

CAPE ATLANTIC CONSERVATION DISTRICT

2024 ANNUAL REPORT

6260 OLD HARDING HIGHWAY, MAYS LANDING, NJ 08330

609-625-3144 CAPEATLANTIC.ORG

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE

As the Cape Atlantic Conservation District continues to build on its commitment to protecting the integrity of our natural resources, we are excited to announce a series of strategic developments that will strengthen our capacity to serve the community and safeguard the environment for future generations.

Over the past year, our district has made significant strides in expanding staff capacity, with a particular focus on three core areas: Forestry, Education/Outreach, and Agriculture. These areas are fundamental to the work we do, and the addition of specialized personnel in these fields will greatly enhance our ability to address the growing demands for resource management and environmental stewardship.

The growth of our district’s capacity would not be possible without the dedication of our Board of Supervisors, our staff, our invaluable partnerships, and the support of the community we serve. This collaborative spirit is key to our district’s success. We are committed to working hand-in-hand with our partners, including state agencies, local governments, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector, to achieve our shared goals of natural resource protection and sustainable land use.

As we look to the future, we will continue to build upon this foundation by recruiting additional expertise, fostering partnerships, and engaging the local community in conservation efforts. With the continued support of our dedicated Board, staff, partners, and community members, we are confident in our ability to meet the growing challenges of natural resource protection and ensure the long-term health of our environment.

Michael Kent, District Manager

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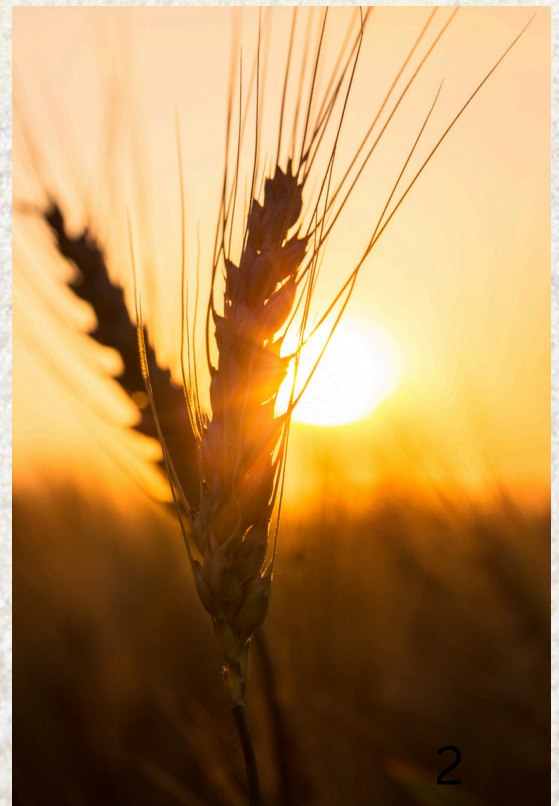
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OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

By Sharon McKenna

The Cape Atlantic Conservation District welcomed a new Outreach Coordinator, Sharon McKenna, to advance the district's current outreach program, enhancing community outreach and expanding educational opportunities for schools, farmers, professionals and more. Through accessible resources and engaging programs, the District empowers individuals, families, schools, and organizations across Atlantic and Cape May Counties to actively contribute to the protection of our natural resources.

Throughout the year, the program engaged in outreach events with local schools, celebrated Earth Day with hands-on activities, and made significant gains collaborating with Sustainable Jersey Green Teams across several municipalities. The year also highlighted Southern Jersey through the New Jersey Envirothon and Local Working Group sessions co-hosted with our partner, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Insights gathered from Local Working and Focus Groups opened new opportunities on urban agriculture in our region, including experiential education in local schools.

Outreach and Education plays a pivotal role in expanding the understanding of the District's work. Through participation in public events, classroom presentations, professional workshops, the Envirothon and other avenues, the Outreach and Education program shares how the District contributes to environmental education and stewardship. As the District expands its role in agriculture, forestry and the coastal zone soil survey, the program will continue to share how our work can assist these fields and the industries associated with them to benefit our shared future.

