Ocean County SCD Local Working Group - 2025

Report of Findings

Date of LWG: January 30, 2025

Location: Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Ocean County, Toms River, NJ

Facilitators: OCSCD Staff: Christine Raabe, District Director; Mary Ellen Banfield, Office Manager; Becky Laboy, Education Outreach Coordinator; Kristin Adams, Conservation Specialist; Jessica Pinto, Senior Erosion Control Specialist; Brittany Moore, Senior Erosion Control Specialist; Georgie Lennon, Inspector II; Joe Serio, Inspector I. NRCS Staff: Nicole Ciccaglione, District Conservationist; Tairi Melchiorre, Acting District Conservationist. Barnegat Bay Partnership Staff: Nina Sassano, Associate Director of Education.

Number of Attendees: 32

Goals:

1. Identify natural resource conservation issues in Ocean County
2. Determine high, medium and low priority level of each Conservation Issue
3. Identify any projects, needs, practices and opportunities based on constituent feedback
4. Share results of LWG with NRCS

Key Ideas for LWG:

- All ideas are welcome.
- Not everything needs a direct answer – we are basically there to gather what is most important to the participants.
- Take detailed notes to compile into the Report of Findings.

Start Time: 4:10pm

<u>Introductions & Role of Soil Districts and NRCS:</u>

- Introductions (All facilitators and all participants introduced themselves, organization affiliation, and interests/why they are attending)
- Set Ground Rules: participants offered rules to which all participants would abide: listen to each other, respect each other, after speaking allow 2 people to speak before you take another turn, assume good intentions, differences are a good thing, facilitator will repeat questions so everyone can hear
- Icebreaker: “Picture a Stove” - activity shows that everyone comes from different backgrounds and has different ideas and experiences about shared topics (conservation priorities)
- Facilitators discussed “Purpose of a Local Work Group” and why we are here.
- Introduced and discussed role of NRCS.
    - What we do

- Our different specialists on staff
- SWAPA+E
- Financial assistance and technical assistance offered
- A Participant asked a question: Is NRCS allowed to / able to work with homeowners that have small gardens.

Introduction to Conservation Priorities:

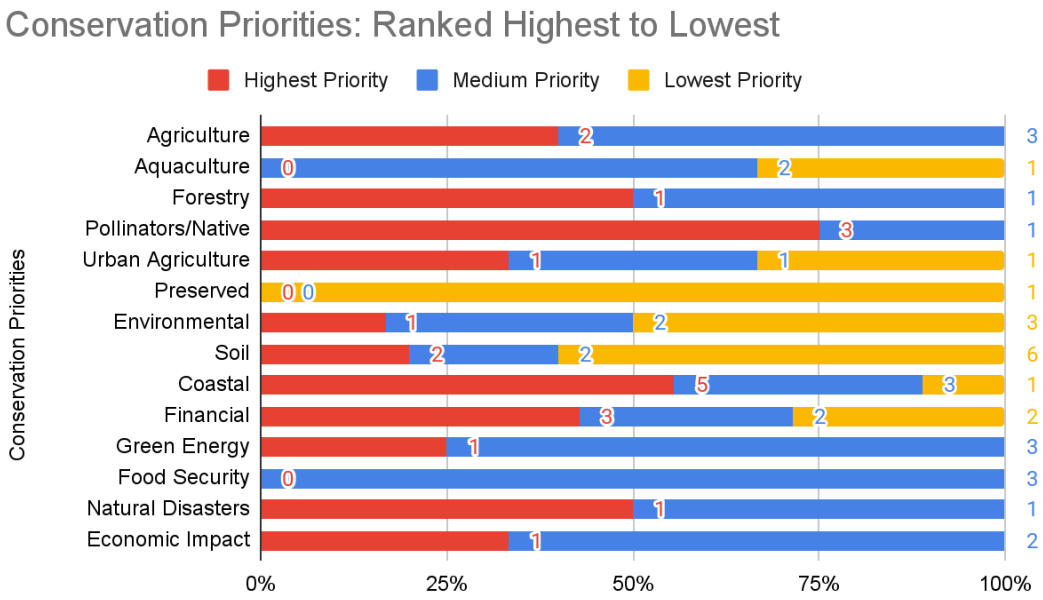
- Facilitators introduced 12 Conservation Priorities thought to be of concern to participants.
- Facilitators prepared chart paper containing the 12 Conservation Priorities, along with a few words to describe each:
  - **Agriculture**: cultivation of crops and livestock for food
  - **Aquaculture**: management of hatcheries for oyster and clam farming, and oyster reef restoration
  - **Forestry**: management of forests and woodlands (public or private)
  - **Pollinators/Native plants**: utilization in public spaces, agriculture, private spaces, etc.
  - **Urban Agriculture**: small scale agriculture for food production and community gardens
  - **Preserved Farmland/Open Space**: protections for agricultural and other uses with restrictions on development
  - **Environmental Education/Outreach**: environmental education opportunities and resources for the general public and private sectors
  - **Soil Erosion/Stormwater Mgmt./Water Quality**: managing soil and water resources/quality, both public and private
  - **Coastal Resources/Sea Level Rise**: management of diverse habitats in this region and their biological, physical, agricultural and cultural resources
  - **Financial Assistance Programs: grants, loan, cost-share agreement**:
  - **Green Energy (solar, wind, nuclear, geothermal)**: renewable sources of energy (wind, solar, geothermal, etc.)
  - **Food Security (local food system resiliency)**: physical and economic access to available and stable food sources
- Facilitators asked if there are any other Conservation Priorities to add to the list. Two additional Conservation Priorities were named, and added to the chart paper:
  - **Natural Disasters**:
  - **Economic Impacts**:

