

Field Notes: AgriPolicy Brief

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NEW MEXICO HEALTHY SOIL PROGRAM

Charles Hibner in Chama, NM
Photo Credit: Ivy Jean Reynolds

New Mexico has been a leader in soil health for years. In 2019, the New Mexico State Legislature passed the Healthy Soil Act, creating programs and enhancing resources for farmers, ranchers, and landowners to invest in their soil health with expert technical assistance from local professionals. Through the Act, the New Mexico Department of Agriculture (NMDA) works in partnership with other organizations to improve soil health, collect data, and determine new and innovative ways to improve soil health. Continuing to champion soil health will result in healthier crops and livestock production, and increase New Mexico's food security.

The New Mexico Healthy Soil Program is a grant program that prioritizes the five principles of soil health:

- keeping soil covered,
- minimizing soil disturbance on cropland and minimizing external inputs,
- maximizing biodiversity,
- maintaining a living root, and
- integrating animals into land management, including grazing animals, birds, beneficial insects or keystone species, such as earthworms.

Every year, NMDA awards grants based on one or more of these principles. The next application cycle opens January 2027. NMDA encourages each potential applicant to begin working on their project idea in Fall 2026. Projects selected for funding will happen between July 2027 and September 2028.

To stay up to date on changes to the New Mexico Healthy Soil Program, you can sign up to join the weekly update list [here](#).

The [New Mexico Healthy Soil Working Group](#) is a key partner in advocating for and educating farmers, ranchers, and community members on soil health practices within the state. Recent blog posts have included helpful insights into composting and the benefits of implementing soil health practices to mitigate rising input costs, including fertilizer. The working group offers field days, farmer and rancher stories, and scientific findings about soil health practices.

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A DAY ON THE HIBNER RANCH

In May, Charles and Verna Hibner welcomed more than 60 government officials, community members, and conservation enthusiasts to their ranch to discuss how soil health and land management are essential to a range-based operation. A long-time practitioner of soil health, Charles Hibner has applied the knowledge and skills gained during his career in natural resource conservation to his own ranch, watching his soil health steadily improve over the years.

To start the day, the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union (RMFU) sponsored coffee for the group. Hibner provided a warm welcome, followed by brief remarks from Emily Paul (Director of Federal Government Relations at RMFU), Xochitl Torres Small (Executive Director of the Quivira Coalition), Anna Stearns (from the Forest Stewards Guild), and representatives from local Conservation Districts.

As the discussion turned to the core principles of soil health, Hibner emphasized that our relationship with the land is deeply rooted in geological history. Beginning more than 5 million years ago, he traced the evolution of the landscape down to the present day.

To support these ongoing efforts, the Hibners have leveraged funding from federal programs, including the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), to improve land resilience and reduce soil erosion.

During the tour, Hibner shared that through strategic disking, mowing, and seeding, he has been able to increase the amount of available forage on his ranch tenfold while preventing invasive or unwanted plant species from overtaking his grazing lands. By prioritizing these practices, he has been able to incorporate organic carbon and organic matter into the soil horizons, significantly increasing the soil's water-holding capacity. In the water-scarce environments of the West, this is critical to ensuring that when rain does fall, the ground cover is optimized to make the absolute most of every drop.

In addition to vegetation management, Hibner has installed several conservation structures across his property to address specific resource concerns. He explained to the group that deep arroyos had previously formed on the land, prompting him to combat severe water erosion by building dams. These structures now serve a dual purpose: providing reliable water sources for livestock and wildlife while actively mitigating further soil erosion.



Rocky Mountain Farmers Union Members in Chama, NM
Photo Credit: Cathy Day, NM Farm to Table



Charles Hibner in Chama, NM
Photo Credit: Cathy Day, NM Farm to Table

Additionally, Hibner has established a highly innovative rotational grazing system across both his private lands and his Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Forest Service (FS) grazing allotments. This adaptive management approach provides the flexibility for complete rest in some years and strictly limited grazing windows in others. Beyond grazing, he has executed several tree-thinning and "lop-and-scatter" contracts. These efforts have significantly boosted the grass understory while cultivating a much healthier, more resilient forest ecosystem.

