

Tennessee State Technical Committee Meeting

(TEAMS) Tuesday, February 13, 2024

Starting time: 9:00 a.m.

Members and Guests Present:

1. Boles, Christina – USDA FSA
2. Boles, Dustin - FWS
3. Bynum, Karina – TDEC Division of Water Resources
4. Commender, Katie (Guest, Appalachian Sustainable Development)
5. Daniels, Roger - USDA NRCS
6. Engle, Joshua – USDA NRCS
7. Fay, Conor - USDA NRCS
8. Friend, Aaron – USDA NRCS
9. Gill, Greer - USDA FSA
10. Gupton, Kelly - USDA NRCS
11. Hawkins, Arthur – USDA NRCS
12. Honicker, Leslie – USDA NRCS
13. Hoskins, Pamela - USDA NRCS
14. Jones, Dennis – USDA NRCS
15. Kaaz, Spencer – Technical Service Provider
16. Lebron, Acevedo - USDA NRCS
17. Lincicome, David – TDEC Natural Heritage Inventory Program
18. Foster, Marlon (Guest, Knowledge Quest)
19. Mayberry, Robin – USDA NRCS
20. McClurkan, John – TDA
21. McAfee, Jason – USDA NRCS
22. Miller, Alton - USDA NRCS
23. Miller, Brad – TWRA
24. Mitchell, Melanie – USDA NRCS
25. Morris, Garrett – USDA NRCS
26. Nelson, Christopher – USDA NRCS
27. Ortiz, Linda - USDA NRCS
28. Pettigrew, Harold - USDA NRCS
29. Pitchay, Dharma – College of Agriculture, TSU
30. Powelson, Jeff – American Bird Conservancy
31. Quartey, Yvonne – Quartey Botanicals
32. Rapaport, Tina – USDA NRCS
33. Richardson, Joshua – USDA NRCS
34. Richman, Alexandra – Cumberland Springs Land Company
35. Robertson, Duane - EPA
36. Stefanick, Emily – Panther Creek Forestry
37. Taylor, Kasey - Taylor Acres Farm
38. Tippens, Joel – City Farms Grower Coalition
39. Warden, Angela - Warden Consulting

- 40. Wolkonowski, Chris – USDA NRCS
- 41. Womack, John – USDA NRCS
- 42. Woodcock, John - TDF

Dennis Jones – Acting State Conservationist

Welcome/Opening Remarks

- Introduction: I am currently the acting State Conservationist for Tennessee NRCS. Mr. Sheldon Hightower is currently on detail at the departmental level. I normally serve as the Assistant State Conservationist – Field Operations in Mississippi and it's been a pleasure to be here in Tennessee working with all the great people here.
- I would like to welcome everyone this morning, I would like to take a moment to recognize the members who have joined since our last meeting: Spencer Kaaz, Kasey Taylor, Joel Tippens, Dharma Pitchay, David Lincicome, Greer Gill, and Yvonne Quarterly, welcome to the Tennessee State Technical Committee. The role you serve is a very important part of conservation, you give insight and information that we just don't have here in the office.
- Currently with the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), we depend on you to help with using those funds accurately and efficiently, we do not take this duty lightly.
- I am looking forward to a great meeting today. We'll get started with our Programs section, Garrett Morris.

Garrett Morris – Assistant State Conservationist for Programs - NRCS

- Good morning, everyone, I am Garrett Morris and I currently serve as the Assistant State Conservationist for Programs with NRCS Tennessee.
- We will be giving you updates across our programs including our Farm Bill programs and our IRA funding.
- We will start with our ACEP program, Ms. Pam Hoskins will be providing that information.

Pam Hoskins – Easement Program Manager - NRCS

- Good morning, everyone, my name is Pam Hoskins and I am the Easement Program Manager here in the Nashville State Office.
- I will start with giving a summary of the 2024 funding that we have for the Agriculture Conservation Easement Program (ACEP). We have two parts to the easement program. We have Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) and we have Agricultural Land Easements (ALE).
- WRE initial allocation is a little over \$4 million and our ALE allocation is \$600,000.
- For our program announcement for FY2024, we had an initial signup period that had a deadline of November 3, 2023. Due to low response, we had a second signup announced on December 4, 2023, with a cut-off date of January 5, 2024.
- The FY24 Area Wide Market Analysis (AWMA) and the Geographical Area Rate Cap (GARC) have been posted to the TN NRCS website.
 - The GARC is used to create a basis for the purchase of conservation easements through ACEP-WRE by placing a value per acre in different geographical areas of the state.
 - An AWMA is conducted by a private certified appraiser. The appraiser gathers data from property sales over the last 12 months on properties that fit the categories listed on the map. Once data is collected, the appraiser summarizes the data to calculate an average

value of each geographical area. TN has decided to provide compensation based on 95 percent of the average value, then round down to the nearest \$50.00.