Speed Dotting Activity:

- Facilitators introduced the Speed Dotting Activity and provided each participant 3 colored sticker dots: red, blue and yellow.
- Facilitators explained directions: if given unlimited funding, rate your highest Conservation Priority by placing a red sticker dot on the corresponding poster. Then, once the participants sat down, facilitators told them that if Congress offered more funding for conservation, put their blue sticker dot on their second highest Conservation Priority. Finally, they were told that if Congress appropriated more funding to conservation, they should put a yellow sticker dot on a poster reflecting their third highest Conservation Priority.
- Participants completed the Speed Dotting Activity. Some participants chose to place two or all three of their sticker dots on one Conservation Priority.
- Also, offer a blank sticky note for participants to write down any questions they might have.

<u>Discussed Results of Speed Dotting Activity through Whole Group Dialogue</u>:

- The following graph shows the results of the Speed Dotting Activity:



- Speed Dotting - Graph Interpretations - highest Conservation Priorities ranked as follows:
    - **Soil Erosion, Stormwater Management, Water Quality** was the Conservation Priority category identified with the highest overall concern, reflected by a total of **10 dots:** <u>2 red dots</u>, 2 blue dots and 6 yellow dots.
    - **Coastal Resources & Sea Level Rise** was identified as the Conservation Priority receiving a total of **9 dots:** including the most red dots - <u>5 red dots</u>, as well as 3 blue dots and 1 yellow dot.
    - **Financial Assistance** had a total of **7 dots**: <u>3 red dots</u>, 2 blue dots and 2 yellow dots.
    - **Environmental Education & Outreach** received a total of **6 dots**: <u>1 red</u>, 2 blue dots, 3 yellow dots.
    - **Agriculture** had a total of **5 dots**: <u>2 red dots</u>, 3 blue dots and 0 yellow dots.
    - **Pollinators & Native Plants** had a total of **4 dots:** <u>3 red dots</u>, 1 blue dot, 0 yellow dots.
    - **Green Energy** had a total of **4 dots:** <u>1 red dot</u>, 3 blue dots, 0 yellow dots.
    - *(Please view graph for further analysis on remaining Conservation Priorities)*
- Facilitators, specifically Nicole Ciccaglione of NRCS, reviewed with the whole-group their Speed Dotting Activity results and facilitated open dialogue/discussion about how the participants feel about each of the Conservation Priorities. Ms. Ciccaglione began with the Conservation Priority that had the most number of red, blue and yellow dots on the chart paper. This whole-group discussion was broken into two sections with a short break in-between. Facilitators and Participant comments are captured below:

    - **Soil Erosion, Stormwater Management, Water Quality**
        - Lots of changes in green infrastructure. Maplewood NJ first town that developed a stormwater authority, might include charging you for impervious surfaces
        - Algal blooms on the rise

- Soil takes a while to build back up so we can work on soil loss, if you are losing soil, you are losing nutrients and these end up in water bodies
- Soil is hard to return once its lost
- Loss of soil = loss of nutrients
- https://dep.nj.gov/stormwater/