To share his knowledge with the wider community, Hibner has hosted four ranch field reviews. These events allow him to teach others the vital importance of soil conservation and demonstrate firsthand how dramatically these practices can improve land health and productivity.

NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)

Through CSP, NRCS works with farmers and ranchers to develop a conservation plan that outlines and enhances existing efforts to meet their operational goals and objectives. Farmers and ranchers will implement practices and activities in their conservation plan that expand on the benefits of cleaner water and air, healthier soil and better wildlife habitat, all while improving their agricultural operations through this program.

Contract payments are based on two components:

- Payments to maintain the existing level of conservation, and
- Payments to implement additional conservation activities.

According to the [NRCS website](#), most participants will be eligible for a \$4000 minimum payment during any year that their total annual contract payment falls below the minimum payment amount.

NRCS Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)

There are three annual Conservation Innovation Grants funding opportunities:

CIG Classic

National competition for projects that support the early-stage development and piloting of new tools, practices and technologies to further natural resource conservation on private lands.

CIG On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials (On-Farm Trials)

National competitive application process for projects that support more widespread adoption and evaluation of innovative conservation approaches in partnership with agricultural producers. The Soil Health Demo Trial is a priority within the On-Farm Trials competition which focuses exclusively on implementation of conservation practices and systems that improve soil health.

State CIG Classic

State-level competitive application process for projects that support early-stage development and piloting of new tools, practices and technologies to further natural resource conservation on private lands. While the overall goal and approach match those of CIG Classic, CIG state competitions fund projects that target state-identified conservation priorities.

NRCS is currently accepting application for CIG through July 27, 2026.

NRCS Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP)

EQIP provides technical and financial assistance to agricultural producers and forest landowners to address natural resource concerns, including:

- Improved water and air quality;
- Conserved ground and surface water;
- Increased soil health ;
- Reduced soil erosion and sedimentation;
- Improved or created wildlife habitat; and
- Mitigation against drought and increasing weather volatility.

To apply for EQIP, farmers and rancher should first contact their [local NRCS office](#). An NRCS conservation planner will schedule a visit to their property. Together, they will walk through the property to identify goals and concerns that could be addressed through the program. Following the site visit, the conservation planner will develop a conservation plan that includes a variety of conservation practices or activities to address the resource concerns and management goals discussed.

Applications for NRCS conservation programs are accepted on a continuous basis; however, customers should apply by state-specific ranking dates to be considered for the current funding cycle.



Hibner Ranch, Chama, NM
Photo Credit: Ivy Jean Reynolds

FARM SERVICE AGENCY STAFF REDUCTIONS ACROSS THE US

In early June, Prospect Partners LLC, in partnership with the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) released a [report](#) showing that between 2024 and 2026, the Farm Service Agency (FSA) had lost nearly 2,000 employees.

FSA is a farmer-facing government agency that provides federal assistance to farmers and ranchers in the face of tumultuous markets and natural disasters. FSA was key in providing front line assistance in response the H5N1 in livestock and in response to damage on private lands in the response to the Hermit's Peak/Calf Canyon fire.

Of the staff lost, more than 600 were County Office employees. These employees are the ones actually providing services to farmers and ranchers in county offices and are critical in delivering programs outlined in the farm bill.

According to the report, over one third of offices had staffing declines and 42 offices nationwide were left unstaffed. Many of New Mexico's counties, especially those in the eastern half of the state, saw a decline in staffing in the last year.

What is most interesting about the report is that Prospect Partners LLC and NSAC also included information about County Office employees. FSA County Office employees make up roughly 7,000 of FSA's roughly 11,000 employees (estimates are based on historical staffing levels).

County employees share many of the same benefits as federal employees but their legal status differs. For this reason, county employees are usually excluded from statistical information provided by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

This report highlights the direct impact staffing cuts are having on rural communities. As the number of FSA employees decreases, farmers and ranchers will struggle to gain program access and receive the support they need from the federal government.

NRCS STAFFING IN NEW MEXICO

In addition to staffing changes at the Farm Service Agency (FSA), NRCS has also experienced severe staffing reductions. In January of 2025, New Mexico NRCS had 186 staff. As of January 2026, NRCS staffing is down to 127, a reduction of 59 employees statewide. For farmers and ranchers, this means longer wait times for government programs and in many cases less access to USDA resources.