- The GARC for TN in 2024 will include individual appraisals in some market areas. This change is due to lack of comparable property sales in those market areas in which to develop a dollar rate per acre.
- For the market areas that have a dollar rate per acre, the amount has increased considerably from past years due to higher property prices in TN.
- There are eight states that border TN, four states use the dollar per acre method and four states use individual appraisals for easement purchases.
- ACEP program applications as of February 12, 2024
 - WRE – 5 new applications
2 deferrals from previous year
 - ALE – 1 new application
 - Total applications – 8



February 2024
STAC-ACEP slides.ppt

Garrett Morris – Assistant State Conservationist for Programs - NRCS

- Staff in local TN NRCS offices are making significant progress on conservation program payments. This graph shows the number of payments made and dollar amounts for our Farm Bill programs. We are still closing out CSP annual payments, but we have completed more payments for each category than this same time in FY2023. We have exceeded EQIP payments by \$2 million, CPS-GCI by approximately \$20,000, and CSP by \$2 million.

EQIP	1127	\$14,684,162.88
CSP-GCI	617	\$363,360.66
CSP	1331	\$9,763,168.20
TOTAL	3075	\$24,810,691.73

- ACT NOW – TN NRCS is taking advantage of a new opportunity this fiscal year. “ACT NOW” is not a new program, but a new approach to how funding is addressed.
- NRCS Tennessee is implementing an extended funding opportunity for select practices through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).
- ACT NOW allows NRCS to immediately approve and obligate a ranked application in a designated ranking pool when an eligible application meets or exceeds a State-determined minimum ranking score, based on the availability of funds.
- An ACT NOW approach is being used for Soil Health, Urban, Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers, High Tunnel, Conservation Planning Activities (CPAs), Design and Implementation Activities (DIAs), and Conservation Evaluation and Monitoring Activities (CEMAs) ranking pools.

- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
 - **FY 24 Program Timeline (Key Dates)**
 - December 15, 2024 – EQIP Classic/EQIP ACT NOW Ranking Tools Released
 - January 5, 2024 – EQIP ACT NOW Preapprovals Begin
 - April 8, 2024 – EQIP Classic Preapprovals Released
 - April 19, 2024 – 100% Obligation Deadline
 - **FY24 Funding Progress**
 - \$23.39m pre-approved
- Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)
 - **FY 24 Program Timeline (Key Dates)**
 - February 8, 2024 – CSP Classic/CSP ACT NOW FY24 Signup Announcement Released
 - March 8, 2024 – CSP Classic Application Deadline
 - March 22, 2024 – CSP ACT NOW Preapprovals Begin
 - April 29, 2024 – CSP Classic Preapprovals
 - The dates listed here are some of the more important milestones for CSP. For this year’s CSP program announcement, we are using an “ACT NOW” approach along with the usual program procedures. This allows us to pre-approve and obligate funds earlier and on a continuous basis until funds are expended. We are moving through our CSP Classic timeline about 1 ½ months earlier than we did for FY23, and ACT NOW allows us to move about 2 ½ months earlier.
 - **FY24 Funding Progress**
 - \$1.9M of Farm Bill funds obligated
 - \$882K of Farm Bill funds obligated.
 - Tennessee NRCS has obligated 82 new CSP contracts for a total of \$2,879,665.
 - The remaining funds include \$13.6M FB and \$8.6M IRA.



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Christina Boles – Farm Programs Chief - FSA

- Good morning, everyone. I am Christina Boles; Brandy Broughton is no longer with TN FSA. She has taken a National Office position. We are in the process of hiring a replacement for conservation, so in the interim I will be filling in.
- Just a brief overview on our Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), it is a voluntary land conservation program, and the goal is to re-establish valuable land cover to protect the nation’s soil, water, and wildlife resources. CRP improves and preserves water quality, enhances fish and wildlife habitat, and addresses conservation initiatives for local, State, Regional and National objectives.
 - There are three options: General CRP, Continuous CRP, and Grassland CRP.
 - 10 - 15-year contracts
 - Annual Rental Payments
- Continuous CRP Signup 61
 - Notice CRP-1016

- Sign up began January 12, 2024
- Accept offers for:
 - New land under Continuous Signup
 - New land plus land scheduled to expire on September 30, 2024
 - Land scheduled to expire on September 30, 2024
- Deadline for Producers to submit a new offer, an offer for re-enrolled land, or a combination of new and re-enrolled land is close of business July 31, 2024, to have an October 1, 2024 contract start date.
- First Batching offers for Signup 61
 - The 2018 Farm Bill requires that no more than 27 million acres can be enrolled in CRP.
 - Current enrollment is approximately 24.7 million acres.
 - Contracts totaling approximately 482,527 acres are scheduled to expire on September 30, 2024.
 - FSA will batch continuous offers to ensure acreage does not exceed the statutory limitation.

