

# **CUMBERLAND SALEM & GLOUCESTER SOIL CONSERVATION DISTRICTS**

## **2026 LOCAL WORKING GROUP**

### ***SUMMARY REPORT***

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

The Local Work Group was comprised of –

- Agricultural producers in Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem counties representing approximately 20,000 acres of farmland
- Farmland Preservation
- Ducks Unlimited
- NJ Audubon Society
- County Boards of Agriculture
- State Board of Agriculture
- Rutgers Cooperative Extension
- SADC - Stewardship/Soil & Water Cost Share
- NJ Department of Agriculture
- NRCS - NJ
- FFA students
- Elected County officials
- United States Senator's office

Conservation partners – NJ Audubon, SADC, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, Ducks Unlimited, NRCS – provided updates on the mission of each organization and the types of conservation programs their respective organization offers.

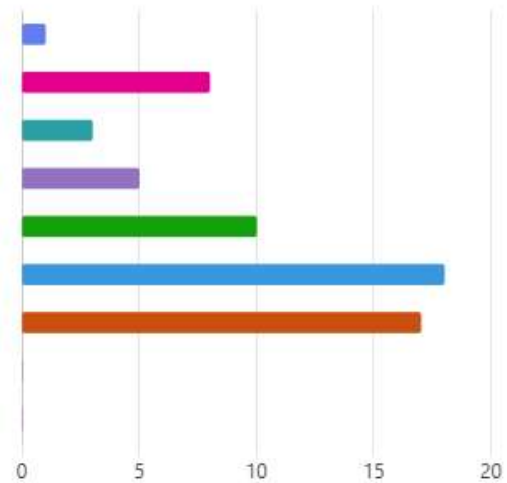
Twenty-one (21) individuals participated in the online survey. Thirty-nine (39) individuals attended the in-person meeting at the Woodstown Service Center.

The online survey and in-person meeting provided the opportunity for participants to select the Natural Resource Concerns most applicable to their area. The top two Natural Resource Concerns for 2026 are once again Soil Related and Water Related concerns. Soil Related and Water Related were also the top selections for the 2024 and 2025 Local Work Group meetings.

## Determining Priority Resource Concerns:

1. Which of the following Resource Concern(s) are most important in your county?

● Air Related	1
● Animal Related	8
● Climate Change Related	3
● Energy Related	5
● Plant Related	10
● Soil Related	18
● Water Related	17
● None of the above	0
● Other	0

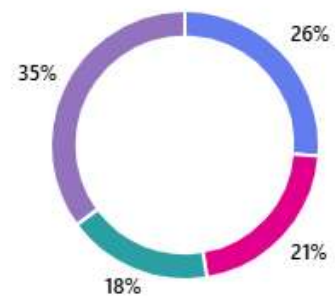


## Soil Resource Concerns:

As shown in the graph below, the top two Soil Resource Concerns are Soil Health and Erosion.

7. Soil Resource Concerns

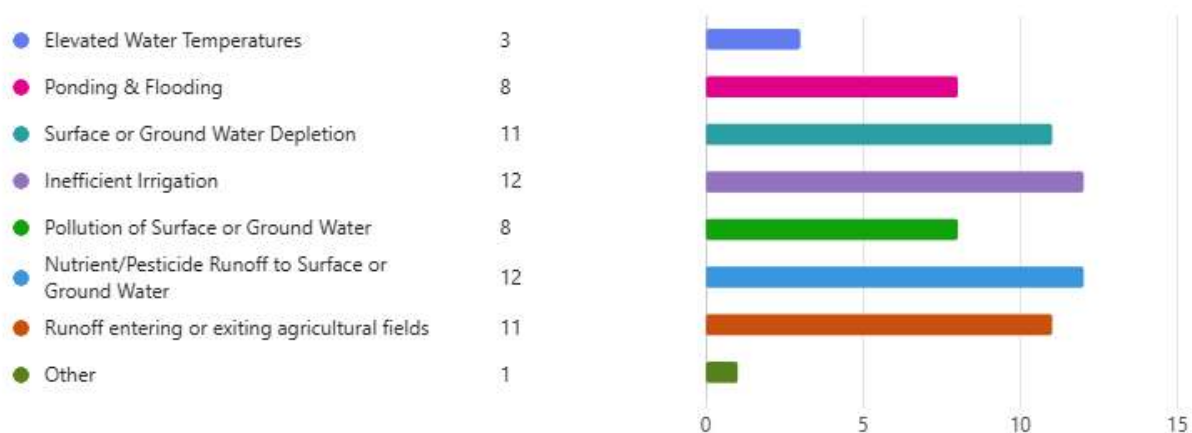
● Erosion	15
● Soil Compaction	12
● Organic Matter Depletion	10
● Soil Health	20
● Other	0



