CONSERVATION PRACTITIONER POLL 2024 SUMMARY REPORT








SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION SOCIETY

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
Extension and Outreach

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Prepared by the Soil and Water Conservation Society in partnership with Iowa State University.

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Responses to the Conservation Practitioner Poll were anonymous, and photos included do not indicate those individuals' participation in the poll.

INTRODUCTION

Conservation practitioners are not only the delivery system for natural resource conservation across the nation but also a key source of feedback and data that should inform and shape policy discussions on conservation implementation. Their direct work with farmers and landowners providing technical assistance, planning, and program implementation gives conservation practitioners on-the-ground insights into the challenges and successes in farmer adoption of conservation practices. Incorporating the perspectives of conservation professionals into policymaking can lead to more effective programs, stronger relationships with farmers, and higher job satisfaction within the profession. The 2024 Conservation Practitioner Poll (CPP), building upon the inaugural survey conducted in spring 2021, seeks to systematically learn from conservation professionals and bring their voices to discussions about moving conservation forward.

The 2024 poll expands on the learning from the inaugural poll. The 2021 poll and its results (Morris et al. 2021) have been presented to thousands of partners across the nation, referenced in published research, and shared with elected leaders, incorporating the voice of conservation professionals in the science, practice, and policy decisions within the industry. The 2024 CPP was again conducted in partnership with Iowa State University (ISU) researchers Dr. J. Arbuckle, professor of rural sociology/extension sociologist and director of the Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll; Dr. Chris Morris, postdoctoral research associate in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice and former 15-year conservationist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS); and Catherine DeLong, water quality program manager for ISU Extension and Outreach. As was the case in 2021, the team developed the survey with substantial guidance from conservation practitioners and in consultation with diverse agricultural stakeholders.

The 2024 CPP was distributed to conservation practitioners in six Upper Mississippi River Basin states: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin. The survey was sent to all field staff from the NRCS, county Soil and Water Conservation Districts or Departments (SWCD), state conservation agencies, watershed coordinators employed by various entities, and Pheasants Forever.

The goals of the CPP are to learn from active practitioners how to improve the conservation delivery system, understand what influences their job satisfaction and success, and elevate their voice in national conversations. The information gathered from this poll provides insight into conservation practitioners' perspectives regarding conservation programs and policies and how to make their work with farmers and landowners more effective. Research has found that interaction with a conservation professional over time is a consistent predictor of farmer adoption of conservation practices (Morris and Arbuckle 2021). Farmers and landowners, communities, the American taxpayer, and our natural resources will all benefit from listening to the expertise of practitioners and incorporating their recommendations into conservation assistance systems.





METHODS

Development of the 2024 survey was guided by suggestions collected in the 2021 survey, consultation with diverse stakeholder groups, and discussions with conservation practitioners who helped develop the 2021 survey. The 2021 survey posed the question, "What questions should we include in future Conservation Practitioner Polls?" and we drew ideas from those responses. Additionally, each of the authors consulted with key stakeholders in their networks to elicit feedback about topics to include. Finally, in early 2024 we met with some of the conservation practitioners who had participated in focus groups that informed the design of the 2021 CPP survey to discuss their thoughts about issues that the 2024 survey should explore.

The survey sample frame was developed by Nadia Snow, an undergraduate research assistant at ISU, and Catherine DeLong. Following the process developed for the 2021 CPP, they obtained the names, job titles, and emails of all employees of the agencies and organizations of interest by either contacting state organization leaders for the information directly or by obtaining the information from online employee directories. The survey was targeted to only those conservation professionals who provide technical assistance directly to farmers on a day-to-day basis. For this reason, NRCS survey participants were limited to soil conservationists and soil conservation technicians and Pheasants Forever participants were limited to Farm Bill biologists. At the District, Department, and state-level organizations, DeLong worked with various contacts to refine organization staff listing to those who offer technical assistance to farmers. The final sample of 1,864 conservation practitioners from the six states consisted of 905 NRCS employees, 719 SWCD employees, 94 state conservation agency employees, 82 watershed coordinators who worked with various agencies and organizations, and 64 Pheasants Forever Farm Bill biologists.

The survey was fielded using the web-based survey software Qualtrics. An initial invitation was emailed to all potential participants on March 11, 2024. The email included a message from Clare Lindahl, CEO of the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS), explaining the purpose and content of the survey. It also provided a link to the 2021 survey report. A number of reminder emails were sent, the last one on June 10, 2024. The survey closed on June 11, 2024.