Batching Period	Target Determination Date	Enrollment Type
January 12 – March 15	April 1	Continuous
		CLEAR 30
		FWP
		HELI
		SAFE (new and land scheduled to expire on September 30, 2024, offered for re-enrollment)

Note: CREP signup enrollments will be monitored separately and not batched at this time

FY 2024 Continuous CRP Deadlines


Date	Action
July 31, 2024	Deadline for producers to submit an offer for new or re-enrolled land or combination of new and re-enrolled land for continuous CRP signup 61.
August 7, 2024	Deadline for producers to request a conservation plan from NRCS County Office and deadline to enter the status in COLS as “Submit for Plan” for continuous CRP signup 61. Note: FSA must provide offers to NRCS within 5 workdays of receiving the submitted offer from the producer
September 6, 2024	Deadline for NRCS/TSP to complete the conservation plan, sign, and obtain signatures of all signatories on CRP-1s, and return the conservation plan to FSA.
September 30, 2024	Deadline for COC or CED to approve CRP-1s and load CRP-1 approvals in COLS.

- Current SU61 Overview as of 2/13/24
 - 32 Total Offers
 - 230.7 Practice Acres

- 28,785 estimated payments
- Average SRR - \$125
- 8 counties
- Tennessee Riparian Incentives Program (TRIP)
 - Alternative to the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP).
 - TVA has provided funding to TDA to provide incentive payments to producers who enter a continuous signup CRP contract for CP22 Riparian Forest Buffer for at least 10 years.
 - TDA will provide a one-time \$3,000 per acre incentive with a 5-acre cap per applicant.
 - Only lands physically inside the TN River Watershed boundary are eligible.
 - This incentive is in addition to FSA payments through CRP.
- Emergency Conservation Program (ECP)
 - Provides emergency funding to farmers and ranchers to rehabilitate farmland damaged by natural disasters.
 - Eligible land includes commercial farming, ranching, nursery, livestock, waterways, terraces.
 - Cost-share payments up to 75% of cost or 90% for limited resource farmers and socially disadvantaged producers.
 - Participants may rehabilitate farmlands by:
 - Debris removal
 - Restoring fences
 - Restoring conservation structures
 - Grading, shaping, or leveling land.
 - EC1 – Removing Debris from Farmland; EC2 – Grading, Shaping, Releveling, or Similar Measures; EC3 – Replacing or Repairing Permanent Fences; EC4 – Restoring Conservation Structures and other Installations; EC5 – Emergency Wind Erosion Control Measures; EC6 – Drought Emergency Measures; EC7 – Other Emergency Measures (requires DAPF approval to implement); and EC8 – Field Windbreaks and Farmstead Shelterbelts.
- Emergency Forest Restoration Program (EFRP)
 - EFRP is a cost share program that provides emergency funding and technical assistance to owners of Non-Industrial Private Forestland (NIPF) to carry out emergency measures to restore forest health and forest resources on NIPF damaged by natural disasters.
 - Nonindustrial private forest land means rural commercial forest lands with existing tree cover, or which are suitable for growing trees, that are owned by a private non-industrial forest landowner as defined in this section.
 - All of the following must be true for Land Eligibility:
 - Land must be physically located in the county affected by the natural disaster.
 - Land must have or had existing tree cover before disaster event.
 - Damaged that, if not treated, would impair or endanger natural resources or affect future use of NIPF.
 - EF1: Hardwood Forest Restoration; EF2: Softwood Forest Restoration; EF3: Mixed Forest Restoration; EF4: Longleaf Pine Restoration; and EF9: Other Emergency Forest Restoration (requires Deputy Administration for Farm Programs approval to implement).
 - The following activities may be covered under the EFRP practices:
 - Debris removal
 - Site prep
 - Planting