Education

Discussions in the Focus Groups on agricultural education, both rural and urban, as well as the importance of pollinators, led to a partnership with the Galloway Township School District. This collaboration includes plans to create a pollinator garden at a multi-school campus. The school campus hosts two (2) elementary schools and a middle school with shared school grounds which includes an existing outdoor classroom, Mr. B's Backyard Classroom. This outdoor space is utilized to enrich students' understanding of the natural environment and their place in it. Pond explorations, forestry studies, flora and fauna discoveries are some of the opportunities available to teachers and students.



The creation of a pollinator garden at Mr. B's Backyard Classroom would expand the possibility for learning in an outdoor, natural space.

Jordan Road School Environmental Field Day

The fifth and sixth graders at the Jordan Road School in Somers Point are treated to an Environmental Field Day each Fall. Groups of students rotate among stations, each focusing on a different aspect of the environment. Stations included soil exploration, birding and ID, and seining in the Great Egg Harbor Bay. The District utilized the inflatable soil tunnel to guide students into exploring the varying aspects of soil like the soil food chain and profiles. Students then played a Plinko® game where they were quizzed by the District Education staff. All participants were given a Sammy Soil temporary tattoo. Groups that answered the most questions correctly were also awarded Marsh Mallow seeds, a native, perennial flower provided by the Cape May Plant Materials Center.



Students learn about creatures in our soils inside the soil tunnel and the hydrologic cycle outside.

Nature Fest

Each year since 2011, Galloway Township School District has held Nature Fest, an interactive and participatory environmental fair. Students, in small groups, select a topic pertaining to a South Jersey ecosystem or organism found in the ecosystem and conduct research on their chosen topic. Afterwards, each group creates a presentation which is then displayed for other students from the school district. Adults and students alike rotate through the student stations, offering the opportunity for all to learn more about the natural world around them.

The District Education staff shared its expertise with the students utilizing an inflatable soil tunnel, an interactive conservation tool. The soil tunnel explores soil biota, prehistoric and past civilizations, and varying soil profiles amongst other information. Students were offered the opportunity to explore the soil tunnel through a question/answer worksheet that included a scavenger hunt by locating items found throughout the tunnel. Those students who completed their worksheet were granted a small prize.



2024 Poster Contest - “May the Forest be with You Always”

Each year, the district invites students from Grades 2–12 in Cape May and Atlantic counties to participate in the Annual Poster Contest. The theme for 2024 was “May the Forest be with You Always”. 1st place posters from each grade category are displayed here and were sent to the State level for judging.



2nd-3rd



4th-6th



7th-9th



10th-12th

Envirothon

The District supports the National Conservation Foundation's (NCF) program with hands-on assistance during New Jersey's annual competition. Early in May, teams of five students convene for a day-long problem-solving competition, with honors, prizes, and scholarships at stake. Areas of competition include aquatics, forestry, soils, wildlife, team presentation and a current environmental issue. The winning team from NJ goes onto represent the state at the North American level where teams from the United States and Canada compete.

This year's NJ winning team was comprised of students from the Ocean County Vocational Technical School, Marine Academy of Technology and Environmental Science (MATES). The team advanced to the NCF National Competition, held in Geneva, New York in 2024.



MATES Team (L-R) Caroline Liebmann, Megan Ebinger, Amalie Werner, Matthew Thomas, Cailean Connolly

Earth Day - Atlantic County (ACUA)

On April 28, 2024, the District showcased an interactive display demonstrating practical backyard conservation techniques utilizing repurposed materials for raised garden beds, alternative planting techniques, water conservation, and sustainable practices. The 32nd Annual Earth Day Festival, hosted by Atlantic County Utilities Authority (ACUA), was the perfect way for visitors to engage in discovering how to become better stewards of our planet. ACUA's festival is the largest and longest running Earth Day Festival in South Jersey and offers a range of activities and information for all ages. The festival provided the district the ability to reach over 1,000 people with our natural resource conservation methods, practical backyard approaches to conservation, and other programs and information the district has to offer.



