

2026 Local Work Groups: What We Heard Across New Jersey

A summary of local conservation priorities shared by farmers, landowners, community members, conservation partners and public agencies

Thank you to everyone who participated in a 2026 Local Work Group meeting or survey. Across six Local Work Group reports covering 12 New Jersey counties, participants shared first-hand experience about the natural resource challenges affecting farms, communities, waterways, habitats and working lands. The purpose of the Local Work Group process is to make sure those local concerns are heard and carried forward to Soil Conservation Districts, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the New Jersey Department of Agriculture, the State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC), conservation partners and other decision-makers.

The strongest message was consistent: local conservation works best when programs are practical, timely, adequately staffed and responsive to conditions on the ground.

What participants told us

Soil health and erosion remain core priorities.

Participants repeatedly identified soil health, erosion control, cover crops, compaction, reduced tillage and the repair or replacement of aging conservation practices as important needs. In southern New Jersey, soil and water concerns again ranked at the top, continuing a pattern seen in previous years.

Water quantity, irrigation and drainage are growing concerns.

Drought, irrigation access, inefficient or outdated irrigation systems, drainage problems, runoff and water supply pressures were raised in several regions. Participants asked for more flexibility in irrigation programs, faster technical review, updated eligible practices and better support for farms that have not previously received irrigation assistance.

More technical capacity is needed.

A recurring concern was the shortage of engineers, irrigation specialists, conservation planners and other technical staff. Participants described delays in conservation planning and project approval that can cause farms to miss critical construction and growing-season windows. This varies regionally in New Jersey, so remedies may be to share technical resources across county boundaries.

Programs should be easier to use and better matched to local conditions.

Farmers and landowners called for clearer program requirements, more transparent ranking systems, streamlined applications, current cost-share rates and greater flexibility for specialty crops, beginning farmers, small-acreage operations and innovative practices. Participants also emphasized the value of whole-farm conservation planning rather than treating practices in isolation.

Land, habitat and climate resilience matter alongside agriculture.

Participants raised concerns about farmland preservation, wildlife habitat, invasive species, forest management, non-point source pollution, stormwater, open-space protection, coastal flooding, saltwater intrusion, shoreline erosion and living shorelines. Ocean County participants placed strong emphasis on preserving remaining open space, habitat and water resources, while DelAtlantic participants highlighted coastal and estuarine resilience as major regional concerns.

Education, outreach and collaboration are essential.

Local Work Groups were valued as places to connect farmers, residents, municipalities, agencies and conservation organizations. Participants asked for better public awareness of available programs, stronger municipal engagement, more education for farmers and residents, and continued opportunities for networking and focused follow-up discussions. These meetings are held annually, and it will be good to report how the previous year's concerns were addressed. Also, participants would like to know the results from other work group meetings from around the state, and region.

Regional priorities also matter

The Local Work Group process is designed to capture differences as well as common themes. Northern and central counties raised issues including soil compaction, livestock and grazing, Right to Farm, wildlife practices, depleted farmland and tile drainage. Southern agricultural counties emphasized irrigation efficiency, whole-farm conservation, preserved farmland, drainage and faster project approvals. Coastal counties highlighted aquaculture, estuarine and marsh protection, flooding, saltwater intrusion, habitat loss and nature-based resilience. These regional differences are exactly why locally led conservation planning is important.

Some examples of specific regional concerns are:

- Support for small scale farming
- Finding additional sources for local oyster seed
- Maintenance of open space and wildlife habitat lands
- Adoption of cover crop incentive programs

How this input will be used

Soil Conservation Districts use Local Work Group input to help identify priorities, improve outreach, develop partnerships and communicate local needs to state and federal conservation programs. Recommendations can also inform the NRCS State Technical Committee and other agencies that make decisions about technical assistance, program priorities and conservation funding. This is also shared regionally and nationally with our national organization the National Association of Conservation Districts. Several reports also called for continued focus groups and follow-up conversations so specific issues can be explored in greater detail.

Cost share opportunities are aligned with a consensus of local needs. This affects reimbursement rates returned to landowners.

Thank you for participating

Your participation helps ensure that conservation programs reflect real conditions in New Jersey communities. Whether you attended a meeting, completed a survey, shared a concern, offered a solution or connected with another participant, your input is part of the locally led conservation process. We look forward to continuing the conversation and sharing future updates on how these priorities move forward.

Summary based on 2026 Local Work Group reports from Morris County; Burlington County; Hunterdon/Somerset/Union Counties; Cumberland/Salem/Gloucester Counties; Ocean County; and the DelAtlantic Conservation District (Atlantic, Cape May and Camden Counties).