PLEASE JOIN US FOR A FREE ONLINE WEBINAR
WEDNESDAY JULY 15 2PM



Join the Institute for Applied Ecology for an upcoming Farmer 2 Farmer (F2F) Hub Webinar focused on installing native pollinator hedgerows to support farm resiliency and pollinator biodiversity in New Mexico.

Kristin Swoszowski-Tran of Ledoux Grange, an organic-certified diversified produce and research farm in Mora, New Mexico will share her experiences integrating native pollinator hedgerows into working agricultural lands and discuss how these practices can benefit pollinators, soil health, and on-farm diversity while supporting productive farming operations.



[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER](#)

For attendees who would like to connect with fellow farmers, land stewards, and IAE staff during the event, a live screening of the webinar will be held at:

Valle de Oro National Wildlife Refuge:
7851 2nd St SW, Albuquerque, NM 87105



NEW MEXICO ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

Written by Debbie Hughes, NMACD Executive Director

The New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts (NMACD) works with local Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) to bring financial, technical and educational resources to New Mexico to assist farmers, ranchers and other landowners to conserve and develop our natural resources. The Healthy Soil Act was passed as a bipartisan bill a few years ago and that bill has enabled NM to focus on conserving and improving our soil, and also to work with landowners who may not have worked with SWCDs in the past. This program requires that each landowner must have a NRCS conservation plan prior to applying for the funding that is administered by the New Mexico Department of Agriculture (NMDA). The Land of Enchantment Legacy Fund is also a very successful bipartisan fund that is currently providing over 1 million dollars for Healthy Soil projects and additional funding for noxious weeds control and other watershed and water conservation projects.

The recent reductions in federal staffing for technical support will make it hard for the USDA-NRCS employees find time to write these plans. Thankfully, NM USDA-NRCS and NMDA have worked with 18 SWCD employees to get them the required training so that there will be additional folks in New Mexico to help develop the required NRCS conservation plan.

Thanks to the support of the New Mexico Legislature and the Governor, NMACD currently has funding to help build the capacity of the local SWCDs by providing funding and training for more local employees and or contractors. NMACD hopes to be able to train many more local district employees to help with planning, archeological clearances and acequia restoration training.

NM Legislature partnering with NM USDA-NRCS has also supported a Technical Service Provider Program (TSP) for the past 22 years. This very successful program is currently supplying 35 local staffers in the USDA-NRCS offices statewide including all rural areas.

NMACD was awarded 15 million dollars from USDA in 2024 to assist New Mexico & Colorado Acequias to update water delivery systems to conserve water, but this grant has not been funded to date.

STATE AND FEDERAL REVIEW: FARM TO FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

Written by Bonnie Murphy, Regional Farm to Food Bank Program

The Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) Cooperative Agreement Program demonstrated that strategic investments in local food systems can strengthen agricultural economies while improving food access. Despite its broad success, federal funding for LFPA was eliminated in 2025.

Recognizing the program's value, New Mexico secured a one-year, \$2 million appropriation for Regional Farm to Food Bank (RF2FB) during the 2026 legislative session. This investment will continue purchasing locally produced foods for the statewide emergency feeding network in Fiscal Year 2027. New Mexico is one of only a handful of states that has committed state resources to continue this work. While this investment provides an important bridge, long-term nationwide success will require federal partnership.

Congress now has an opportunity to build on LFPA's success through the reauthorization of the Farm Bill. The Food and National Security Act of 2026 (H.R. 7567), recently passed by the House of Representatives, includes the Local Farmers Feeding Our Communities Act (H.R. 4782). The Act would provide LFPA-like support for local and regional food systems. In the Senate, the proposed Strengthening Local Food Security Act (S. 2338) would establish long-term federal support for local food purchasing and emergency food distribution.

To continue this progress and ensure these benefits reach communities for years to come, Congress would need to include dedicated, long-term funding for LFPA style programs in the final Farm Bill.

