

Local Working Group Report 2023: Atlantic County

February 1, 2023

Location: Atlantic County Office Building

Objective: Identify natural resource conservation issues in the Local Working Group area, identify high priority projects, needs and practices.

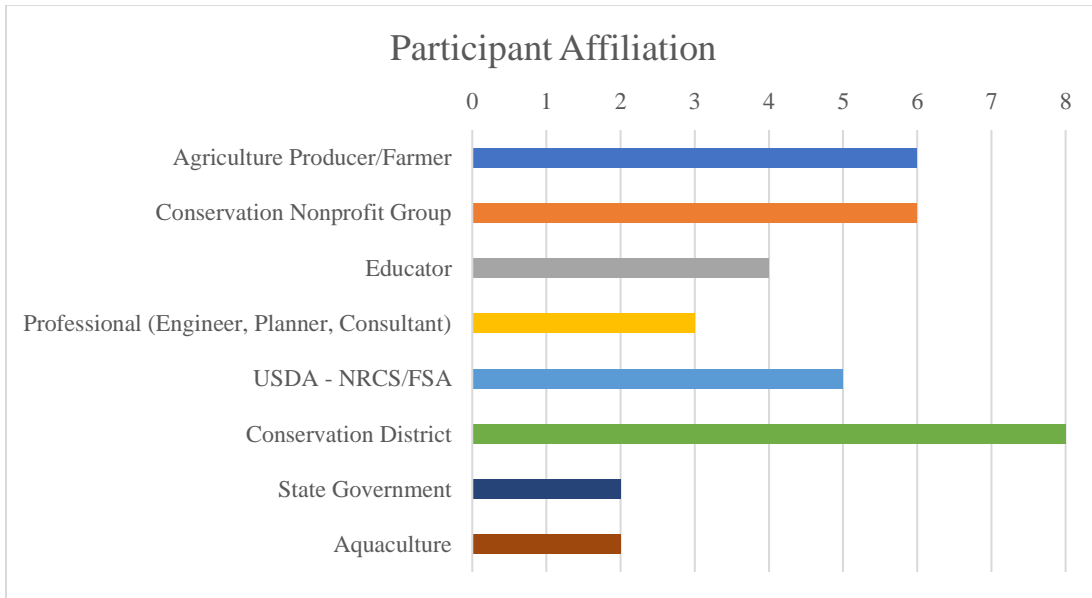
INTRODUCTION

Locally led conservation begins with the community, both geographically and focused groups, working through the Conservation Districts. This is based on the principle that community stakeholders are best suited to assess and deal with local resource issues and other problems. The products of the locally led process will provide the Conservation District, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and other resource management entities with relevant conservation needs, resource concerns, priorities, and recommendations regarding programs that can be used to address those needs. It is the responsibility of the Conservation District to collect and assess the data and to share the information with appropriate entities that may be able to address these local resource concerns. The Local Working Group (LWG) process allows recommendations to be introduced to the Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) State Conservationist through the State Technical Committee. The USDA agencies can determine where to invest in technical and financial assistance to meet the needs of the communities within their operating programs. It is noteworthy that the data obtained by the LWG can aid communities to address conservation needs also through other agencies and organizations in addition to inform and aid decision makers and the interested public.