- Fence
- Conservation Structures

2024 ECP and EFRP Disasters



2024 Tennessee ECP and EFRP Request Status Report 1-ECP(Rev.7)-New ECP Software

STATE	COUNTY	Disaster Type	Date of Disaster	Date Request Received from COF/Date STO submitted to WDC	Disaster ID	Date Implementation was APPROVED	Approved ECP Practices	Sign-up Period Dates	Amount of Funds Estimated on the Request
TN	Dickson	ECP-2024 Tornado	December 9, 2023	1/3/2024		01/09/24	EC1, EC3	January 31, 2024 - February 29, 2024	\$100,000
TN	Weakley	ECP-2024 Tornado	December 9, 2023	1/3/2024		01/09/24	EC1, EC3	February 1, 2024 - March 29, 2024	\$250,000
TN	Montgomery	ECP-2024 Tornado	December 9, 2023	2/8/2024			EC1, EC3	February 12, 2024 - March 12, 2024	\$250,000
TN	Cheatham	ECP-2024 Tornado	December 9, 2023	2/8/2024			EC1, EC3	February 12, 2024 - March 12, 2025	\$100,000
TN	Dickson	EFRP-2024 Tornado	December 9, 2023	1/3/2024	1828	01/09/24	EF1, EF3	January 31, 2024 - February 29, 2024	\$100,000

- For more information about CRP and/or ECP, please contact your local FSA county office or visit www.fs.usda.gov/conservation.
- To locate your local FSA office, visit <http://offices.usda.gov>.
- FSA State Office Contact
 - Chrisina Boles, Farm Programs Chief – Christina.boles@usda.gov

John McClurkan – Tennessee Department of Agriculture

- Hello, thank you all for the opportunity to present today, it is always good to be on these calls and hear all the things going on not only with NRCS but with our partners as well. It goes without saying that we highly value the partnership that we have had for decades now with the USDA NRCS. We are very appreciative of what you all do on a daily basis in this partnership.
- I want to thank Christina for covering the TN Riparian Incentives Program. We are hopeful that in the course of your work, as you encounter landowners who may be interested in riparian forest buffers, reach out to the local FSA office. We thank FSA for really stepping up to promote this program because we really think the dollars are significant for the landowner to take advantage of this.
- I want to talk a little bit about our four-year action plan, our Governor and Commissioner of Agriculture are very committed to conservation and to soil and water conservation. I was challenged a year ago to create an action plan to do what we could to move the needle on soil and water conservation. We have developed an action plan for soil, water, and nutrients. We are working through some plans to better target our conservation efforts in places where we know there are problems. Our program has encouraged them to be targeted as much as possible with these state funds to work a worst watershed first and approach and really look at impaired waters.
- TDA maintains a robust list of waters across the state, which is updated every 2 years. The 2024 draft list is already available for public comment, and we encourage you all to go and find it on TDA website. We would love to accelerate the process toward measurable reductions and impairments due to agriculture. We are going to be reaching out to partners about taking a deeper dive into some of these watersheds and try to use the tools we have at our disposal (GIS and geo-referenced). You geo-reference your practices and if we could see the areas where we've had a concentration of practices being put on the ground and in a water body area that is impaired due

to agriculture, perhaps we could get some follow up monitoring being done there. So that is one part of our strategy, and one part of this action plan is to look at how we can accelerate improvements and de-listing of waters that are impaired by agriculture.

- We are trying to establish a baseline about nutrient management and last year we did a survey of producers with the University of Tennessee, and we had about 480 responses. The 2024 survey is out now, so I would encourage you to respond. If we could get your help in advertising the survey, I would appreciate you all going on the link and filling out the survey. You can find it on the UT Crops blog. We already have over 300 responses; it will be open until March 15. We would love to have double or triple the results of the survey we had last time. The results of the survey were encouraging on the nutrient management side, it showed an overwhelming majority of the responses said that they were using soil testing to determine the amount of fertilizer to apply which was a statewide metric.
- Over the past month, I became aware of some issues surrounding the NRCS 590 Conservation Practice Standard (CPS). I think that in order for a producer to be eligible for incentive payments under the 590 standard they must adhere to document that they are fertilizing their farm based on recommendations of the Land Grant University and those are sometimes maybe less or are different than what the agricultural retailers or certified crop advisor may propose or what the farmer thinks is the most economically viable agronomic approach for their farm. I would respectfully request that there be a subcommittee formed from the State Technical Committee to look into this issue. I know that there are changes coming to the 590 standard, perhaps this fiscal year. It's my understanding that in order to be eligible, there is a possibility the producer can either follow the Land Grant University recommendations or an alternative method of agronomy that is certified by the Land Grant University to use. This is where I think we have an opportunity to get the University of Tennessee researchers and members of this committee together. If we could get a subcommittee formed to look at that, I think we could increase the organic program, get UT to certify an alternative method of agronomy that everyone could live with and that would make more producers eligible for incentive payments under the 590 standard. That would be another metric that we can use to say we've had an increase in the number of producers eligible for the 590 standard and for incentive payments.