For more information on New Mexico's Regional Farm to Food Bank Program, please visit: nmfoodbanks.org

NEW MEXICO DELEGATION TAKES ACTION ON NEW WORLD SCREWWORM

On June 3, 2026, the United States Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA APHIS) identified the first confirmed case of New World Screwworm in the United States since 1966. APHIS had previously eradicated the pest across the United States, and had worked closely with neighboring countries to provide long-term control. However, since 2023, cases have once more begun spreading northward from Central America.

The pest is a fly larva that burrows into the living flesh of livestock and wildlife, often causing severe secondary infections that can lead to death. Previous control efforts worked partly through the introduction of a sterile fly to interfere with the pest's reproduction. Sterile flies are also part of APHIS's approach this time around. The Natural Resources Conservation Service is also offering information and assistance for New World Screwworm control.

Unfortunately, the pest is spreading despite APHIS's control efforts. On June 18, 2026, following confirmed cases of the New World screwworm (NWS) in New Mexico and Texas — U.S. Representatives Leger Fernández and Gabe Vasquez (NM) introduced the Protecting America's Herds Act, an innovative, bipartisan solution to combat the spread of the parasite, herd loss, and a jump in beef prices. The bill would equip the Cooperative Extension System with resources to train inspectors, inspect livestock, educate producers, and provide the hands-on support needed to catch outbreaks early and stop them from spreading. See more information here: Rep. Leger Fernández Introduces Bipartisan Solution to Protect America's Herds From New World Screwworm | Congresswoman Teresa Leger Fernández

On June 22, U.S. Representatives Melanie Stansbury (D-NM), David Schweikert (R-AZ), Adelita Grijalva (D-AZ), Greg Stanton (D-AZ), and Teresa Leger Fernandez (D-NM) sent a letter to Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins and Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. to push for urgent action to address the confirmed detection of New World screwworm (NWS) in the United States for the first time in sixty years. The letter requests full agency coordination and deployment of all federal resources necessary to contain the New World Screwworm (NWS) outbreak in New Mexico and across the country. See full Letter here... Reps. Stansbury, Schweikert, Grijalva, Stanton, and Leger Fernandez send Bipartisan Letter to Secretaries Rollins, Kennedy on Screwworm Outbreak | Congresswoman Melanie Stansbury | Representing New Mexico's First Congressional District



NEW WORLD SCREWWORM

Written by Manny Encinias, New Mexico rancher, Owner of Buffalo Creek Ranch – Torrance County

New Mexico’s livestock producers face increasing biological threats, including the potential reintroduction and spread of the New World Screwworm and other foreign animal pests and diseases. These threats create substantial economic risk for ranchers, increase production costs, and jeopardize domestic food security.

Congress has previously recognized the need to provide emergency support to agricultural producers during extraordinary events, including livestock market disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic and drought-related losses through existing USDA disaster assistance programs. Similar principles should be considered for biological threats that require producers to bear additional costs and management responsibilities to protect the nation’s livestock industry.

We encourage New Mexico’s Congressional Delegation to explore legislation establishing a Livestock Biosecurity and Disease Prevention Assistance Program that would provide per-head payments to livestock producers who participate in surveillance, reporting, monitoring, and prevention efforts during declared animal health emergencies.

Such a program would recognize that ranchers serve as the first line of defense against the introduction and spread of devastating livestock pests and diseases. Modest per-head payments could help offset increased labor, veterinary expenses, treatment costs, record keeping requirements, movement restrictions, and other biosecurity measures necessary to protect animal health.

Investing in prevention is far less costly than responding to a widespread infestation or disease outbreak after it becomes established. A proactive federal partnership with livestock producers would strengthen national food security, protect rural economies, and preserve the long-term viability of America’s livestock industry.

We respectfully urge Congress to evaluate innovative risk-management tools that provide meaningful support to producers facing extraordinary biological threats while advancing the shared goal of safeguarding the nation’s food supply.

ON THE FARM BILL

Last month, the House of Representatives passed the 2026 Farm Bill out of the House, marking the furthest a farm bill has made it in Congress since 2019. Currently, we are waiting action from the Senate Committee on Agriculture. The Committee is expected to release the text of their version of the bill soon.

FARM BILL TRACKER