## Water Resource Concerns:

As shown in the graph below, the top two Water Resource Concerns are Inefficient Irrigation and Nutrient/Pesticide Runoff to Surface & Ground Water.

### 8. Water Resource Concerns



## Additional Local Resource Concerns:

1. Conservation needs to be applied to the whole farm - not just a single practice and ignore the rest of the farm. Conservation plans should apply to the whole farm. ☒
2. Farms that have erosion and agriculture runoff should have to address those resource concerns when applying for conservation programs.
3. Hedgerow Management – Hedgerows that were previously installed need management to improve/restore functionality.
4. Downstream beaver dams can cause flooding to upstream farm fields. The trapping and management of “off-farm” beaver can be difficult.
5. Prioritize conservation on farms that are preserved or deed restricted. If the land is developed in a couple years, the conservation benefit is minimal. A preserved farm will benefit from the conservation practice throughout the practice lifespan.
6. Cutting the "Red Tape" on Conservation Programs - cooperators need to be able to get practices installed quickly & efficiently.
7. Streamline cost share projects for max efficiency (example: irrigation projects installed before growing season).
8. Impacts of large Commercial/Industrial developments on available water supplies

## Identifying Conservation Practices to Address Local Resource Concerns:

1. Hedgerow Management/Improvement
2. Drone Application - spray and cover crops
3. Grid sampling/variable rate lime & fertilizer application
4. Regenerative Agriculture/Whole farm conservation
5. On farm irrigation pond maintenance
6. Cover Crop: update guidelines for “End Date” to allow for temperature and moisture accommodations. Require “No Till” if planted after “End Date”. Reduce payment rate – current payment is too high. Consider modifying the contract terms to allow for more flexibility due to weather (ie-contract for 5 years and plant cover crop 3 of 5 years) to get improved benefit from the practice.

## SADC Farmland Preservation & Soil and Water Cost Share:

SADC staff provided an update on the formula valuation for Farmland Preservation and discussed the recently updated soil and water cost share rules. The State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC) provides grants to reimburse eligible landowners up to 50% of the costs of approved soil and water conservation projects on preserved farms. The farm must be permanently preserved or enrolled in an 8-year or 16-year farmland preservation program. Each farm is eligible for a new round of funding every 8 years, and each farm has a maximum grant designation based on the following formula: \$50,000 + \$500/acre, up to \$150,000. Recent amendments allow for up to \$20,000 in cost-share grants specifically for hiring consultants to design projects. Practices such as irrigation, wells, and grassed waterways are eligible for 50% cost share. SADC is currently working to develop/update policy guidance for program implementation.