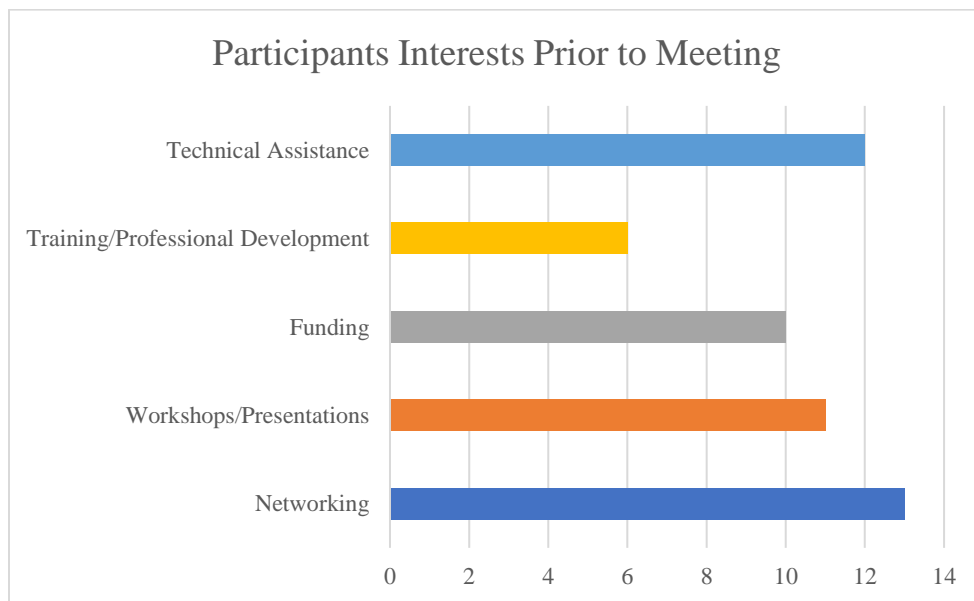
Overview of LWG Participants

- Farmers/Producers
- State Government
- Federal Government
- Soil Conservation Staff
- Conservation Professionals

Thirty-four participants attended the Atlantic County LWG. Of those thirty-four, many represented more than one discipline or interest area. A breakdown of the participants' affiliation is shown in the chart below.



An online registration form for the LWG asked the question “Which of the following best describes your interest(s)?” The chart below presents the responses.



Networking was the top issue that participants wanted from the LWG, followed closely by Technical Assistance. Networking is reflective of the culture of the participants, generally, a think tank of likeminded people providing solutions to problems and exploring or pursuing opportunities. Similarly, Technical Assistance is reflective of participants looking for support from others in the community and their networks when it comes to the natural resource concern they are facing.

SUMMARY of MEETING

Natural Resource Concerns and Ideas Presented by Participants

Agricultural Producers

There were several topics of interest that were offered or presented by agricultural producers. These topics included:

1. Future of Producers

- a.** A concern expressed at this LWG is what the future of farming looks like for those trying to enter the industry. Mentioned multiple times was that there are young people wanting to start farming but they are facing challenges when it comes to acquiring and affording land and equipment. Farmers also commented that while the farmland is being preserved, the individual producer is not being preserved. Instead, they are being priced out of their jobs and property is becoming increasingly expensive to access for production. Farmers would much rather see their land go to another farm, but farming is just not competitive and the barrier for entry for new farmers is just too high for them to acquire the land for production.

2. Selling and Distribution

- a.** Producers are interested in selling locally but are facing barriers when it comes to the pricing and distribution of their products. For the individual farmer they face a lot of costs and risks when it comes to selling their products locally, i.e. at a farmer's market. Farmers must package and transport their product to the market and, sell it at a price that allows them to make a profit. Often this means they are setting their prices high enough to be successful enough to compensate them for

missing a day of work. Ideas were discussed about public assistance to buy produce from farmers at a reasonable margin for the producer.

3. Information Sharing

- a.** A main concern from farmer participants of the LWG was having a network for information sharing. Many resources are made available to farmers and other stakeholder groups to access farm produce, but there needs to be a better way of sharing that information. Increasing information sharing efforts would also bring to the forefront what funding is available to them. It is important to connect farmers with the resources and groups that can provide technical and financial assistance to producers not only to sustain operations, but also improve them.

4. Education

- a.** There is work to be done to help bridge the gap between farmers and the schools. Many schools no longer offer agricultural topics and courses that benefit an understanding of the importance of farming as a business. While there are programs in higher education which are training students to become sustainable farmers, the programs and funding are not available to encourage and sustain them after leaving these academic programs.