Atlantic County (ACUA) Earth Day backyard display



Cape May Earth Day outdoor pollinator display

Earth Day - Cape May County

The Cape May County Park & Zoo co-hosted its Annual Earth Day Celebration with the Cape May County MUA on April 20, 2024. This is the largest Earth Day event in Cape May County with hands on educational exhibits, children's amusements, live entertainment, a variety of environmental eco-shops, and scavenger hunt. The theme of the event was "Planet vs. Plastics". A variety of environmental organizations were set up to share their expertise and knowledge with visitors.

The District displayed a small sample of backyard conservation techniques, focusing on repurposing items and urban alternatives to planting flowers and vegetables. An information table, filled with useful conservation techniques and methods for the homeowner or apartment dweller were available. Other conservation information, such as how to aid our declining pollinators and soil conservation, were available as well. The event attracts many children and the District provides an opportunity for them to engage with their environment by planting sunflower seeds, a pollinator plant, to take with them.

Local Working Groups

Each year, the Cape May County and Atlantic County Local Working Group invites participation from the community to identify important natural resource issues, concerns, and opportunities to conduct a conservation needs assessment. The products of the locally led process will provide USDA and the District with relevant conservation needs, resource concerns, priorities, and recommendations regarding programs that can be used as tools to address those needs. Additionally, gathered information helps direct technical and financial resources for those conservation programs and efforts locally and across the State.

In 2024, the District held two separate meetings, one in each county, which yielded insights into local conservation concerns, voiced by a wide variety of professionals and professions. From that information, focus groups were formed and specific concerns addressed in the areas of agriculture, outreach and education.



Community Stakeholders gather in Atlantic County for the January 2025 Local Working Group co-hosted by the District and the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

SOIL EROSION AND SEDIMENT CONTROL By Glenn Ward

Chapter 251 Overview

The Cape Atlantic Conservation District continues to work harmoniously with our partners in the construction industry, township construction offices, and engineers in accomplishing our shared interest in protecting our natural resources, especially our waterways and other critical habitats. Construction projects, from the single-family project to large subdivisions, beach restoration or commercial projects, continue to keep District staff engaged. In fact, the District hired two resource conservationists/ inspectors in 2024 to assist with the considerable number of projects and construction plans sent into the District.

New Hires

Connor Smilon, a former District intern, and Renee Capetola were brought on board in early 2024. Their training and introduction to the Chapter 251 program, our partners, and plan review continue to expand and hone the skills necessary for them to excel in their roles at the District.



