

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

## **2025 LOCAL WORKING GROUP**

### ***SUMMARY REPORT***

Gloucester Soil Conservation District and Cumberland Salem Conservation District conducted a joint in-person Local Working Group (LWG) meeting to determine the communities' Natural Resource Concerns. This meeting was held at the Ware Building in Woodstown New Jersey. Participants from the agricultural community in Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem counties as well as state and local representatives of USDA NRCS, USDA FSA, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, State Board of Agriculture, Ducks Unlimited and SADC met to discuss and prioritize local resource concerns. The meeting had 27 participants.

Meeting attendees were provided with several handouts: Agenda, LWG Fact Sheet, Summary of 2024 LWG Resource Concerns and 2024 LWG Comments. The 2024 LWG report was emailed to meeting attendees.

The 2024 top two local Resource Concerns - Water Resource Concerns and Soil Resource Concerns - remain as the top two local Resource Concerns for 2025.

During the February 12, 2025 meeting, NRCS State Resource Conservationist, Evan Madlinger, gave a slide presentation to the group summarizing the State Programs and State Totals for areas of interest in the 3 county community. The presentation also discussed several key Resource Concerns and Comments brought up at the 2024 LWG Meeting.

Throughout the presentation, multiple slides resulted in group discussions. All comments generated by meeting attendees are listed below.

## Resource Concerns, Cost Share and Technical Assistance Specific Concerns:

### *Comments carried over from 2024 -*

- Backlogs for Irrigation Practice approvals are huge. Producers work with irrigation companies (such as Walls Irrigation, Lee Rain, Central Ag Systems, Sussex Irrigation) to submit designs for NRCS approvals and face significant delays getting final approvals. Producers interested in installing efficient irrigation system desperately need approved plans as soon as possible to install/upgrade their existing irrigation systems. Instead, they suffer reduced yields and crop planning issues while waiting for designs. This has been a comment at the 2023, 2024 & 2025 LWG meetings. ***\*\*When queried, 5 out of the 5 producers in the room who have worked with NRCS on irrigation projects have dealt with this issue.\*\****
- NRCS needs more Irrigation Technical Support Staff to address issue of backlog. Potential funding issues at NRCS may limit the ability to hire new technical support staff to facilitate irrigation design approvals. ***\*\*This discussion point resulted in the recommendation to have local irrigation dealers become Technical Service Providers (TSPs)\*\****
- Farmers aren't qualifying / ranking for programs that are actually needed on local farms. Current Ranking System is too complicated and needs to be improved.
- 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.
- 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 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 unreserved farms.
  - Significant funding is provided to High Tunnel Greenhouses which are production-based rather than conservation-based. The 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 Program needs to include a “No-Till” incentive similar to the Chesapeake Bay Program. Current program requirements (70% ground cover in the spring for payment) lead 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\*\****
  - Winter wheat and other small grains which function as cover crops should be eligible for an incentive payment if they are planted early and can serve as a winter cover.
  - 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/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\*\****

- State Technical Committee Meetings are not discussing practices or resource concerns. The meetings only report on program statistics.

**2025 Comments -**

- 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 work/discuss programs and practices as a sub-group to help with this process.
- Drought led to significant issues with planting, harvesting and yields. Contracts need to address these types of unpredictable delays.
- NRCS should provide cooperators with checklist/checkout documents so they are fully aware of all program requirements and expectations.
- Maintenance of on-farm irrigation ponds is a necessity. Producers sometimes have problems with other regulatory agencies when doing this maintenance item. Could NRCS offer guidance or oversight? Possibly include ongoing necessary maintenance as a practice in the Farm Conservation Plan?
- NJDEP Resilient Environments and Landscapes (REAL): Does NRCS have Conservation Practices or cost-share programs that could help producers follow these rules if implemented? Could practices be included in Conservation Plans?
- High priority practices differ greatly across the state. Is it possible for NRCS New Jersey to split the funding between North & South?
- Funding limits restrict practices for large farms (large farms reach their maximum funding limit quickly). Is it possible to factor in ‘acreage farmed’ into equation so larger farms have a higher funding limit?

LWG participants appreciate the opportunity to help guide future NRCS programs and would like to see SADC/SSCC further implement their programs for Soil and Water Cost Share. DU Representative Ben Langey discussed several Wetlands Restoration programs and funding opportunities available and the LWG participants were appreciative of the support from DU.

The LWG participants greatly appreciate the NRCS-NJ State Office representation that participated in the 2025 Local Work Group Meeting. Evan Madlinger and Fran DeFiccio were able to show participants the changes NRCS has implemented to address the items discussed at the 2024 LWG session and address participants’ new concerns at this meeting. LWG

participants would like to extend an open invitation to NRCS State Office personnel to visit their farms and continue the discussions from the 2025 LWG.

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 to guide the future programs to better address the current Resource Concerns in the Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem County areas.