Aquaculture Producers

There were several topics of interest that were offered or presented by aquaculture producers. These topics included:

1. Sea Level Rise (SLR)

- a.** Producers are seeking technical assistance for pilot studies and training for dealing with SLR in the coastal wetlands.

2. Ecological Projects

- a.** Utilize native resources for spat on shell projects.
- b.** Technical assistance is needed for learning more about the carbon market system and how that can work in a competitive environment like New Jersey. Connection to local resources in the State is needed to be viable.
- c.** Technical assistance is needed for bird deterrent on floating gear.

3. Operation Concerns

- a.** There needs to be programs that bridges the gap between the shellfish fishery and local restaurants. Local NJ aquaculture growers need to be able to compete with other fisheries, i.e., harvest it in NJ and keep or consume it in NJ.
- b.** Funding for New Jersey aquaculture operations is challenging because New Jersey producers are often overlooked compared to Maryland or the Chesapeake producers where there is a robust program supporting aquaculture producers.

Non-government Organizations

Participants of this group represented varied interests across many different food management and conservation efforts. The interested parties included:

1. Pinelands Preservation Alliance
2. C.R.O.P.S.
3. New Jersey Audubon.
4. Great Egg Harbor Watershed
5. Stockton University
6. Coastal Resources Conservancy

These topics included:

1. Food Insecurity

The hurdles of providing food to those people in need or have limited access to nutritious food as a result of a myriad of factors. The participants of the LWG emphasized that having the local farming community participate in food collection and distribution programs is crucial to a successful endeavor. Even small farms in proximity to a city may be able to fill the gap for those who need access to produce them for city dwellers. And while farmer markets fill a niche, some stumbling blocks exist for the farmer, such as, burdensome paperwork, the risk of profit loss, lack of incentives to attend due to loss of work on the farm, and lack of resources or excessive costs to bring products to the farm market.

2. Finding Available Funding and Information Sharing

A common thread during the LWG session was the lack of current and reliable informational sources and resources available to organizations, individuals, other interested parties. That needed information is in the form of technical assistance, funding, and partnership opportunities. Connecting people with the proper resources and information is a high priority. Network sharing, facilitating connections, and focusing on a comprehensive program of training, was considered central to obtaining needed funding and assistance. Funding sources should not be elusive, unobtainable to acquire. Making connections, partnerships, sharing information and resources, and sharing common goals make obtaining funds and information less burdensome, more successful tasks.

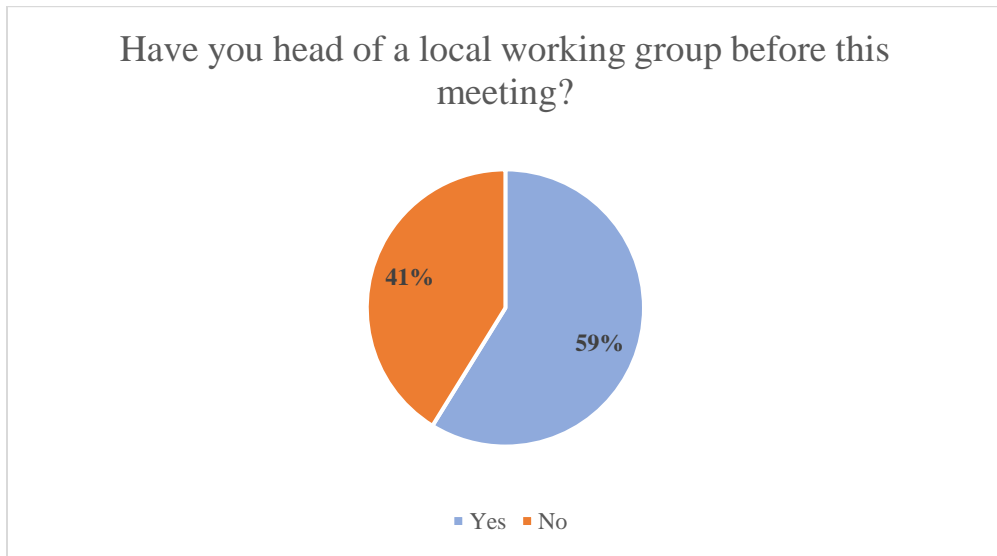
3. Conservation of Natural Resources and Management