Leslie Honicker – State Agronomist - NRCS

- Good morning. John, thank you for your input on the CPS 590. Just so folks know how conservation practice standards work, I know we have some newer faces on the committee. Our national headquarters will release the new CPS 590, probably October 1st which gives states one year to adopt, meaning that we would release on October 1, 2025. This gives us plenty of time to incorporate changes. I would be happy to host the subcommittee on this, however until we have the national standard in place (which could include some pretty significant changes to the verbiage) I would caution us on making big changes at this time. I would be happy to meet, and I want to ensure that everyone will be included – UT, row crop folks and any input from anyone that is on the committee are welcome. Once we have the national standard, we will take approximately 60 days to make edits and all of those edits will happen internally before they are presented to the State Technical Committee. At which point they will have 30 days to comment from there.

Garrett Morris - Assistant State Conservationist for Programs

- I appreciate all of the work our partnership does and look forward to continuing the conversation about delisting waters impaired or potentially impaired by agriculture. Shifting gears here, do you have any further details on House Bill 1890 as it relates to acquisition of easements?

John McClurkan – Tennessee Department of Agriculture

- I don't have any updated information other than to say that there has been some legislation filed this session and the General Assembly and Tennessee that will establish a program in order to establish easements on agricultural land in some fashion. The intent is to try to slow down the rate of loss in prime farmland in TN. I encourage everyone to go to the TN legislative website and check out the bill.

Katie Commender – Appalachian Sustainable Development, Director of Agroforestry

- I would like to thank everyone for having me here today. I am the Director of Agroforestry at Appalachian Sustainable Development (ASD). We are a small nonprofit organization based in Southwest Virginia, and among the many things that we do, I am lucky enough since 2010 to work on increasing adoption of agroforestry with farmers across Appalachia. Over the past few years, we've been working with NRCS on a Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) towards that goal, and that touches TN.
- I wanted to share some of the results of that project, some of the exciting initiatives that have come out of conversations with NRCS from that project and explore more opportunities for partnerships.
- A quick highlight of what our agroforestry department does – there are primarily 3 different buckets. We offer farmers agroforestry, technical and financial assistance to help with implementation and adoption, and then there is our Appalachian Harvest Herb Hub facility in Duffield Virginia, which is nested with our food hub. We offer shared use of processing equipment and then marketing, aggregation and distribution services to help farmers in our region. They are growing medicinal herbs in agroforestry systems to connect with premium price markets who value sustainable production. That directly ties to our CIG project and creating market-based incentives for adoption.
- The bread and butter of our work since 2010 has been focused on training both farmers and natural resource professionals. We have been a founding member of the Appalachian Beginning Forest Farmer coalition since 2015. That's a network of nonprofits, universities, and government agencies that provide forest farming training and most recently, as a result of our CIG project, we've developed a program called Agroforestry Trainings for Natural Resource Professionals designed specifically for NRCS and others.
- Our CIG project focused on 2 primary agroforestry practices. When I say agroforestry, I really mean, farming with trees, integrating trees into crops, animal livestock operations for economic, social, and environmental benefits and forest farming or practice. Code 379 is the cultivation of high value crops, whether they're edible, ornamental, or medicinal, that are not timber that are grown under a managed forest canopy. There are a variety of benefits for forest farming when it comes to resource conservation. It can help improve soil health with organic matter. It can capture carbon, specifically in encouraging farmers and landowners to retain their forests and their tree canopy to grow these shade loving species in the understory, it can increase habitat for wildlife. It can significantly improve crop and income diversity, especially for farmers in the back 40, which they may not be utilizing right now. It encourages sustainable forest management and it's

in particular why ASD got involved with this practice. It really helps improve biodiversity and plant conservation of at-risk species like Golden Seal that you have here in TN, whose populations are declining in the wild from habitat loss and over harvesting.