Renee Capetola



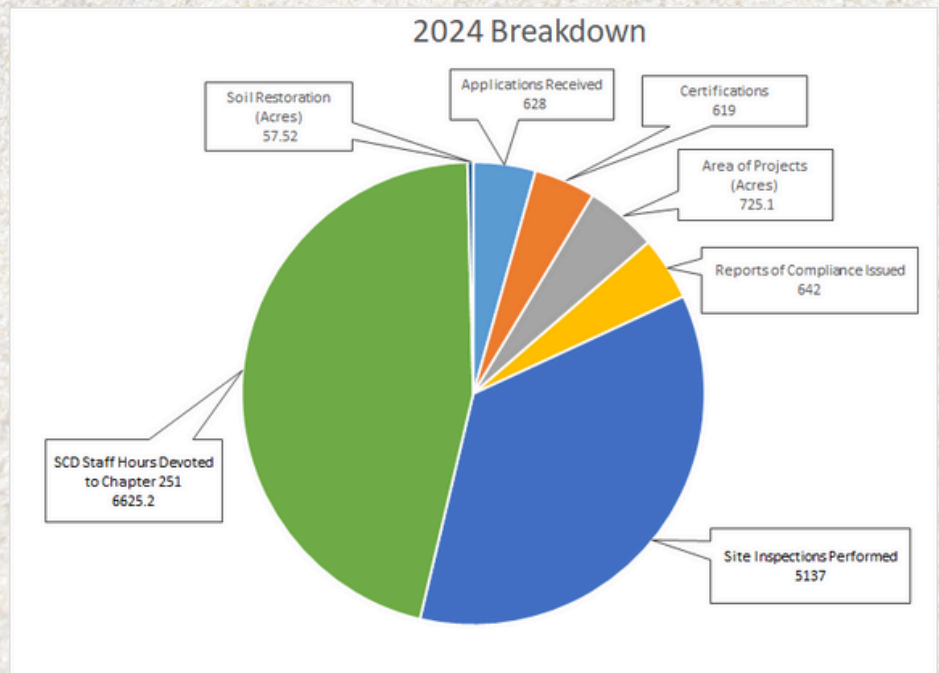
Connor Smilon

Data Breakdown

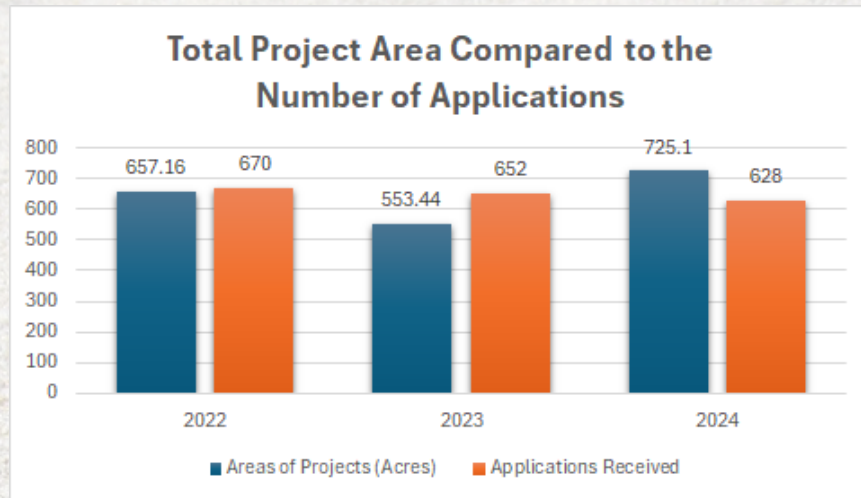
The District tracks and collects data in order to monitor and analyze trends associated with District operations, projects, staff time dedicated to Chapter 251, and other pertinent information.

A breakdown of the categories for which data is collected is easily represented in the pie chart to the right. As indicated, the vast amount of energy expended by District staff is dedicated to the Chapter 251 program.

The efforts of staff is reflected in the number of inspections performed, reports of compliance issued, and soil erosion plan certifications.



The **“Total Project Area”** chart demonstrates the relationship between the number of applications received and the area of construction projects. As noted previously, 2022 was a stellar year for construction projects. It’s interesting to note that even though the District received less plans in 2024 compared to 2022, the land disturbance (area of a project) increased. In fact, it’s the highest of the three years represented, indicating staff were reviewing and inspecting larger, more complex projects, i.e., subdivisions and commercial sites.



