

CUMBERLAND SALEM & GLOUCESTER SOIL CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

2024 LOCAL WORKING GROUP

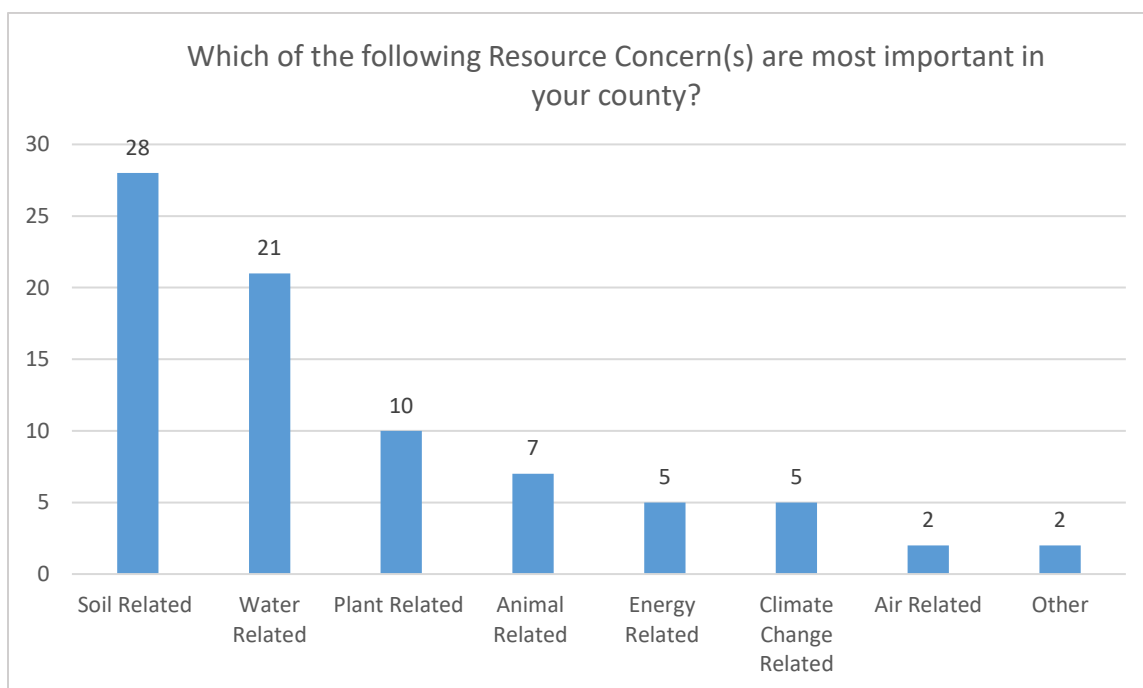
SUMMARY REPORT

Gloucester Soil Conservation District and Cumberland Salem Conservation District conducted a joint online survey and in-person meeting to determine the communities' Natural Resource Concerns.