- a.** Mismanagement of public lands was a topic that was raised several times throughout the LWG session. Identifying resource issues to manage those lands is needed, while concurrently bringing other funding mechanisms to address environmental degradation such as invasive species and restore diverse, healthy natural habitats.
- b.** More forest stewardship plans on public and private lands.
- c.** More information about uplift projects was requested.
- e.** Addressing the need for more technical assistance.

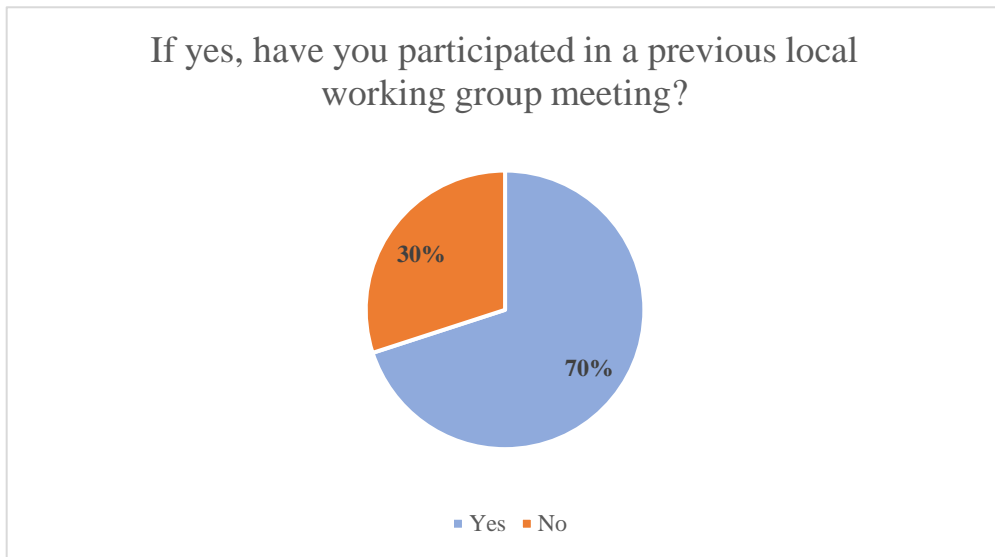
LWG FOLLOW UP

Post LWG surveys were distributed to participants, collected, and the data analyzed. The purpose of the survey was to provide the opportunity for additional comments from participants and to explore with them how to improve the LWG process moving forward.

Question: “Have you heard of a Local Working Group before this meeting?”

