

## **Local Work Group Summary Report for Kansas 2023**

### **Prepared by the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts (KACD)**

The following report summarizes the 30 Local Work Group (LWG) meetings that were held in Kansas in 2023. Each of the LWG meetings were conducted on a multi-county management unit (MU) basis with local conservation districts hosting each meeting. The LWG meetings were coordinated and implemented by local conservation districts with assistance from the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts (KACD) through the “Local Work Group Cooperative Agreement”. Through this cooperative agreement KACD representatives (Facilitators) worked closely with local conservation districts to plan, coordinate, and implement LWG meetings to provide a consistent local workgroup process that engaged local producers and stakeholders to assess needs and identify priority natural resource concerns at the local level.

The LWG meetings were conducted through January, February, and March, 2023. As previously noted, 30 LWG meetings were held with the assistance of 4 KACD facilitators. Each LWG meeting was conducted in-person, but offered remote participants the option to attend virtually via ZOOM utilizing the audio and video capabilities of the OWL system. There was a total of 590 participants in the 30 LWG meetings, of which, 91 were virtual participants. As LWG meetings were completed, KACD facilitators utilized LWG meeting video and audio recordings to develop individualized “LWG Meeting Reports” which were provided for review to each Conservation District within the management unit, with courtesy copies sent to applicable Supervisory District Conservationists (SDC’s) and Assistant State Conservationist for Field Operations (ASTC’s).

To accurately capture the occurrence of all comments that were presented during the LWG meetings, a separate spreadsheet report entitled “2023 State Resource Concerns” was developed and is considered a companion document to the “2023 Local Work Group Summary Report for Kansas”. The “2023 State Resource Concern” spreadsheet lists in detail the specific “state resource concern statements” which are captured by number and % of occurrence across all MU’s, and also by number and % of occurrence within each NRCS administrative area (see exhibit 1 map). For the purpose of this summary report, only those state resource concern statements noted during at least 50% of the LWG meetings serve as the basis for the LWG resource concern summary narratives included in this report. Also included within the summary narratives are those geographically unique or specific concern areas (i.e., urban, etc.) which were recognized as such during the LWG process. To view the 2023 State Resource Concerns spreadsheet capturing all comments presented click on this link: <https://kacd.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2023-LWG-State-Resource-Concern-Spreadsheet-1.xlsx>

## **Cropland Resource Concerns:**

### **Soil Health**

- Concern for a need to expand soil health practices (no-till/cover crops). Keep the soil biologically active and healthy. Cover crop adoption/expansion was a major discussion item. The concern exists that cover crop implementation is difficult to justify (economically) unless cover crops are able to be grazed. Additionally, how do we sell cover crop adoption based on intrinsic soil health benefits? The concern existed that economic data needs to be provided for non-grazers to justify cover crop adoption (especially in a corn/bean cropping system). These concerns were noted at 80% of the LWG meetings.
- There was a perceived need for additional education/training on cover crops/soil health (for both staff & producers) on the long-term benefits of soil health practices. This concern was noted at 57% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern with the lack of diversified crop rotations was noted across the state. This concern was primarily associated with the increase of row crop production (primarily corn). The perception was this is driven by economics, crop insurance safety nets, and localized market demands (i.e., corn for feedlots in western Kansas). This concern was noted at 63% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern with the overall nutrient management and implementation of nutrient management practices. This included concerns with proper soil testing, soil test interpretation, and the associated proper/efficient application of fertilizers. It was felt that additional education and training was needed to address this concern. This concern was noted at 53% of the LWG meetings.

### **Erosion**

- Active gully erosion (specifically ephemeral erosion) in cropland fields was a major concern in 2023. Ephemeral erosion concerns were associated with cropland fields that do not have structural practices applied (i.e., using only management practices to control erosion) and cropland fields that have failing (outlived practice lifespan) structural conservation practices. This erosion is worked shut every year, but reforms annually and is perceived to be a major source of sediment delivery. This concern was noted at 70% of the LWG meetings. Additionally, it was noted at several LWG meetings that existing ephemeral erosion areas in cropland that are not adequately treated continue to worsen to the point they transition to classic gully erosion.

- As noted above there is a concern with structural practices that have outlived their span and are failing...active erosion is occurring in these unmaintained structural practice systems. (terraces, waterways, ponds, etc.) This concern was noted at 60% of the LWG meetings. An associated concern was raised that structural practice maintenance has declined due to producers lacking time to perform maintenance, lack of landlord commitment, and cost of maintenance/replacement activities.
- Concern exists with grasslands be converted to marginal cropland (sodbusting) and not being adequately treated. The concern is grassland conversions to cropland are primarily treated with management/vegetative practices (i.e., no-till, cover crops) and concentrated flow areas are not adequately addressed leading to ephemeral erosion occurring. This concern was noted at 50% of the LWG meetings. An associated concern was raised that ephemeral erosion can't adequately be treated with management practices alone...it takes a combination of management and structural conservation practices.

