal Disposal Trench
- Composting Facility Subsurface
- Composting Facility Surface
- Clay Liner Material
- Composting Medium and Final Cover
- Emergency Disposal by Shallow Burial
- Trafficability VEH Type 7

The trafficability layer was designed as a quick tool for farmers to use during planning if they suffer a large-scale mortality and bury on-site. This tool does not replace site visits.

**2:30 PM          LWG Feedback Discussion– Various NRCS Staff**

NRCS State Resource Conservationist Evan Madlinger highlighted some comments from different local work groups and the information presented to them as ways to remedy the concerns.

Concern from Morris County District – importance/need for conservation plans.

- NRCS understands the demand for state regulations
- There is a demand for NRCS plans outside of their programs and normal workload
- Monthly meetings with NJDA to discuss these issues
- Roles of CEMAs and trying to get more people certified as planners
- Inclusion of non-NRCS employees in NRCS training

Concern from Morris County District – practices not easily accommodating to innovative production/value added products

- NRCS has the authority to do interim standards (3-year period) before converting to a standard.
- Conservation Innovation Grants are available for new and innovative ideas, with an every-other-year cycle
- Practices have to address a resource concern as NRCS is still a resource-based organization.

Concern from Cape May District – NRCS lacks the resources available for technical assistance

- Staffing and program workload limitations.
- Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG) is one method NRCS shares their standards, information, and training.

Concern from Cape May District – Coastal Issues

- Limitations based on jurisdiction (Army Core)
- Cape May Plant Material Center (PMC) work on saltwater intrusion
- Past and present marsh restoration
- Work with aquaculture producers
- RCPP as an option

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#### General Concern – Cover Crop

- 70% cover in the spring but erosion could occur over winter even with spring green-up
  - This rule was changed for all FY25 programs; it was creating resource concerns
  - NRCS-NJ state instruction outlining requirements for certifying vegetative practices is being updated
  - Practice payment guidance will be updated as well to read “any species planted after the seeding date prior to high-risk periods of erosion must be planted using no-till drill/planter or no-till broadcast methods. The appropriate adjusted seeding rates must be used. This applies to fall plantings.”
- Aerial Seeding used to be a separate aerial scenario
  - Any scenario within 10% payment rate of another scenario were combined
  - Drone seeding is an allowable method
  - If NRCS wants to update the cost of any scenario, multiple itemized receipts from the previous 2 years are required to propose a new or revised standard
  - No FY26 new scenario requests are allowed at this time

#### General Concern – Economics: Need for the sharing of the economics of conservation

- Economics is mentioned in the beginning of the Planning Procedures Handbook and should be discussed with the farmer.
- Farmers are also responsible for getting their own quotes before signing a contract.
  - Planners should help farmers make informed decisions – present CSP cost, EQIP cost, CSP deferred application, if applicable.
- Economics of Conservation Planning is a course required for Level 3 Conservation Planning

#### General Concern – New Department of Environment Protection (DEP) rainfall data and storm intensity

- Most practices plan for a 10-year storm if related to waterway diversion
  - Note: the rate difference between information output from software versus DEP numbers was six hundredths of a percent.
- Most practices plan for a 25-year storm if protecting a structure
- NRCS provides spot checks for highly erodible lands and if ephemeral gullies exist.
  - Variance exists for extreme weather events
  - Northern-based farmers are setting up their own weather stations to establish data as microclimate isn't being captured by the mainstream weather stations.

NRCS-NJ Forester Don Donnelly provided forest composition information for the state. NJ has approximately 2,000,000 acres of forest, 46% is private forest land. 900,000 acres NRCS can make an impact through various programs.

- Increasing forest resiliency is one of three land-based objectives listed in the NJ strategic plan.
- Forestry routinely ranks among the top 10 contracted practices in NJ each year.
- Forestry remained a funding priority in FY25, despite the increased funding NJ was oversubscribed with program applications.

#### Themes that were brought up during local working groups:

- More forestry work in the pinelands
  - Pylon commission permitting process and strict regulations are one hurdle
  - 7,200 forest landowners' work is guided by forest management plans (primarily the emphasis on format assessment, which uses those documents for contracting); contracting requires consultants.
  - Much of the work in the pinelands deals with low grade wood products; local yellow pine forest tends to be less commercially viable resulting in the economic component that would tie into the cost share program.
  - Newer NRCS-NJ staff in southern offices showing more interest in forestry than historically shown, self-promoting programs and taking active interest in writing more contracts.