- The second practice that we focused on in our CIG project is Alley Cropping or 311. That is essentially when we are growing herbaceous crops in rows in the alleyways between rows of trees or shrubs, this practice really helped this farm that's pictured on the left in Kentucky. It's one of our demonstration sites when the flooding came through Kentucky a few years ago. One of the things that she found was the perennial crops that she was growing in her alley cropping system fared okay and recovered after the flood, but her annual crops grown outside of the alley cropping system did not. Alley cropping helped reduce her surface water runoff and erosion. It also creates really amazing microclimates to improve both the quality and the quantity of the crop or the forage that you are growing in this system. It can capture and store carbon with the trees and shrubs that are integrated, and it can help enhance habitat for wildlife and beneficial insects, which can help improve crop production. It increases crop diversity. That is one of the biggest benefits that farmers see. There are a number of species mixes that can be incorporated into alley cropping systems, and of course help improve soil health.
- We were recently awarded, in partnership with Virginia Tech and Working Trees, another CIG project over the next three years called Assets and that's focusing on Silvopasture or 381. Silvopasture is when we're essentially integrating trees into grazing livestock operations and combining them intentionally on the same land. There are a lot of benefits for this practice. It can provide forage, shade, and shelter for livestock, especially in the wintertime. It can improve water and soil quality by reducing erosion. It's wonderful habitat for wildlife and pollinators and of course with the trees. We are continuing to sequester carbon and store it.
- One of the things that we've seen over the past few years with our CIG project is a pretty dramatic increase in interest from the landowners that we have been working with in TN and in the other four states.
- In Central Appalachia, we have been working within TN specifically, we worked with 170 farmers who are interested in having adopted agroforestry, 39 applied for our agroforestry technical assistance, 4 farmers so far have applied for financial assistance.
- We are launching this year a number of financial assistance programs, so we expect that number to increase even more over the next five years. With our partners at the Appalachian Beginning Farmer Coalition, we were able to train 127 forest farmers who have adopted that practice in their woodlands.
- The project itself, ASE is the lead, but we are working with a number of partners throughout Central Appalachia, nonprofit organizations, universities, and even the US Forest Service to help advance agroforestry in our region. The main goal is really to help increase the adoption of both forest farming and alley cropping and the innovative way we're going about this.
- Over the past several years, we've focused on developing market-based incentives or financial incentives for adoption. We started by offering technical assistance, so we ended up providing site visits to 86 farmers over the past several years where we go out to their woodlands and identify existing species like American Ginseng that may already be growing. We identify other sites that may be suitable for production and develop a forest farming management plan for farmers to implement forest farming in the woodlands.
- With Alley Cropping, there were a few demonstration sites in our regions, so we focused on developing 7 and then to capture the design and management practices and lessons learned, sharing all that information, we conducted 7 farm tours, and we published the case studies with the National Agroforestry Center in the publication that is pictured here.

- We also worked with Real Action and United Plant Savers who with a previous CIG project develop the Forest Farmers Handbook. We added a new chapter on an iconic forest botanical species called Solomon Seal and this book now covers several different forest botanical species that can be grown in a forest farming system. Everything from propagation all the way to post-harvest handling and marketing. This is a really great resource for farmers and natural resource professionals that's made available through this project.
- We worked with the National Agroforestry Center on another resource. This is an economic decision support tool that forest farmers can use called the Forest Farming Calculator, it essentially helps farmers see the break-even price for a variety of different medicinal forest botanical species like ginseng and goldenseal that would need to get in order to cover their costs with the operation. This tool is also available on the National Agroforestry Centers website. All of the work we have done over the past several years is based on this innovative concept of developing market-based incentive system.
- I mentioned our Herb Hub in Duffield. Over the past several years, we have been able to work with 36 farmers who are growing medicinal herbs and either an alley cropping or forest farming system and connect them with 12 domestic and international herbal products. Companies who are willing to pay premium prices for sustainably grown medicinal herbs, and they really love the fact that they're grown in agroforestry systems and in some cases for forest farm botanicals. For example, black cohosh that's harvested from the wild goes anywhere from \$4.50 to \$6 a dry pound. We are able to give farmers \$45 a dry pound or higher, so that creates a financial and system and financial incentive for adoption that has been really successful.
- The last goal that we had with our CIG Project was admittedly a lofty goal. When I was writing our CIG proposal a few years ago, I thought it would be great if all the 5 central Appalachian states that we were working in could approve all 5 agroforestry practice standards for funding. I think in my mind it was a simple you just press a button and turn the practice code on, what we realize in conversations with NRCS TN, as well as other Central Appalachian states, is that it's really not that easy. There are a lot of barriers that can prevent something like that happening and in conversations across all the states, we realized a common thread was that there was limited awareness and technical capacity for these newer alley cropping and forest farming practices and the solutions that we heard within NRCS on these calls was really a need for more cross training on these practices, more one on one mentorship and also being able to actually see what these practices look like in real life versus just a piece of paper. So, developing demonstration sites, posting farm case studies that can be shown to the farmer. Those are the types of barriers that we took into consideration throughout the life of our CIG project and helped formed a lot of the work that we did.
- We were able to do work with West Virginia where our CIG technical contact is based and then most recently Virginia in helping turn those practices on. We worked with them to refine and revise the payment schedule for forest farming, taking a look at what the forest farmers we were working with said they really needed funding for in order to implement the practice and revising the payment schedule accordingly.
- We also worked on developing an agroforestry plant establishment guide and species on the list can be suited for forest farming, alley cropping, and agroforestry practice. We also worked with West Virginia to develop a site visit Evaluation Guide. So that is something that NRCS agents can use out in the field when doing site assessments for forest farming to look at specific indicators and resource concerns that might need to be addressed.