### **Grazing Land Resource Concerns:**

#### **Invasive and Woody Species**

- Tree/brush (primarily cedar trees) invasion associated with grazing lands across the state was a major concern again in 2023. Contributing factors include: unmanaged land utilized primarily for wildlife; fear or hesitation to use prescribed burns (see related concern below); and lack of early identification of resource concern and lack of action to control. Tree/brush invasion was noted at 80% of the LWG meetings. In addition, old world bluestem and sericea lespedeza concerns were noted at 63% and 50%, respectively, of the LWG meetings.
- A related concern in some aspects to the woody/invasive concern, is the hesitation to perform prescribed burns and the overall risks associated with prescribed burning. Concern that prescribed burning is not implemented as it has been in the past due to changing environmental conditions, increased fuel loads (brush/trees/invasive species), and fear of potential non-desirable outcomes (i.e., out of control fires, litigation, etc.). This concern was noted at 77% of the LWG meetings. Additionally, the lack of available resources available to producers to support prescribed burning (burn associations & districts/groups, rural/municipal fire departments) was noted at 40% of the LWG meetings.

#### **Prescribed Grazing**

- Concerns continue to exist with overgrazing grasslands and adoption of prescribed grazing practices/systems. Livestock water availability (lack of reliable watering points) was also perceived to be a key concern during LWG discussions. These concerns were noted at 57% of the LWG Meetings.

- Concern associated with the challenges managing grazing lands that are adjacent to tracts of land that are primarily managed for deer hunting...leading to a fear of prescribed burning, hesitation of spraying, and dealing with perennial seed sources of undesirable invasive species (cedars, hedge, locust, etc.). This concern was noted at 57% of the LWG meetings. A related concern is the number of grasslands that are being purchased for hunting with grazing management becoming an afterthought. This concern was noted at 53% of the LWG meetings. It was also noted that education and outreach efforts need to be made targeting landowners whose focus is managing lands primarily for deer hunting.
- Concern for the growing number of absentee landowners and the perceived lack of concern for, or understanding of, grassland management needs. It is becoming increasingly difficult for local producers to address grassland related concerns without the understanding, concurrence, and support of absentee landowners. It was also noted that education and outreach efforts need to be made targeting absentee landowners. This concern was noted at 57% of the LWG meetings.

#### **Surface Water Quality & Quantity Concerns:**

- Perception that more expansive use of soil health practices would improve water infiltration and subsequently assist in reducing excessive surface water runoff. This perception was noted at 57% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern with the overall nutrient management and implementation of nutrient management practices and its effects on water quality. This included concerns with proper soil testing, soil test interpretation, and the associated proper/efficient application of fertilizers. It was felt that additional education and training was needed to address this concern. This concern was noted at 53% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern with the amount of sediment and nutrient delivery to surface water supplies that are utilized for domestic purposes, and the subsequent negative effect on those surface waters. This concern was noted at 50% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern with the perceived increase in frequency and intensity of flood (out of bank flow) events observed. This concern was noted at 50% of the LWG meetings.

### **Groundwater Quantity/Quality Concerns:**

Groundwater quantity and quality continued to be major resource concerns in the western half of the state in 2023.

- Declining ground water levels was a concern in the majority of the LWG meetings in western Kansas (i.e., having to drill wells deeper to locate reliable sources of water). In addition, it's been observed that wells go dry and streams lose their baseflow during heavy cropland irrigation periods. Recommendations shared at LWG meetings to address this resource concern included: adoption of drought tolerant crops and/or less water intensive need crops; incentives to reduce irrigation rates; improved infiltration rates on cropland; improved irrigation system efficiencies; broader use of moisture probes for irrigation water management; increased application of small watershed structures, impoundments, level terraces, and playas to facilitate aquifer recharge. A related concern was the unknown engineering design requirements and potential costs associated with playa restoration. This was a perceived factor in the landowners'/producers' decision not to potentially enroll in the SAFE program for playa restoration.
- The primary ground water quality concern identified for public/private water supply was nitrates in groundwater. Other groundwater contaminants identified were bacteria (E. Coli) and uranium levels (Garden City MU). Specific to uranium it was noted there is a high cost to test and financial assistance is needed to facilitate this. Additionally, a broader uranium concern exists with above ground biomass.

### **Streambank Concerns:**

- Concern with streambank erosion and the perceived increase of active streambank erosion and the associated amount of sediment delivered to surface waters. These concerns are associated with an increase in stream channel width and incision, with subsequent head cut advancement up smaller tributaries into adjacent land uses. This concern was noted at 70% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern practices that address streambank erosion are too expensive (especially armoring) for landowners to afford. Associated concerns are the success rate of applied streambank protective practices, the associated cost of maintaining streambank protective practices, and potential cost of replacing failed streambank protective practices. These concerns were noted at 50% of the LWG meetings.