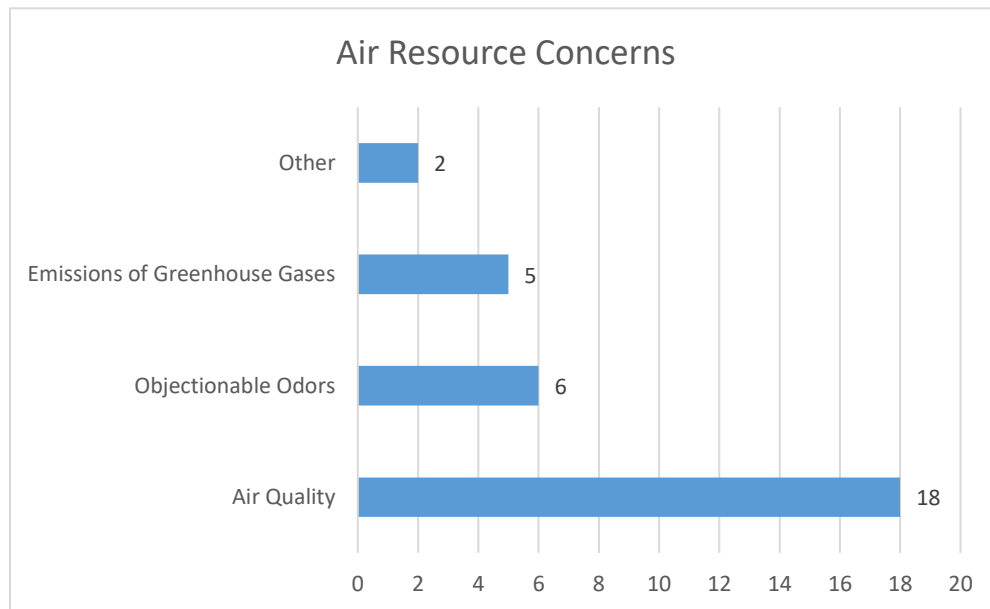
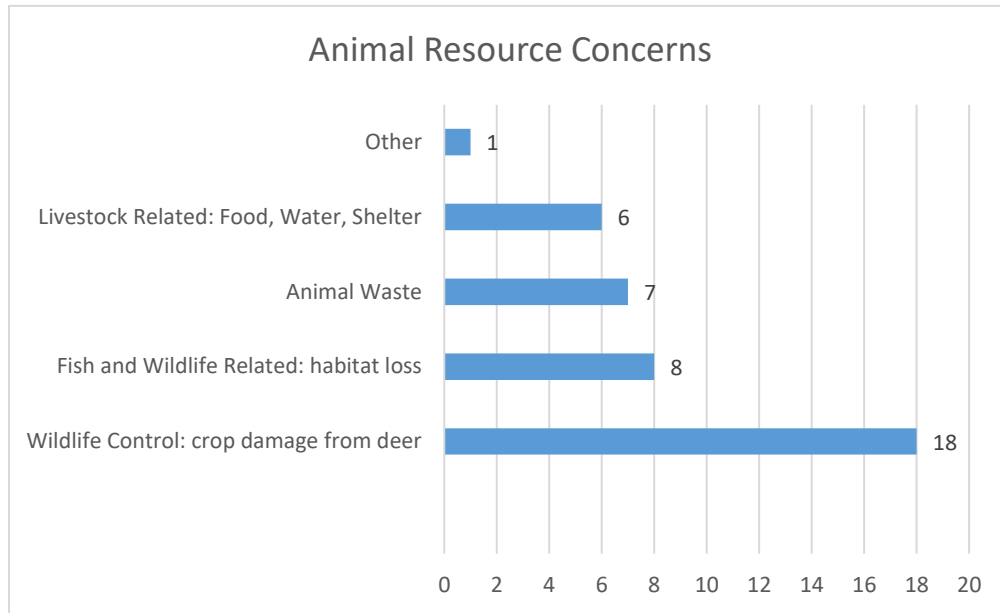
The online survey contained nine (9) questions focused on identifying Resource Concerns. Three (3) questions focused on NRCS Conservation Programs. Five (5) questions addressed participant specific demographics (industry representation, age group, county of residence, contact information).

