

Spring 2025 STAC Meeting Summary

Date: April 16, 2025

The Spring State Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) meeting provided a platform for sharing updates, strengthening partnerships, and discussing conservation priorities across California. Key agency staff, partners, and stakeholders participated in a full agenda highlighting strategic efforts, program updates, and collaborative opportunities.

Leadership and Policy Highlights

- **New Agency Leadership:** Aubrey Bettencourt has been appointed as the new NRCS Chief, bringing experience from USDA and various conservation partnerships. Her leadership emphasizes customer-focused service delivery, enhancing tools for producers, and continued collaboration.
- **Farm Bill and Funding:** The agency is currently operating under the extended 2018 Farm Bill. Investments made through the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) have been significant; however, certain IRA-funded activities are on hold pending further guidance.
- **Executive Orders and Reorganization:** Recent federal directives and structural changes shaping program delivery and internal operations. NRCS is actively aligning with departmental shifts and communicating key changes to partners as available.

Program Implementation

- **Strong Program Demand:** Programs such as EQIP and CSP continue to see high participation. In California alone, over 6,000 EQIP applications were submitted this year, with more than half ranked as high-priority.
- **Active Obligations:** NRCS is moving forward with program obligations under the Farm Bill. Approximately \$90 million is currently being distributed through EQIP, and additional requests for funding are in review to meet high application volume.
- **Partnerships and Easements:** Progress continues on RCPP initiatives and easement closings. Several projects are advancing through partner-led agreements, with continued focus on resource conservation and land stewardship.

Emergency Support and EWP Overview

- The Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program was reviewed, emphasizing eligibility, timelines, and sponsor responsibilities. Attendees were reminded to coordinate with local offices promptly following disaster events.

Subcommittee Structure and Participation

- STAC subcommittees will play a key role in developing coordinated, actionable recommendations for the State Conservationist. Guidelines discussed include:
 - Holding meetings at least twice a year
 - Incorporating public input at designated times
 - Assigning spokespersons and notetakers for each group
 - Using facilitators to support meeting logistics and NRCS policy alignment

Stakeholder Dialogue

- Participants inquired about program deadlines, application processes, office staffing, and agreement timelines. NRCS staff responded with current information and committed to keeping partners informed as updates are available.
- Feedback emphasized the importance of timely communication, technical assistance, and access to programs for new and historically underserved producers.

Partner Reflections and Recommendations

- Stakeholders shared insights on improving program accessibility, streamlining timelines, and enhancing outreach efforts. Additional areas of focus included:
 - Support for urban and small-scale agriculture
 - Strengthening local engagement
 - Promoting transparency in program eligibility and requirements
 - Increasing resources for easements and regional partnerships

Closing Comments

- Agency representatives thanked attendees for their engagement and acknowledged the value of continued collaboration.
- Planning is underway for the next STAC meeting, with details to be shared in the coming months.