### **Animal (Wildlife) Concerns:**

- Concern with the declining populations of ground nesting game birds (quail, pheasant, turkey) and non-game birds. This concern was noted at 67% of the LWG meetings. This concern is closely related to the habitat concern below.
- Concern with upland bird habitat degradation and lack of diversity across the landscape. This includes degradation and/or loss in native grasslands (including CRP acres) and riparian areas, loss of brood rearing habitat, lack of habitat connectivity, loss of edge effect in habitat areas, over grazing of grasslands, lack of diversified crop rotations, and clean/weed free cropland acres. These concerns were noted at 83% of the LWG meetings. Related wildlife habitat concerns include loss of and/or unmanaged windbreaks/shelter breaks, encroachment of woody and invasive species in grazing lands, and land fragmentation (particularly around urban areas).
- An associated concern with habitat degradation is the concern with invasive species encroachment...cedar, hedge, locust, honeysuckle, phragmites, teasel, winter creeper, sericea lespedeza, etc...and the detrimental effect on wildlife habitat. This concern was noted at 50% percent of the LWG meetings.

### **Urban/Small Farm Resource Concerns:**

- Perception the conservation partnership is not properly prepared to assist urban/small farm landowners and producers. Additional training is needed for the conservation partnership staff, and additional direction is needed from USDA on the urban/small farm initiative. Additionally, a focused outreach effort is needed to reach these potential customers. The perception exists that these potential customers are not aware of the conservation partnership and services available. More conservation partnership promotion/outreach is needed in this area utilizing non-traditional outreach methods (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, website pop-ups, etc.). These concerns were noted at 70% of the LWG meetings.
- Additionally, the following concerns were noted at 100% of the LWG meetings that encompassed major urban areas within Kansas (Kansas City, Lawrence, Topeka, Wichita). The concern of increased fracturing of rural landownership within urban area proximity, and the frequency of ownership change. Agricultural operational challenges faced within the urban footprint included: applying prescribed burning, dust control, odor control, pest management, control of invasive species, etc. There is a concern that individuals moving into rural areas have unrealistic expectations dealing with traditional agricultural leading to challenging interactions. Additionally, there is a perception the urban population

generally lacks an understanding of traditional agriculture requiring additional education and outreach to address this knowledge gap. Within this focus area the following concerns were universally noted: increased runoff flows associated with non-permeable urban surfaces...roofs, roads, parking lots; concern with surface water quality associated with animal (pet) waste and over fertilization of lawns; and the number private wells within city limits being used for lawn irrigation systems.

### **Climate Concerns:**

- Concern was the perceived need for additional information and education on climate smart agriculture and carbon sequestration. LWG's were generally supportive of the need for climate smart agriculture and recognized the agricultural challenges associated with adapting to changing environmental and growing conditions. This concern was noted at 73% of the LWG meetings.
- There is a general concern with the increased intensity of storm/rainfall events and the subsequent effects these events have on water quality, maintaining conservation practices, controlling erosion, and maintaining local infrastructure (i.e., roads, culverts, bridges). This concern was noted at 57% of the LWG meetings.
- Drought Mitigation...during the 2023 LWG meetings numerous discussions centered on the ongoing drought conditions throughout the state. Noted comments included:
  - concern that drought has had a negative impact on cropland/grassland causing less cover leading to challenges with erosion control, blowing crop stover, pest control, plant vigor, OM, etc.
  - concern that interest in cover crops has been negatively affected by the current drought conditions
  - concern there seems to be a hesitancy to move to cover crops because of a perceived fear of losing moisture
  - concern that more drought tolerant cropping system research is needed aimed at providing alternatives to row crops
  - concern that grazing lands were over utilized during drought conditions out of necessity to provide forage for livestock
  - concern with grassland recovery after a prescribed burn with drought conditions
  - concern that the drought conditions are drying up existing ponds reducing available grazing lands watering points

## **Outreach Concerns:**

- As mentioned previously under “Urban/Small Farm Resource Concerns” outreach within the urban setting was a primary concern. It’s perceived a focused education/outreach effort is needed to tap this potential customer base, to improve urban awareness and use of conservation partnership services, to improve urban and traditional agricultural interactions and successes, and to better understand the perspectives and needs of the urban/small farmer. This outreach concern was noted at 70% of the LWG meetings, and at 100% of the LWG meetings that encompassed major urban areas.
- Concern was expressed by landowners, producers and conservation partners that there is a relatively uncoordinated effort between local/private/state/federal entities to promote, advertise, and implement resource protection programs. Landowners, producers, and conservation partners have found it challenging to understand and locate all sources of information, technical assistance, and financial assistance. LWG’s saw value in a collaborative effort at both the local and state level for applicable entities to meet on a regular basis to ensure the scope of services/programs implemented by each is understood. Additionally, the creation of a media product (i.e., brochure, website, Facebook) that encompasses and explains the resources that are available from each entity was suggested. This would benefit not only landowners and producers, but also conservation partnership staff. This outreach concern was noted at 67% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern with the overall lack of landowner/producer participation in meetings, workshops, trainings, and field days. Significant efforts are put into developing meaningful educational/outreach events only to realize relatively low landowner/producer attendance and participation. This outreach concern was noted at 50% of the LWG meetings.