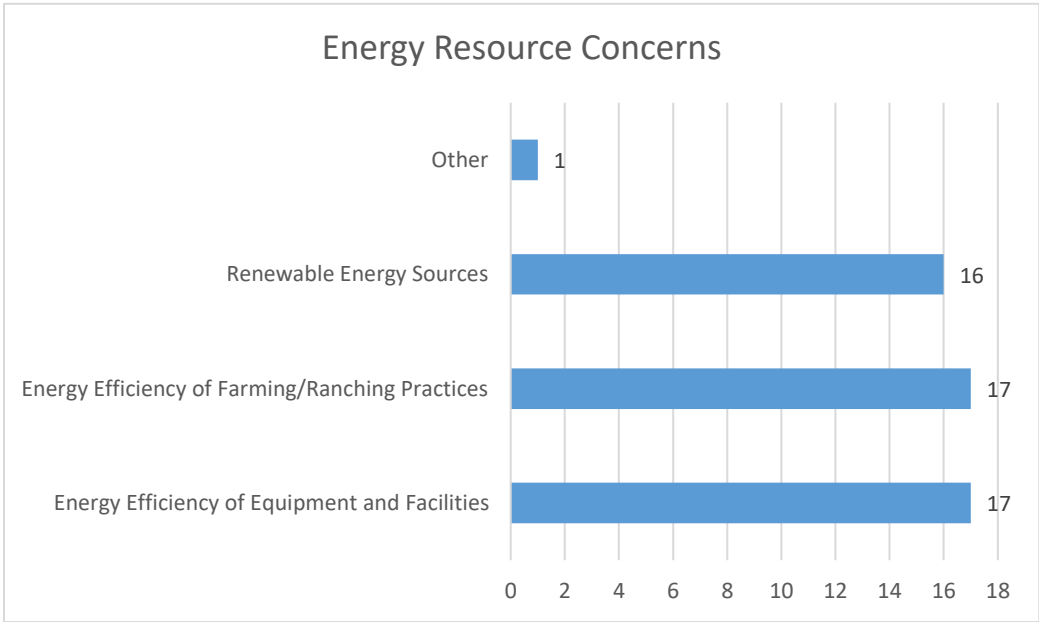
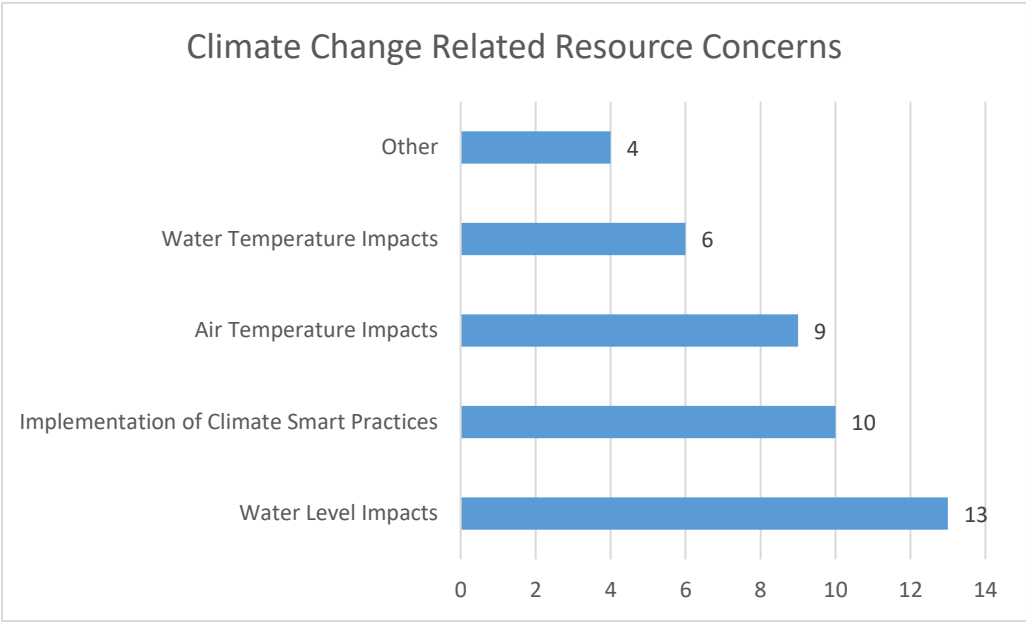
The survey received 31 responses. The survey questions and responses are illustrated in the following charts and graphs.