- **Coastal Resources & Sea Level Rise**
  - Sea level rise will displace a lot of people in Ocean County.
  - Direct impacts = awareness
  - Weather and climate-driven impacts
  - Living near the coast means front row view of impacts
  - Needs to be addressed
  - Connects to stormwater
  - There's been a lot of awareness from folks who have been hit multiple times about coastal erosion. Define sea level rise vs coastal resources. What is disturbing is the fact that a lot of these things that were highlighted will start with a weather phenomenon in the beginning, is either a rhythmic, a cycle or a new introduction to weather patterns. Raise awareness as someone who has been living on the coast his entire life, weather events happen at an accelerated rate and this is a concern that should be addressed. This should be a group financially focused on the local level too.
  - Barrier islands are at great risk.
  - Losing marshlands which are an ecological engine for the area. No long-term viable strategy to recover that. Barges have been built in the back of these areas to allow for migration but eventually we will lose that.
  - Saltwater intrusion is affecting the vegetation in parks causing ghost trees.
  - Copy of NJ master supply water plan that includes information about sea level rise, 2-4 ft by 2100. Thousands of wells can be impacted by this. Cape May has been doing reverse osmosis since 90s. Subsidence and sinking might start becoming a bigger problem.
  - There is no long term strategy to recover them
  - Marsh migration
  - SAV loss
  - Saltwater inundation and intrusion
  - Cleaning waterways.
  - Stormwater management - working on plans to improve infrastructure.
  - All these problems we have pointed out tonight are related to one another. We need to find ways to get together and help all together.
  - Wildfire hazard risk that can be caused by the diminished water quality in refuge areas where there is salt water intrusion.
  - NJ forest service should be able to come out to the community to clean these areas in conjunction with other green teams. Maybe even get NJ fire service to do prescribed burn.
  - NJ Management Master Plan - predictions are grim
  - Los Angeles wildfires

- We must un-silo
- There are gaps in current resource management

- **Financial Assistance**
  - Sources of funding are limited
  - Centralized grant hub
  - Large pot of money doesn't exist
  - Not enough people know how to write grants/increase awareness
  - Demand is up but resources are down
  - There are resources available that people just don't know about
    - Need outreach
    - Need to have money to make money
  - Improve free, no cost access
  - Funding streams are reimbursement based
  - Need buy-in from locals
    - Ideas need vetting and a plan
  - More advocacy for Ocean County
  - Size and scale of grants
  - Non-profits sometimes not large enough or capable of implementing large grants
  - Difficult to find grants designed with goals and bandwidth of organization
  - FA is limited in many groups by the source of where they are getting the money from.
  - So many people have great ideas but not the funds.
  - Grant/financial request writing.
  - Outreach- It is cost prohibitive to start a garden. There are resources out there that people do not know about to start community gardens and school gardens.
    - Many of the assistance available is on a refund basis and sometimes people don't have enough to cover upfront costs.
    - Money is there but people don't have access to it. It takes a lot of time and effort for people to sit down and write grants to access the money.
  - We have problems and we need money to help mitigate/solve them. In the future, we need to not make money the first priority, but maybe people are instead.
  - When you do funding decisions, it would be great if you go out to the community to do outreach, come up with a plan and then go implement the plan based on results. That way we avoid pushbacks.
  - It is shocking how many little non-profits and local municipalities from Ocean County get grants from the State or money from the State. Counties are not getting enough money from the state to improve the different township areas like public transportation.
    - State Aid- State gives money to municipalities every year but they must apply.
    - There are also competitive grants with the State but big money with Federal government agencies.

- If your nonprofit is looking for grants that are outside of your scope is not good. You have to look for grants that align with your organization.
- BOSS - Brick Open Space Savers is a citizen advisory committee dedicated to evaluation properties
- Connect with Girl/Boy Scouts and 4H groups to educate the youth