There was also a general awareness of the challenges associated with out-of-area or absentee landowners...their awareness and understanding of resource concerns and willingness to apply conservation practices. Absentee landownership appears to be increasing, presenting challenges with information, education, and outreach.

## **Program Concerns:**

### **NRCS Programs**

- Concern that available financial assistance funds are insufficient, and that financial assistance is an important component when addressing resource concerns. This concern was noted at 77% of the LWG meetings.



- Concern additional FA is needed for rebuilding/replacing structural conservation practices that have outlived their lifespan and are considered failing (i.e., terraces, waterways, ponds). This concern was noted at 63% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern inadequate livestock water... "water availability"... should be considered a stand-alone resource concern for EQIP. It was shared that water availability is not always tied to plant resource concern. This concern was noted at 57% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern with the "excessive" amount of "paperwork and administration" that exists with implementing federal FA... the current program application/approval process is too complicated, cumbersome, and lengthy. This concern was noted at 60% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern FA programs reward procrastinators and not innovators/adopters. This concern was noted at 53% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern progressive levels of treatment should be allowed rather than always having to meet RMS levels of treatment for FA programs... specifically a concern that grazing plans for EQIP applications/contracts are too restrictive and are not economically feasible to producers to follow. This concern was noted at 50% of the LWG meetings.
- Although this report primarily captures the state resource concern statements that were documented in at least 50% of the LWG meetings, it's worth noting there are numerous additional specific state resource concern statements captured on the "State Resource Concern Spreadsheet" under the heading of "Program Concerns: EQIP" that did not meet the 50% threshold.

### **FSA Programs**

- Concern with the lack of appropriate management and/or maintenance of CRP acres due to program limitations and/or producers' unwillingness or ability to perform management and/or maintenance. Suggested considerations for improvement include to allow grazing earlier in the season, remove rental rate reduction for grazing, providing cost share on seedbed preparation for interseeding, providing more agency oversight of CRP field conditions, and holding CRP participants more accountable. These concerns were noted at 90% of the LWG meetings. An additional related concern is with encroachment of woody and invasive species in CRP.

- Concern CRP payments rates are too low which hinders interest in new contracts and renewal of expiring contracts. This concern was noted at 63% of the LWG meetings.

### **Training Opportunities:**

- Concern additional soil health training is needed for both staff and producers. The training needs included identifying the long-term benefits of applying soil health practices such as cover crops, no-till, crop rotation; appropriate use of cover crop mixtures; management of cover crops; and the economics associated with cover crop application. This concern was noted at 57% of the LWG meetings.
- There was a perceived need for additional prescribed burning training for staff and producers. Associated with this concern is the perceived lack of available resources available to producers to support prescribed burning (burn associations & districts/groups, rural/municipal fire departments). This concern was noted at 50% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern there is a perceived need for additional information, education, and training on climate smart agriculture and carbon sequestration. This concern was noted at 73% of the LWG meetings.

### **Technical Assistance/Staff Concerns:**

- Concern NRCS staff does not have time to spend time with landowners and producers in the field. This affects the ability to build trust and to fully understand the producers concerns and needs. This was a concern noted in 73% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern with lack of adequate staff, number of vacant positions, training/knowledge of existing staff, and retention of staff...competent staff is needed to assist producers addressing resource concerns. This concern was noted at 73% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern NRCS needs to place more emphasis on CTA planning vs programs. Spending more time with landowners providing a comprehensive evaluation of the landowner's resource concerns with treatment alternatives, along with follow-up after practice implementation. This concern was noted at 50% of the LWG meetings.

**General Comments:**

- Contractor availability is a concern that needs to be recognized (contractors servicing soil conservation, spraying and brush/tree removal, well drilling, prescribed burning, tree planting, grass drilling, etc.). Limited contractor availability may impact practice installation within financial assistance contracts, as well as conservation technical assistance (CTA) practice application. This concern was noted at 50% of the LWG meetings.
- Concern NRCS needs to provide a response (report) to LWG sponsors on the "actions" that have been implemented as a result of input received through the LWG process/meetings...providing validity to the LWG process. This concern was noted at 67% of the LWG meetings.

# Exhibit 1