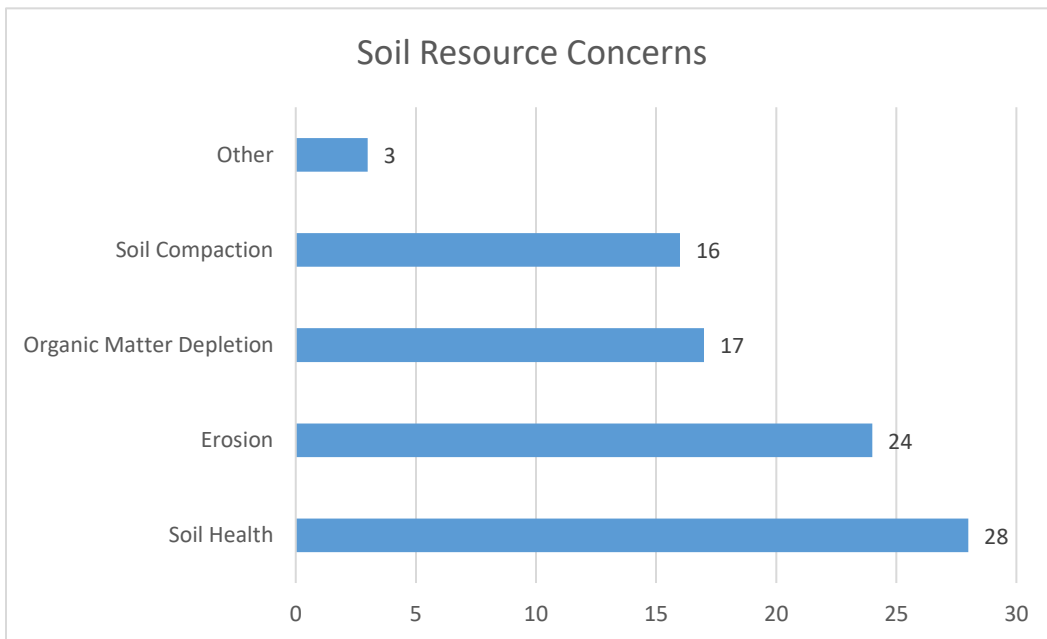
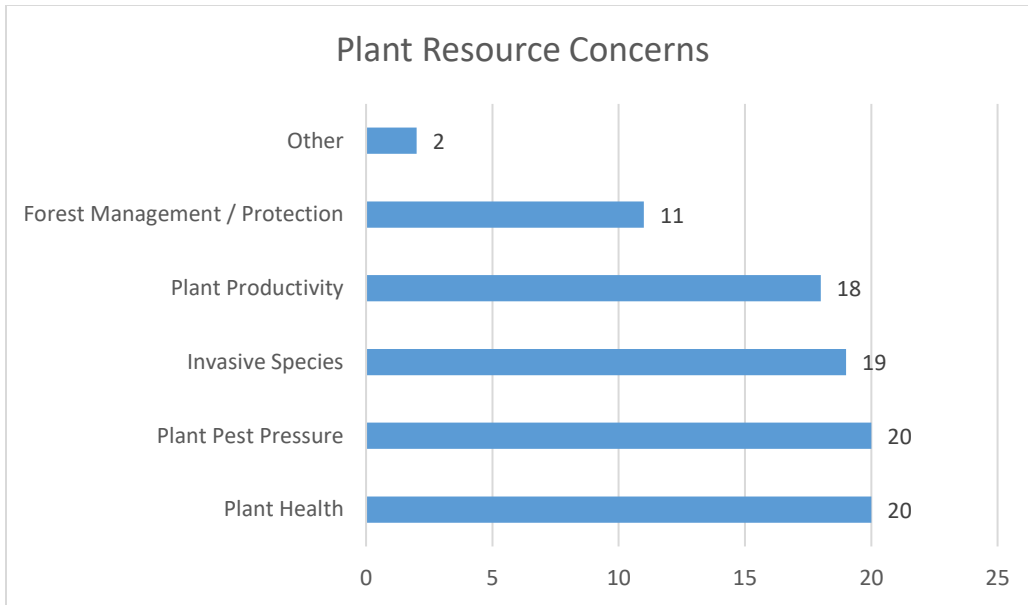
Question 1: Which of the following Resource Concern(s) are most important in your county?
Participants could pick up to three Resource Concerns.