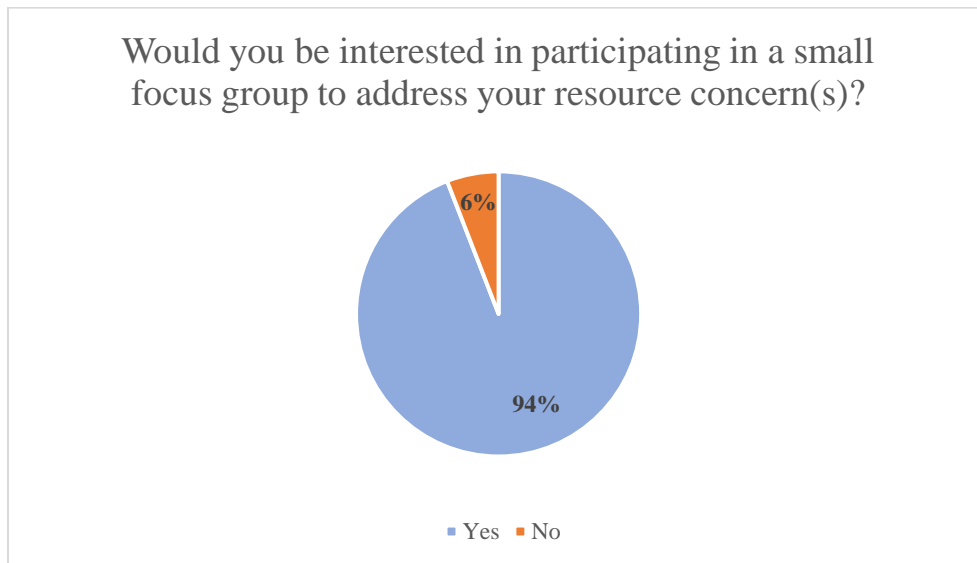


Question: If you have heard of a LWG, “have you participated in a previous LWG meeting?”



Most of our participants had previously heard of a LWG and well over half of them have actually participated in an LWG.

Question: “Would you be interested in participating in a small focus group to address your resource concern(s)?”



The interest in following up on the initial meeting was overwhelmingly very positive.

FUTURE ACTION ITEMS

- 1.** Based upon the LWG experience, it is the intention of the CACD to form several focus groups to better understand issues and focus on potential solutions for particular conservation resource concerns and interests. The benefit of a focus group includes gaining insights into people’s shared understanding of common problems, establishing targeted interest areas, and assembling constituents to work on solutions.
- 2.** The barriers to allowing farmers to produce and deliver their products to the market, in particular to those people in need, are formidable and complex. The lack of information, effective dissemination of that information, outreach, and education were common issues that many of the participants expressed. CACD envisions becoming an informational hub or clearinghouse to direct and connect people, organizations, and programs to accomplish common conservation goals.
- 3.** As a way to encourage continuing participation and show a good faith effort that the LWG heard their resource concerns, and took them seriously, this report will be emailed to each

participant. It is anticipated that by doing so, the seed will be planted to continue engagement and encourage others interested in conservation and resource concerns on the local level, to attend future LWG sessions and let their voices be heard.

CONCLUSION

Locally led conservation can find its niche within federal and State-run programs, in addition to supplementing, aiding, and filling in the gaps that other programs are not able to or fall short of providing. Districts are in a unique position to offer such support, given the fact that they are part of the local communities while also partnering with governmental programs and non-governmental programs to educate and assist District constituents. The LWG is a listening board where the needs of the local community can be voiced and, while not always immediately addressed, serves as the information distribution hub that can be used to focus the District's and partners' efforts in addressing particular resource concerns and opportunities.

TEAM							
Local Work Group	Atlantic County 2/1/23						
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Conservation Needs Assessment Report

Rank in order of Priority resources concerns identified in the Conservation needs		Narrative of priority resource Issue	Resource concern categories	Extent	Recommended activities to solve resource concerns	Programs and fund pools that may help treat the identified resource concerns	NRCS Funding Required			Recommendation from Local work group
							2022	2023	2024	
1	Bridging the communication gap between orgaizations, intereste parties, and farmers	Education/Outreach	High	Improved network for dissemination of information and resources					Identify suggestion for technical, policy, or application selection criteria that should be forward to the State Technical Committee for consideration in addressing the resource concerns.	
2	Distribution of agricultural products to urban areas	Urban Agriculture	High	More organized system for distribution	USDA Urban Agriculture grants					
3	Mismanagement of public lands	Invasive Species/Erosion	High	Concerted effort towards stewardship of protected land						
4	Lack of information sharing			Centralized system for information sharing						
5	Program support for underserved farming community	Shellfisheries	Medium-High	Increase in focused programs/assistance						
6	Lack of education for current and future farmers	Program misinformation/lack of program opportunities	Medium-High	Educational network needed	USDA/NJDA funding sources?					
7	More resources funneled into irrigation	Irrigation	Medium	Improve access to irrigation programs						