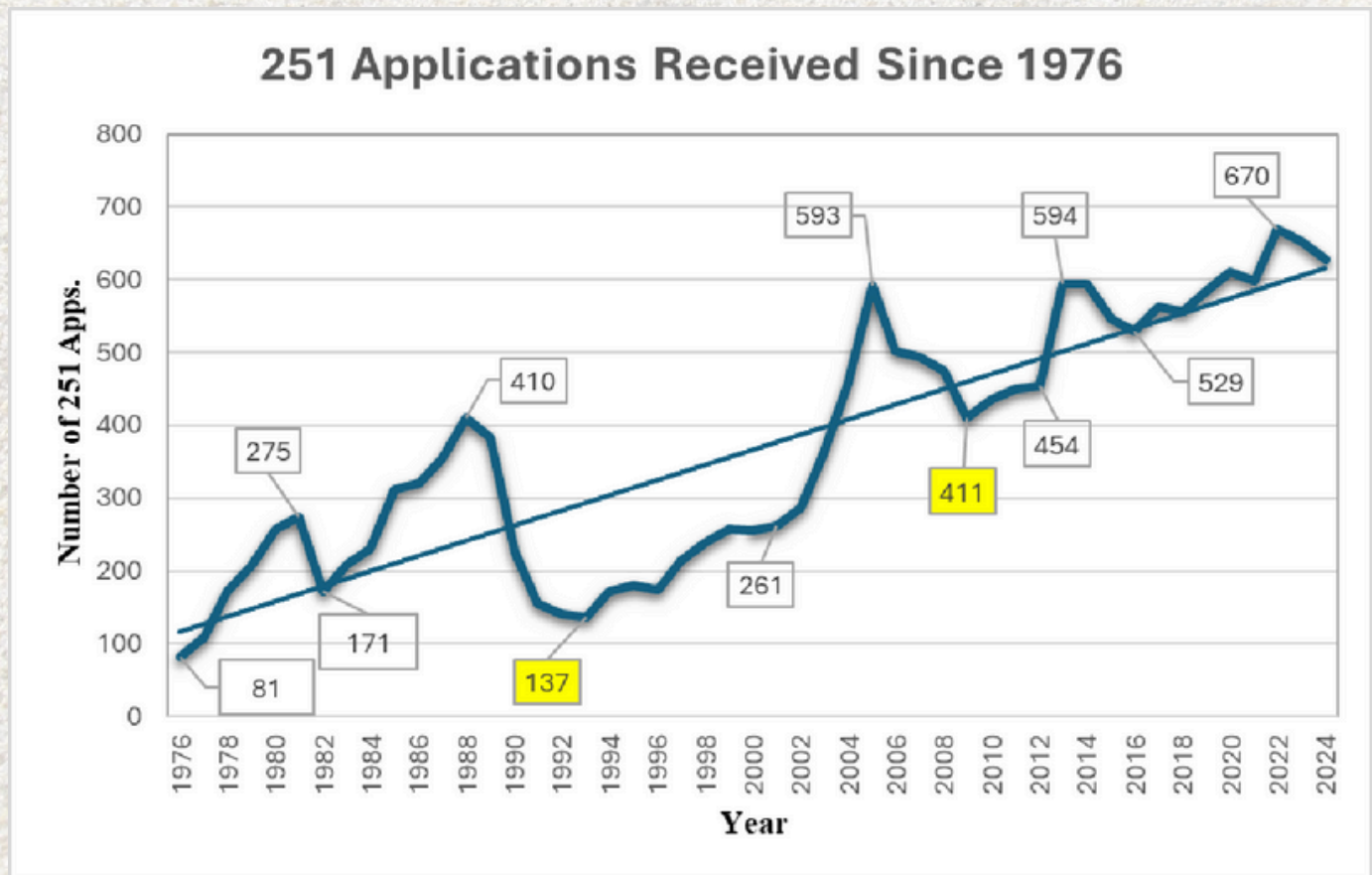
The efforts of staff dedicated to soil erosion and sediment control is demonstrated in the **“251 Workload”** chart. Between the issuance of reports of compliance, processing and certifying plans, performing site inspections, and responding to township officials and clients, the District closed out 2024 on upturn.



Trends

Trends in the housing and construction market in general, are dependent on many factors of the overall economy, including labor costs, supply chain and material availability among other variables. Over the last 49 years, the number of applications sent into the District has followed the ups and downs of the construction market, as demonstrated in the chart below. Of particular note are the two dips (colored yellow) that took place in 1993 and 2009. America was still in recovery mode from a recession started in 1990. Job losses, unemployment, and inflation were high, contributing to sluggish construction. 2008 experienced the burst of the housing bubble, a period of rapid increase in housing prices that led to a financial crisis and the Great Recession, which carried over into 2009.

Despite these downturns, a statistical analysis of the number of plans sent into the District indicates an upward trend throughout the 49 years of data collected, with the largest number of applications, 670, received in 2022. Accordingly, there's no reason to believe that this upward trend will not continue into 2025 and beyond.



The District has seen an influx of new, larger projects or projects that were stalled and are now active with construction. Single family subdivisions, multi-family site plans, and commercial enterprises are some of the more complex projects keeping the inspector observant and vigilant for any issues that may arise.

Two projects of interest at the district are a 219 acre subdivision consisting of 661 single family and multi-family residences, and a beach restoration project encompassing 110 acres.

The Higbee Beach Project, located in one of the most prestigious birding communities, seeks to restore the habitat and functionality of the Pond Creek Marsh. Reestablishing the proper hydraulic tidal flux will support native vegetation and create habitat diversity. Through construction of sand shell islands, mudflats, and open water ponds, various migratory birds will be provided nesting and foraging locations. When construction is complete, the result will be the restoration of approximately 220 acres of wetlands and 135 acres of upland.