- **Environmental Education and Outreach**
  - Cultural / historic influences - very important
    - Leads to buy-in
    - Outreach in all these areas
  - Too much misinformation - lacking residential education
  - Grassroots makes a difference
  - Need more welcoming space for sharing environmental info
  - We must pay attention to educating the public, that way we can have more buy in from the community. Outreach should be higher on the list
  - As a new resident in Ocean, I've been receiving mixed information from my neighbors on what I can do about gardening or managing my land. Erosion from Oyster Creek going into the bay. Looking to build a rain garden to avoid losing soils due to neighbor's water going through my property.
  - Take an approach of talking to people in a more approachable way and avoid being aggressive or look down to people.
  -
- **Agriculture**
  - We all eat! Ag is an equalizer.
  - Ag is dependent on environmental conditions
  - Local farms are in need of resources and proper environmental conditions
  - Not having slaughterhouses in New Jersey is limiting to ranchers
  - Funding and weather are equalizers
  - Disaster funds are available
  - NJEDA has resources for small businesses with POS systems
  - Rain is a problem. No rain, no pasture which adds additional expense to producers.
  - A lot of push backs from vegan communities and in social media for growing beef cattle.
  - Demand is high for local raised beef. No USDA processor in NJ. They have to bring it to PA, and it can take months and is very expensive.
  - Grocery prices have gone up, but it is not the producers who see that increase.
  - NJ Back services and planners available

LWG Meeting Wrap-up (5-10 min):

- Facilitators concluded the whole-group discussion and asked participants to complete a brief survey to provide any additional feedback. Responses received are provided below.
- *Do you have any additional resource concerns that were not discussed?*
  - Thoughts on some of the Conservation Priorities:

        - Coastal Resources/Sea Level Rise: “coastal squeeze” effect resulting in displacement of coastal residents, inability for tidal wetlands to migrate, loss of critical habitat, saltwater intrusion affecting drinking water sustainability
        - Financial Assistance: reimbursable grant are no good - they create a gap in who can fulfill the award.
        - Education & Outreach: using indigenous practices - rooting us; mixed information; small step = big results
        - Soil erosion/stormwater management/WQ: watershed management - getting municipalities to work together to achieve better water quality in the watershed
    - Concerned about water quality/supply
    - Wetlands and seagrasses
    - Fisheries (both commercial and recreational)
    - Unpopular opinion/fact: not all erosion is bad. Erosion is integral for relocating sediment, particularly to the coast. NJ barrier islands are largely in a sediment deficit, necessitating replenishment
    - Do you intend to take this opportunity to bring the public into the discussion if conditions get worse in Ocean County?
    - Subaqueous soils
    - Pollinator gardens
- *Do you have any comments or feedback to help us improve the Local Working Group?*
    - Great job on your first one! I liked the speed dotting - easy way to identify popular issues of concern.
    - Came to see how meeting was run. Excellent job. Clear concise presentation.
    - Interesting meeting. Media outreach may provide a wider audience.
    - Perhaps two or three separate meetings with a more focused topics listed would be good
    - Thank you. Nice to meet other who live locally and are involved in these efforts.
    - It was very informative.
    - I would recommend squeezing in a breakout group even for 15 minutes with a structure to go around the group for information and/or opinion at least twice. Some people in large groups never contribute but find the small group much less intimidating.
    - Specialized focus group topics
    - Hopefully this meeting will help get more stakeholders attend next time. A lot of great resources that everyone should have access to these resources.
    - Nicely done and great ideas. Would like to participate in educational events for residents on the waterways.
    - More time.
    - I think you need a state representative to hear our concerns and give us his opinion from his level.
    - Thank you for allowing us to listen. I am statewide and it is really helpful to hear local perspectives from across the state.
    - Very good diversity of perspectives (municipal, academic, Ag, gov’t) that led to good discussions.
- *Would you be interested in participating in a small focus group to address your resource concerns?* They were asked to identify their resource concern(s) and provide contact information.
    - 12 participants said they were interested in participating in a small focus group. Their resource concerns were:
        - Coastal resources / Sea Level Rise
        - Education & Outreach
        - Agriculture
        - Stormwater erosion
        - financial assistance
        - education and outreach
        - Soil and water

- Soil erosion into Oyster Bay/Barnegat Bay
- Barnegat Bay flooding
- Water, food,shelter (should we have another Superstorm Sandy)
- Need more alternative energy to stop fossil fuel use
- Agricultural grants
- Local fishing
- Pollinators/native plants
- Max grants

End of Meeting:

- Facilitators thanked everyone for coming and let them know they will each be emailed a copy of this Report of Findings by mid-March, via their email address provided during registration and/or sign-in at the event.

Finish Time: 6:05pm

(Photos on following pages.)

EXIT
LOCAL WORKING GROUP
Listening
Respect each other

AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES

RCE OUTREACH
PROGRAMS
EXIT

FCHS
HORTICULTURE

EXIT