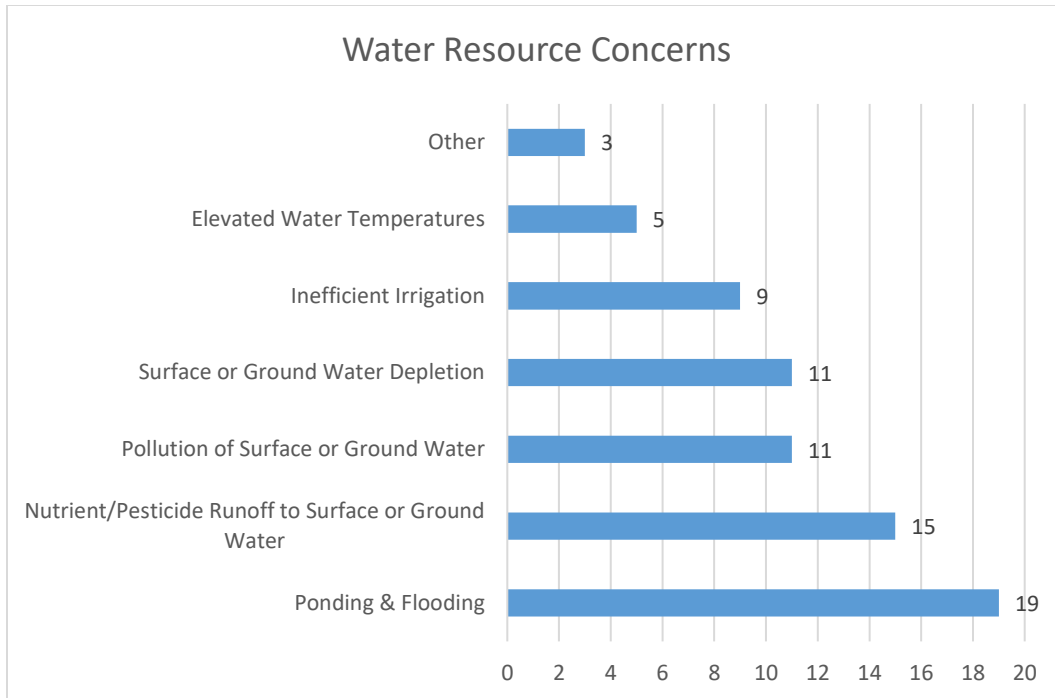


Questions 2 through 8 addressed each of the aforementioned Resource Concerns by dividing each Resource Concern into subcategories. Participants were requested to select all applicable options.









The survey participants were also asked “Are there any additional Resource Concern(s) you would like to share with us?” Participants expressed the following additional concerns:

- Educating Farmers about Cover Crops
- Weed Control
- Economic viability of farming
- Preservation of cropland
- Focusing on sustainable farming to help the climate
- Concerned so-called climate emergency will restrict productive agriculture
- Waste disposal: how do excess crops get disposed of?
- Complaints/concerns regarding agricultural water runoff: who addresses these problems? How to prevent?

Survey participants were queried to determine if they have participated in NRCS Conservation Programs and asked to list any programs they have, or would be interested in, participating in. Some answers were program-specific such as EQIP, CCSP and CSP. Other answers were community specific concerns or issues. These answers are listed below:

- Regenerative farming
- Switch diesel engines to electric for irrigation
- Cover Crops
- Renewable energy
- Recharging ground water
- Decrease in deer and groundhog damage
- Restricting climate mandates and controls that will in effect make production agriculture not financially possible
- Soil Health - Erosion prevention
- Energy efficient equipment, facilities, and farming practices
- Riparian Buffers
- Wildlife Habitat
- No-till / Strip-till / Reduced tillage
- Wetland Restoration
- Water drainage systems
- Cleaning wastewater for recycling

In addition to the online survey, the Districts hosted an in-person Local Working Group (LWG) meeting at the Ware Building. Participants from the agricultural community in Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem counties as well as local representatives of USDA NRCS, USDA FSA, Farmland Preservation, Rutgers Cooperative Extension and SADC met to discuss and prioritize local resource concerns. The meeting had 17 participants.

During the February 21, 2024 meeting, the survey results were presented as handouts and shared with the meeting attendees. The results that generated the most discussion were the opened ended questions: “What sort of program(s) would you be interested in?” and “Are there any additional Resource Concern(s) you would like to share with us?”

The discussion portion of the meeting generated several additional comments. All comments generated by meeting attendees are separated into two categories and are listed below.