NRCS Partnerships

In 2024, the Cape Atlantic Conservation District employed four full-time Agricultural Conservation Specialists. District employees work with NRCS staff to assist with technical and financial assistance programs, helping to implement conservation practices on farmland and private forest lands. In 2024, District staff assisted with conservation planning on over 7,500 acres across 15 counties. Across this acreage, we planned, implemented, and/or certified 57 different conservation practices.

The top ten practices, by number of instances, in 2024 were:

1. Cover Crop
2. High Tunnel
3. Forest Management Plan
4. Brush Management
5. Livestock Pipeline
6. Conservation Cover
7. Watering Facility
8. Obstruction Removal
9. Wildlife Habitat Planting
10. Fence



High tunnels funded by NRCS through the Socially Disadvantaged funding pool—photo by Zach Lenzi, NRCS Soil Conservationist

The top conservation practice by acreage in 2024 was cover crop planting, which covered over 5,520 acres. Cover crops help reduce soil erosion, increase soil carbon, and decrease compaction during the non-growing season for cash crops. They can also break weed and pest cycles between growing seasons. Planting recommendations vary by farm and the specific resource concerns being addressed. District staff work closely with farmers to ensure maximum benefit by helping select the appropriate species of cover crops, seeding dates, and seeding rates.

The District works to build relationships with local landowners by being active participants in Board of Agriculture meetings, County Agricultural Development Boards and by holding stakeholder meetings. Looking ahead to 2025, the District will maintain three conservation planning partner employees across the state—one each in the Vineland, Woodstown, and Hackettstown offices. The District will also maintain a Conservation Engineering Technician position in the Woodstown office. We look forward to continuing to provide science-based technical and financial assistance to our local landowners in 2025 and beyond.

The Cape Atlantic Conservation District has agreements with the State Agriculture Development Committee (SADC), Cape May County, Atlantic County, and Cumberland County to conduct annual monitoring of preserved farms. This monitoring is required to ensure that preserved farms continue to meet the requirements of their deeds of easement. In 2024, we monitored a total of 151 farms across Atlantic, Cape May, and Cumberland Counties, covering nearly 12,000 acres. Of all the farms monitored, over 90% had no concerns regarding their deeds of easement. The few that did have concerns involved mostly minor issues, which are expected to be resolved before the 2025 monitoring.

County	# of Preserved Farms Monitored	# of Concerns
Atlantic	51	1
Cape May	70	6
Cumberland	30	6

All findings are submitted to the appropriate easement holder, who works with the landowner to address any concerns. The District does not have enforcement authority over these deeds of easement but serves as a partner, helping to lighten the workload of our partner agencies.



District staff and local producer Fluffy Farms explain technical assistance grants on film for the NACD film crew

Thanks to NACD, Riley Blankenship, Senior Agricultural Conservation Specialist, Joe Lomax, District Supervisor, and local producer Fluffy Farms, were featured in an upcoming short film. The goal of this video is to better explain the benefits of NADC Technical Assistance grants for both Districts and producers. It aims to encourage more Conservation Districts to apply for these grants and expand their capacity to implement conservation on the ground. Check back to view the final video once it is released.

Animal Waste Management - Technical and Financial Assistance

A key for agricultural conservation on farms with livestock is animal waste management. The nutrients that animal manure contains can pose risks to soil and water. Excess nutrients can collect in soils and run off into bodies of water causing increased aquatic vegetation and decreased dissolved oxygen levels.

To ensure animal wastes don't become an environmental concern, it is important to create an animal waste management plan or nutrient management plan. The nutrients in manure, if properly handled, can be beneficial for producers who have hay fields, pastures, or crop production on their farm as a fertilizer. Farms without areas viable for manure spreading can partner with a producer who can field spread manure as an input or manure can be hauled off site. To prevent negatives from animal waste, field stacked manure should not be left in place for more than six months or located near surface waters. Run off should be minimized.