The Local Work Group participants would also like to express the following items of concern to NRCS State Office leadership:

- Backlogs for Irrigation Practice approvals are huge. Producers work with irrigation companies (such as Lee Rain, Central Ag Systems, Sussex Irrigation & Hoffman Irrigation) to submit designs for NRCS approvals and face significant delays getting approvals. Producers interested in installing efficient irrigation system desperately need approved plans as soon as possible to install/upgrade their existing irrigation systems. **This has been a comment at the 2023, 2024, 2025 & 2026 LWG meetings.**

- NRCS needs more Irrigation Technical Support Staff to address this backlog issue. Potential funding issues at NRCS may limit the ability to hire new technical support staff to facilitate irrigation design approvals. **\*\*At the 2025 LWG this discussion point resulted in the recommendation to have local irrigation dealers become Technical Service Providers (TSPs). At the 2026 LWG it was conveyed that TSPs must also be PE licensed individuals.\*\*** If NRCS NJ currently does not have an irrigation specialist and local irrigation dealers are not reasonably able to become Technical Service Providers what is the path forward for reviewing/approving irrigation designs? Clarification on the TSP requirements is requested.
- Farmers aren't qualifying/ranking for conservation practices that are needed on their farms. The ranking system should be transparent so producers understand what they need to do to become eligible for programs. The current ranking system is not transparent for applicants.
- Deadlines for applying for programs and awarding contracts needs to be earlier or process needs to be faster. Current deadlines do not give producers time to implement practices and complete projects prior to the start of growing season.
- Producers can install similar projects to address resource concerns without NRCS involvement and cost-share funding for similar final producer costs. NRCS designed practices are VERY expensive and cost share rates are not adjusting with the current market. **\*\*Cost of individual line items is outdated (four plus years behind current costs) \*\***
- Significant priority/additional ranking points should be given to Preserved Farmland – Preserved Farmland guarantees the full lifespan of an implemented practice which should be recognized with additional ranking points. These landowners have committed their farms to remain in production and should be given priority in respect to unpreserved farms.
- Significant funding is provided to High Tunnel Greenhouses which are production-based rather than conservation-based. The LWG participants struggled to see the resource concerns addressed by their use as a conservation practice. High Tunnel Greenhouses can lead to concentrated runoff (which increases soil erosion) and other resource concerns. The funds used for High Tunnels would be better utilized for other locally important practices. **\*\*Meeting attendants would like to see this practice reduced or eliminated in area\*\***
- Cover Crop practices should include a “No-Till” incentive similar to the Chesapeake Bay Program. Current program requirements (70% ground cover in the spring for payment) often leads to farmers broadcasting cover crop and disking for incorporation. When this is done late in the growing season it can cause increased erosion/runoff from these

fields and minimal cover during the winter. **\*\*A No-Till planting method should be required for all plantings past a reasonable date\*\***

- Innovative Conservation Programs for implementing new practices such as drones for spraying / cover crop seeding, & variable rate fertilizer and lime application should be pursued.
- Programs/Practices that improve Irrigation Efficiency are extremely important, especially in the tri-county area. Without irrigation, the producers are less likely to plant cover crops and use other similar conservation practices as these crops utilize valuable moisture.
- Reduced tillage or specifically No-Till needs to be included and given priority in the ranking process. **\*\*This practice addresses several Resource Concerns in this area\*\***
- State Technical Committee Meetings are not discussing practices or resource concerns. The meetings focus on program statistics.
- Programs need more farmer-input into practicality – farmer knowledge would help programs be more applicable to local level concerns. The LWG participants would be willing to discuss programs and practices as a sub-group with the NRCS State Office to help with this process.
- NRCS should provide cooperators with checklist/checkout documents so they are fully aware of all program requirements and expectations. NRCS should follow-up with cooperators once the practices are completed to better improve program delivery.
- Maintenance of on-farm irrigation ponds is a necessity. Producers sometimes have problems with other regulatory agencies when doing farm pond maintenance. Could NRCS offer guidance or oversight? Possibly include Farm Pond maintenance as a practice in the Farm Conservation Plan?

The LWG participants appreciate NRCS requesting feedback from the local level to help guide future programs. LWG participants have dedicated time to attending the LWG meetings for the past 4 years. Participants look forward to receiving a written response to the decisions made regarding the LWG recommendations.

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.