- NRCS-NJ created an internal forest management plan template, which they hope will facilitate quicker implementation.
- Prescribed burning, FSI, brush management, and residue treatment are used for wildfire mitigation.
- Joint Chief's Landscape Restoration initiative provides a dedicated fund pool in the Pinelands to address wildfire mitigation issues.
  - Utilizing Joint Chief's funding, The New Jersey Forest Fire Service partnered with Tall Timbers Research Station in Georgia, to create a curriculum for private landowner prescribed burning certificate to be in alignment with the NRCS prescribed burn bill that passed several years ago.
- The New Jersey Forest Fire Service created a new tool showing burn probability, independent of weather conditions.
- Agroforestry
  - New interest in regenerative farming
  - Increased interest in silvopasture and biological brush management
  - NRCS-NJ worked on technical note guidance documents with an agroforestry section that will be included in the planting vegetative planting guide
- Forest Easements
  - NRCS remains interested in as an agency
  - NRCS-NJ State Soil Scientist Edwin Muniz built a GIS tool to identify priority parcels for acquisition based on the productivity of the soil
  - NRCS does not have the capacity to hold all forest easements; partnership through the RCPP program would be a good mechanism.
- Navigating NRCS programs is overwhelming
  - Proposing overview meetings, virtual meetings, evening meetings for farmers and landowners
  - Provide literature information to farmers at service centers
  - Encourage farmers to explore farmers.gov to apply for programs
    - Completed avenues include twilight meetings and on-farm meetings
- Payment rates do not match NJ cost
  - NRCS-NJ staff encouraged to ask program participants to submit bills for use during regional cost development.
    - Bills must be detailed by component
  - Cost assistance is not 100%
- Preserved Farms earn extra ranking points for program consideration
  - NRCS focuses on resource concerns.
  - If two farms have equal resource concerns and practices planned to address those concerns, the preserved farm would receive higher ranking points.

### Questions from the group

1. When will the planting guide be released?
  - a. The draft is estimated to be completed by the end of the calendar year.

NRCS-NJ Public Affairs Specialist Jacob Bailey reviewed more comments from the local work groups.

- A one-page flyer with before/after photos would be helpful
  - NRCS-NJ is looking to include more before/after visuals into factsheets, pamphlets and online materials
  - Internal newsletter will begin featuring the before/after visuals
- Outreach and guidance regarding process of applying for programs
  - NRCS-NJ continually look for opportunities to conduct outreach and education on the process of applying for programs, including our Getting Started with NRCS Guide, which can be found at [https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2024-07/NJ\\_NRCS\\_Get\\_Started\\_Guide\\_07\\_2024.pdf](https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2024-07/NJ_NRCS_Get_Started_Guide_07_2024.pdf)

NRCS-NJ Area Resource Conservationist Craig Chianese provided a review of Field Operations.

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- What is holding up irrigation, why was irrigation not being implemented
    - Increased workload for the entire state (151 contracts total for irrigation; southern service centers account for the most contracts)
    - Increased staffing for the southern-based service centers
      - New staff don't have job approval authority; 1 irrigation specialist reviewing all designs.
      - With increasing expertise, the total number of pending should work their way down.
      - State hosting irrigation training to increase knowledge

Dave Clapp from SADC spoke about the Next Generation Farmer Program as there were a few comments derived from the local work groups in relation to this topic. Participants for this program are newer (within 1 year) and was rolled out with the increased funds from the legislature to hire staff.

- Comment – it is overwhelming for farmers to understand all the opportunities
  - Next generation farmer does not mean new – it means helping people transition.
  - It includes supporting established farmers and they enhance their operations.
  - The program is not meant as a duplication of effort but to collaborate with partners to support the next generation of farmers.
    - Next generation farmer includes farm families, newcomers, active-duty military and veteran, women, urban growers, and others.
    - Succession planning, planning for next generation operations, and addressing common farm viability issues also qualify.

### **3:45 PM**      **Open Discussion – Evan Madlinger, NRCS**

Laura Tessieri from RC&D spoke to her agency and their work.

- They largely kept all of their grants, reapplying for the big one tied to the grazing initiative.
- Recently put out a call for new projects for AgAssist and EQIPAssist programs, where they can add additional cost share to projects.
  - Currently watershed based mostly, in the Delaware watershed within 100 and Warran County.
  - They have an agreement funded by DEP and the Department of Agriculture to spend on engineering needs.
  - They have a Northeast SARE grant to look at grazing schools and more technical assistance towards grazing.

Ben Langey from Ducks Unlimited spoke to his agency and their work.

- Ducks Unlimited have an engineering technician that sits in Delaware and covers from the Eastern shore of Virginia up through New Jersey, focusing on wetlands engineering.
- Ducks Unlimited started a series of outreach events, with the first one called “Breakfast with Biologists”. It is a partner collaboration held very early in the morning to ensure everyone can attend. This first event had approximately 27 attendees with great dialog, open communication, and included other partners like Pheasants Forever, Quail Forever.
  - This event garnered between 5 and 8 potential projects. The next event will be held in July in Cumberland County at the Morris River Diner.
- NJ Audubon freed up funding for Black Duck and covers the entire state of NJ.
  - Black Duck decision support tool is watershed based on a HUC12.
  - Based on dabbling duck species, how many ducks use each watershed, wetland habitat types, expectation of energy on the ground in that watershed, and if there's a surplus or deficit.
- The Delaware River Valley in the north has a huge habitat need for Black ducks and dabbling ducks as they utilize that area during spring and fall migrations.

Ines Zimmerman from NACD spoke to her agency and their work.

- The association has a virtual meeting scheduled for June 16.
- Thank you to participants of the Envirothon; the winning team is headed to Alberta Canada.
  - The winning team is being considered for additional training in the next school season.
- Looking to bring the districts along with any of the programs that could be featured at the annual conference.



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- Some districts provided cost share assistance for teens to participate; scholarships offered.
  - Not all districts participated – asked if NRCS could bring this up to the other districts that schools were interested in going but didn't have the resources.
  - Looking to bring back camping next year for the students.

**4:00 PM**

**Adjourn – Evan Madlinger, NRCS**