The location of the field stack should be rotated to limit nutrient build up in one location. After removing the field stacked manure, revegetating the area by planting will help to absorb excess nutrients. Additionally, around manure storage areas, filter strips (densely vegetated areas) can be planted to absorb excess nutrients and to hold soils in place preventing runoff and erosion. For larger operations, structural fixes may be beneficial, such as adding a concrete pad to store manure on or adding a roof to prevent oversaturation and run off. There is no one way to manage manure that will work on every farm. Each farm has a set of conditions that will change how animal waste can best be managed which is why it is important to create a farm specific animal waste management plan.

To help achieve this, the Cape Atlantic Conservation District has entered into an agreement with the New Jersey Department of Agriculture to offer both technical and financial assistance to our local livestock producers. Through this agreement animal waste management plans can be written free of charge for producers. We also have financial assistance available to support improvements on farms to reduce the environmental impacts of animal manures. The staff continue to work with producers to get these plans completed and submitted. There is still money and time available so please reach out to Riley Blankenship at agprograms@capeatlantic.org for more information on this opportunity



*Alpacas are a source of animal waste
that must be controlled*

COASTAL ZONE SOIL SURVEY

By Lauren Tighe

In Cape May and Atlantic Counties, estuarine resources provide vast ecological and socioeconomic benefits. However, these essential ecosystems in our area lack soil surveys and associated data. Coastal Zone Soil Survey (CZSS) is conducted by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and National Cooperative Soil Survey partners. CZSS collects data through soil sampling of shallow subaqueous soils, submerged soils, and adjacent upland areas. CZSS is a way to understand the function and condition of estuarine habitats. For example, collected data can provide information that is used to determine potential restoration areas, ideal shellfishery location and conditions, and build climate resiliency.

The Cape Atlantic Conservation District understands how essential this data is for maintaining a healthy and functioning natural environment. The District submitted a request to the Hammonton Soil Survey Office of the Soil and Plant Science Division and the Natural Resource Conservation Service for CZSS work to be conducted in Atlantic and Cape May Counties. This request was accepted by NRCS and the Hammonton Field Office for project kickoff to begin Spring 2025 in Atlantic Coast Estuaries. This will be a multi-year project extending down into the Delaware Bay.

Comparison of pre and post Coastal Zone Soil Survey



1996 SSURGO Soil Map

No subaqueous soils mapped, all beaches are one unit, barrier dunes are one undifferentiated unit with no data, marshes not mapped out in detail.



2010 SSURGO Soil Map with Coastal Zone Soil Survey

Subaqueous soils mapped, several beach units, barrier dunes are mapped to series level, marshes mapped out in detail. Point data provided along with special features.

Photo via nrcs.usda.gov

FORESTRY

By John Hooven

Forester on Staff

The District added a new forester to their staff in June, 2024. John Hooven joined the District from University of Maryland Extension (UMDE), and previously Maryland Forest Service. John has been actively involved in forestry since becoming a NJ Woodland Steward in 2015, a program that he has facilitated from 2017-2024. John is a certified inspector for American Tree Farm System in New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland, a Candidate Certified Forester® with the Society of American Foresters and is licensed as a forester in the state of Maryland. John is working on his professional credentials and approvals in New Jersey and is currently also working to become a technical service provider (TSP) with US Department of Agriculture (USDA) – Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) for forestry.

The District hired a forester to build program capacity to assist communities and private landowners in New Jersey with forestry planning services in the form of community forestry plans (CFP) as well as forest management plans, especially those looking to work with USDA – NRCS. Grant funding has been made available for conservation projects through the NRCS.

Additionally, an urban forester trainee was hired in January, 2025, to assist communities in need of a community forestry plan. The NJ Forest Service Urban and Community Forestry Program currently has grant funding available to assist communities who wish to complete a CFP. A community's CFP may reduce or eliminate liability associated with local tree care programs/shade tree commissions, promote the health and resilience of neighborhood trees and plan for tree planting/neighborhood improvement programs.