NRCS Program / Technical Assistance Specific Concerns:

- NRCS Conservation Programs that involve irrigation are not easy to work with: Irrigation programs should be efficient, simple, and flexible
- Some NRCS personnel are very difficult to work with
- Getting started in an NRCS Program is a very long tedious process: it requires significant work which is almost impossible to complete when you're running a farm by yourself.
- State Technical Committee Meetings are not discussing or enacting programs addressing Resource Concerns. The meetings only report on program statistics.
- Farmers aren't qualifying / ranking for programs that are actually needed on local farms. Current Ranking System needs to be improved.
- Farms/producers aren't getting funded for simple projects. Only high dollar projects get funded. Sometimes farmers only need minor projects to help with farm.
- Priority/additional ranking points should be given to Preserved Farmland
- Priority/additional ranking points should be given to farmland which is owned by the farmer (rather than rented)
- Ideas or programs shared with NRCS never turn into actual Conservation Practices for Cost Sharing

- Backlogs for Irrigation Practices are huge. Producers wait and wait for irrigation designs. Producers interested in irrigation cost share desperately need to install irrigation on their fields. Instead, they continue to suffer reduced yields while waiting for designs. This is an ongoing issue, year after year.
- NRCS needs more Irrigation Technical Support Staff to address issue of backlog
- Early Start Waivers need an approved irrigation design. Even if you get an Early Start Waiver, you can still be denied a contract AFTER you've been approved for an Early Start Waiver, and you've completed the project. If you install an Irrigation System through an Early Start Waiver, yet do not get a contract, you should be allowed to apply for funding to cover the irrigation project in the next funding year – even though the project is already complete. Currently, this is not allowed and is negatively affecting producers.
- NRCS Cost Share Programs need to understand the timeliness of farmer funds and interest rates. The contract process is currently so long a farmer secures a loan for his portion of the project and is already making monthly payment (including interest) before the project is finally authorized by NRCS to start.
- Producers can typically install a similar, more efficient project for less money than their portion of an NRCS design. NRCS designed practices are VERY expensive.
- Deadlines for applying for programs and awarding contracts needs to be earlier. Current deadlines do not give producers time to implement practices and complete projects prior to start of growing season

NRCS Resource Concerns/Cost Share Program Ideas:

- Irrigation Cost Share programs should be more than just center pivots. Irrigation should be linked to filter strips or other similar programs.
- High Tunnels are not effective Conservation Practices. They lead to additional concentrated runoff. These practices are not needed in this area. The funds used for High Tunnels would be better utilized for other needed practices.
- Practices/Cost Share Programs are needed to address Agricultural Water Runoff and Soil & Water Runoff into lakes/streams

- Cover Crop Program needs to include a “No-Till” incentive. Current program requirements (70% growth of cover crop for payment) lead to farmers plowing existing crop residue to plant cover crop too late in season and cover crop does not provide stabilization for winter.
- Innovative Conservation Programs for implementing new practices such as drones for spraying/cover crop seeding, & variable rate fertilizer and lime application should be pursued.
- Energy Efficiency Cost Share Practices such as electric forklifts instead of propane fueled forklifts should be added.
- Cost Share Practice to replace diesel irrigation pumps with electric irrigation pumps. This practice needs to consider additional components required for conversion. Could they be included in cost share?
- Programs offered, practices, funding and ranking processes do not really match the local area needs. The practices are too generic and not area specific.
- Programs/Practices that stress Irrigation Efficiency are extremely important, especially in the tri-county area
- Tillage or specifically No-Till needs to be included and given priority in ranking process. This practice addresses several Resource Concerns in this area.
- Winter wheat and other small grains which function as cover crops should be eligible for an incentive payment.

The LWG participants appreciate NRCS requesting feedback from the local level to help guide future programs and feels it would be very beneficial to all if NRCS-NJ State Office representation – such as Assistant State Conservationist Programs, Assistant State Conservationist Field Operations or State Resource Conservationist – attended future LWG meetings.

LWG participants are very interested in implementing the best possible management practices to increase their yields while protecting the environment and assuring the future productivity of the farmland in this area. Participants are hopeful NRCS will use the information gathered through the online survey & meeting to guide the future programs to better address the current Resource Concerns in the Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem County areas.