- Lastly, most recently we've been working pretty closely with NRCS on a joint site visit. So, when there is a farmer who applies for this newly turned-on practice for EQIP, we'll go out with NRCS and do a site visit for one-on-one mentorship.
- As you know, NRCS has been provided or will be provided over the next five years \$19.5 billion from the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) to help programs for climate change mitigation. We are fortunate that all five of these agroforestry practices are approved climate smart ag and forestry practices.
- So, the most exciting outcomes of the CIG project were not in our original proposal. We ended up getting some funding from Edwards Mother Earth Foundation to develop a new program based on the feedback we heard from NRCS for agroforestry trainings for natural resource professionals. We launched two years ago; it's an interregional training collaboration with partners, universities, nonprofits, and the National Group Grocery Center throughout the southeast, northeast, and Midwest. It's designed to help build up the technical capacity for agroforestry and technical assistance to help implement all the millions of dollars of funding that is out there right now for agroforestry.
- We are doing this in a few different ways. First, we heard that demonstration sites are needed. In addition to the sites that we developed through our CIG proposal with funding from the foundation, we established an additional 9 demonstration sites, three of which are in Virginia along the I-81 corridor with Virginia Tech and all of the programming for this training is focused on the 3 practices of forest farming, alley cropping, and silvopasture. At the demonstration sites, we hosted in person training. In 2023 alone, we ended up training 225 natural resource professionals at 8 different workshops, three of which were held in Virginia. We worked very closely with Virginia NRCS to get those trainings approved for their training schedule. We had CPU credits that were offered for those trainings as well for folks who couldn't join the in-person trainings. We still wanted to make sure that training was available, so we developed six online courses that are available at www.learnagroforestry.com and those cover everything from a general introduction to agroforestry to fundamentals of forest farming, alley cropping and silvopasture.
- So, what's next? I think one of the things that we realized with the agroforestry trainings for natural resource professionals over the last two years with the valuations and additional conversations is that attending a one-day training is not enough to be able to then provide technical assistance to farmers. We were fortunate enough to get another round of funding from the Edwards Mother Earth Foundation. We have funding for 2024 and 2025 to host an additional 3 workshops in Virginia and expanding into 3 workshops in North Carolina. Some of those will be at a 101 level and some of those will now be at a 201 level (a two-to-three-day training). That's more of a design intensive, where you'll walk away having developed an agroforestry design and a management plan for a farmer. We also have an NRCS CIG grant called Assets and through that project in 2026 we'll have funding for six additional workshops and that includes Tennessee if there's interest in having trainings in the state.
- We also added a new webinar series called Ask an Agroforester. We'll be hosting 20 of those over the next few years and that's where we bring in an expert in a particular topic to do a deep dive. It could be what the different methods are for or protecting your trees in a silvopasture system and those would then be recorded and added to our YouTube channel to watch at any time.
- We also have funding right now to do farm tours in Tennessee and Virginia. North Carolina will be doing 12 of those over the next several years on many different agroforestry practices. I think maybe this is a bit of a good problem to have, but we have more funding than we know what to do with. In addition to the funding that NRCS has through the Inflation Reduction Act for

climate smart practices, we are also a sub awardee on the NRCS CIG Assets Grant, in addition to the trainings and the farm tours that also includes \$300,000 over the next three years to implement 500 acres of silvopasture in Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina

Linda Ortiz –State Resource Conservationist - NRCS

- Good morning, everyone. Thank you, Katie, for participating on today's State Technical Committee, we appreciate you. I just want to take a few moments to discuss what a conservation practice is and what the adoption process is in Tennessee.
- So, what is an actual conservation practice? As many of you know, it could be vegetative, structural, or even a management activity that will help the producers (our clients) to restore and conserve our natural resources.
- What exactly is a conservation practice standard, also known as a CPS? It is a document where you will be able to find a lot of the information related to that practice. It could define new technology. What are the general criteria for when this practice is applicable in the landscape? Also, it will provide additional considerations. And this will be based on the clients and producers' goals and objectives and there you will be able to find what are the requirements for the establishment of the practice and operation and maintenance to ensure the longevity of the practice in the landscape.
- What is the role of the conservation practice standard? The agency approach is to ensure that the products that we offer (meaning the conservation practices) are to a high-quality criteria standard, meaning that we are ensuring technology, quality, and consistency across the nation and that we are also evaluating the system components in our operation farm with our practices, but also looking at what a set of practices can be worked together for a complete system. Of course, we want to be in compliance. We have the National Environmental Protection Act, so we want to be ensuring that our conservation practices are aligned with that policy, but also helping our farmers to stay within compliance.
- And the last point is important, especially these days since we're getting a lot of new employees, the conservation practice standards allow us to carry previous research studies. Our previous experiences from NRCS employees or researchers. So that information gets passed along to new employees. We keep consistency of the implementation of the practice and when to use the practice in the landscape.
- But exactly where do you find the conservation practices? Hopefully all of you know that those are found in the Field Office Technical Guide (FOTG). The FOTG is a website. Every state has a FOTG website, and then if you search or look for Section 4, that's where you will be able to find all our conservation practices adopted in Tennessee and the associated documents with each for each of the practices.
- Here this is a quick example of the first page of a conservation practice standard. I just use Cover Crops because it's one of the most used practices in Tennessee. Here you will find the practice name, the code, the unit of where that practice is implemented. In this case, Cover Crops are implemented based on acres, but we also have other practices that are implemented based on linear feet or square footage. In addition, there on the first page you will see the definition of the practice, the purpose of the practice, where the practice applies, and then you will also find the general criteria.
- I don't have copies or screenshots for the next pages of the conservation standard, but I just want to mention that we have additional considerations and that's based again on the goals and objectives of the producers, meaning that for example, the producer wants to use conservation

cover for soil health, increase organic matter or to prevent erosion. So based on those goals or resource concerns that we would like to address, that's when we go into the additional considerations of the standard.

- What is the adoption of the conservation practice standards? This is a simple flow chart. I'm just taking you all the way to the national level. At the national level, we have national discipline leads and those are the individuals that have a set of conservation practices they are in charge of. And the goal of the agency is to be able to update the conservation practices within a 5-year cycle. Of course, that doesn't always happen because sometimes we have new technology, new information, new laws. So maybe the update of the conservation practice standard comes earlier than the five-year cycle. From the national discipline leads, they work on the national or the base of the national conservation practice and after that they share it with the state for the state technical leads to review that first draft of the national standard. Sometimes they have a special groups and teams, so they can pretty much dig into the national standard and after that, a final draft of the national standard goes to the Federal Register and once that goes through the Federal Register process, then it becomes final. The final standard gets published into the National Handbook of Conservation Practices. So right now, we are in that public period that is coming from the Federal Register. We have a practice that is going through that public period. This is a perfect time for you to do recommendations and provide comments. For those eight practices right now, we have field borders, filter strip, grazing management (which was previously called prescribed grazing), hedgerow planting, mulching, a seasonal water management for wildlife (which used to be shallow water development), structure for water control, and wetland restorations. So right now, those practices are under the public comment period, and you have until March 4 to provide comments.
- This one is mostly on how the state of Tennessee moves along into the adoption of the conservation practice. So, let's say it's already published in the National Handbook for Conservation Practices. The state takes that practice like Leslie mentioned earlier. Once that comes out, the states have one year to adopt the practice, so there's two ways of the adoption. We can adopt the national practice with no significant changes and then the practice will go into our Tennessee FOTG. The second path is taking the national conservation practice, making updates, adding additional information and state specific information like state specific requirements that will align with the state laws. So, we take the national, we adopt the state specifics and then it will go to all of you in the State Technical Committee. You will have 30 days to provide comments, recommendations, and input. These recommendations, comments, and input are associated only with the state specific requirements. That doesn't mean you cannot do any other comments or recommendations for other parts of the standard. But again, these recommendations are all only going to be applicable to the state specific information. In the past you probably have received these emails from Katherine Burse. Moving forward, you probably will be receiving these emails asking for input from Tina Rapaport, Executive Assistant to the State Conservationist.
- Also, I want to also mention that here in Tennessee, we adopt our conservation practices October 1st. So, we work on the adoption and the updates and new information throughout the year and then we adopt the new or the updated practice on October 1st. Because right now, the planners are working on new contracts and new conservation planning using the previous standard, so we start fresh on October 1st, which is the beginning of our fiscal year. So that's all I have to present, but the takeaway message for all of you is that we need your input and there's at least two ways for you to provide input on CPSs.

Dennis Jones – Acting State Conservationist NRCS

Closing Remarks

- If there are no more questions, comments, or suggestions then we will adjourn. Our next meeting is scheduled for May 14, 2024. Thank you, everyone.