NJ Urban and Community Forestry Program

The NJ Urban and Community Forestry Program was authorized by state legislation in 1996. Since then, NJ Forest Service has made grant funding available to communities to hire professionals to assist governments in writing community forestry plans to manage trees in public spaces. These plans include tree resources in parks, street trees, and community forests. In 2024, grant funding was made available to encourage community participation in CFPs. Additional requirements were added to the plan writing guidelines to help governments to better manage their tree resources. Still, the need for professionals to assist communities with these efforts continues to increase. The District will provide assistance to communities that would like to apply for grants for CFPs and hire the District to assist with completing the CFP.



District forestry personnel attended a New Jersey Forestry Association Walk in the Woods event



Forestry personnel attended a Pinelands Joint Chiefs Restoration Project kickoff meeting in Egg Harbor City

Partnerships

District staff has assisted NJ NRCS staff as needed with woodland owners seeking grant assistance with such NRCS supported farm bill programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). The District will assess community needs to expand services as needed. In working with private woodland owners and municipalities, their needs were assessed to determine those additional service needs that the District may provide. The goal remains to not only provide these services but to focus on available programs to provide cost share or grants to cover the expense of these services to the woodland owners and communities that request them. The District anticipates building capacity of the forest management resources in the region to benefit forests, wetlands and riparian buffers in need of conservation.

To date, the District Forestry program has provided forest management plans to private woodland owners working with or wishing to work with NRCS. Our forester facilitated and provided instruction for the 2024 NJ Woodland Stewards Program and will continue to provide instructional and technical support to the program's partners, NJ Forestry Alliance and NJ State Forest Service. The District Forestry program provided tree ID workshops throughout the state. This outreach effort assisted those needing tree ID experience and introduced the District to the public. Personnel have attended outreach functions throughout the state involving the forestry community at large both professionally and in support of efforts by NJ State Forest Service and its partner stakeholders for their programming efforts. The District Forestry staff will continue with those efforts and support of other forestry conservation groups in education and outreach. As we build capacity, we anticipate providing services to private woodland owners needing forest management plans as well as communities in need of CFPs. We anticipate becoming a Technical Service Provider (TSP) for NRCS in the first half of 2025 as well as being approved as a forester for writing Farmland Assessment forest management plans and forest stewardship plans.

The District Forestry program has assisted community Green Teams and similar entities with technical and training needs, leading to good tree stewardship in their communities. District personnel also assisted with the annual NJ Envirothon, a statewide high school student competition that sends NJ's top team to the North American Envirothon competition.



*District forester John Hooven facilitated the NJ
Woodland Stewards Program
in Sandyston, NJ*

CONTACT US!

Board of Supervisors

Robert H. Fenton, Chairman—fentonrbt@aol.com
Joseph Lomax, Vice Chairman—jlomax@lomaxconsulting.com
Cormac Morrissey, Treasurer—Cormac@dixonassociates.com
Richard Dovey, Secretary—rdovey30@gmail.com
Allen Carter, Jr., District Supervisor—allencarterjr@aol.com

District Staff

Michael Kent, District Manager—CapeAtlanticSCD@capeatlantic.org
Glenn Ward, Assistant Manager—GlennWard@capeatlantic.org
Lauren Tigue, Resource Conservationist—LaurenTigue@capeatlantic.org
Renee Capetola, Resource Conservationist—ReneeCapetola@capeatlantic.org
Connor Smilon, Resource Conservationist—ConnorSmilon@capeatlantic.org
Sharon McKenna, Outreach Coordinator—education@capeatlantic.org
John Hooven, District Forester—JohnHooven@capeatlantic.org
Tyler Savage, Forestry—TylerSavage@capeatlantic.org
Marie Rogowski, Office Administrator—MarieRogowski@capeatlantic.org
Riley Blankenship, Senior Agricultural Conservation Specialist—agprograms@capeatlantic.org
Natalie Repak, Ag Conservation Specialist—Natalie.Repak@usda.gov
Chloe Lewis, Ag Conservation Specialist—Chloe.Lewis@usda.gov
Nicole Miller, Ag Conservation Specialist—Nicole.Miller@usda.gov

**“Committed to the
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Our Natural Resources”**
6260 Old Harding Highway
Mays Landing, NJ 08330
Phone: 609-625-3144
www.capeatlantic.org

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