Out of the initial sample of 1,864 conservation practitioners, 148 were determined to be ineligible. Most of these were because of bounced emails, indicating that the individuals were no longer working for the same agency or organization. This resulted in a final sample of 1,709. The final number of respondents who opened the survey was 413, or 24% of the eligible sample. Of these, 112 respondents did not answer any questions. Thus, 301 conservation practitioners completed at least some of the survey, for an effective response rate of 18%.



RESULTS

This section presents the tabulated survey results. To add nuanced context to the findings, we also include relevant quotes from open-ended survey questions that invited respondents to share additional comments.

LOCAL OFFICE SUPPORT NEEDS

The 2021 CPP included questions on the most effective methods for implementing conservation practices. The survey clearly identified that conservation practitioners (CPs) believe that "building long-term relationships with farmers/landowners through multiple interactions over time" is the most effective method, with 99% of respondents stating it is effective or highly effective. Participants also identified several hindrances to effective conservation implementation, including high employee turnover, changing procedures and program rules, and increasing amounts of "paperwork."

Building on these findings, we wanted to understand where additional capacity and support are needed to increase the effectiveness of CPs. In the 2024 survey, participants were provided with several statements related to local office needs (that could be provided internally or externally), including increases in human capital, communication, program evaluation and conservation practice effectiveness, and outreach (table 1). Respondents were instructed to "rate the degree to which you think your local office needs additional internal or external support to facilitate work with farmers and landowners to plan and implement conservation practices" on a four-point scale from "no need" to "high need."

Among all responses, the statement that had the highest level of need was "More capacity to provide farmers/landowners with technical assistance," with 82% of participants stating that there was a medium to high need (table 1). Within the human capital items, there was also a high level of support for "Increased capacity to design practices," "Increased conservation planning capacity," "Increased capacity for new employee onboarding and training," and "Improved training on available programs and practices," with 77% of participants stating that there was a medium to high need. When looking only at "high need" responses, "Increased capacity for new employee onboarding and training," "More capacity to provide farmers/landowners with technical assistance," and "Increased capacity to design practices" were rated as a high need by 49%, 46%, and 46% of respondents, respectively.

Within communication-focused responses, all three statements received a medium or high need rating from a strong majority of CPs (table 1). "Better communication and coordination between conservation agencies and/or partners," "Better communication with partners in general," and "Increased coordination between conservation agencies and partner organizations on complex projects (e.g., Regional Conservation Partnership Programs [RCPP])" were rated as a medium to high need by 74%, 73%, and 72% of participants, respectively.

Responses related to program evaluation and conservation effectiveness were also rated highly (table 1). "Troubleshooting in-field issues with new practices" and "Evaluating conservation success (surveying for program compliance, collecting data for programs, etc.)" were rated as a medium to high need for 65% of participants, and "Evaluating program performance" was a medium to high need for 62% of participants.

Lastly, the responses focused on outreach were more mixed. There was high agreement that "Help creating events that farmers will attend" was either medium or high need for 75% of participants, while 56% felt there was the same need level for "More event planning capacity" (table 1). Perhaps this speaks to conservation practitioners' preference to improve their own ability to organize impactful events, rather than outsourcing or adding additional staff to organize events.

TABLE 1

Rating of additional local office needs to plan and implement conservation practices (by percentage).

Local office need	No need	Low need	Medium need	High need
Capacity Building				
More capacity to provide farmers/landowners with technical assistance	4	14	36	46
Increased capacity to design practices	4	18	31	46
Increased conservation planning capacity	5	18	40	37
Improved training on available programs and practices	4	19	41	36
Increased capacity for new employee onboarding and training	6	18	28	49
More capacity to meet one-on-one with farmers and landowners	8	18	35	40
Better project management capacity	7	23	43	27
More human resources capacity for hiring new employees	14	30	22	34
Employees who specialize in paperwork	10	34	30	26
Increased grant administration capacity (progress and financial reporting, agreements, etc.)	9	36	35	20
Team management capacity (maintaining communication oversight to meet goals, etc.)	10	38	34	18
Management of external agreements	9	42	33	17
Communication and Coordination				
Better communication and coordination between conservation agencies and/or partners	3	23	39	35
Better communication with partners in general	4	24	38	35
Increased coordination between conservation agencies and partner organizations on complex projects (e.g., Regional Conservation Partnership Programs [RCPP])	5	23	41	31
Program Evaluation and Conservation Effectiveness				
Troubleshooting in-field issues with new practices	6	29	41	24
Evaluating conservation success (surveying for program compliance, collecting data for programs, etc.)	6	29	39	26
Evaluating program performance	7	32	42	20
Outreach				
Help creating events that farmers will attend	5	21	41	34
Improved processes to direct farmers and landowners to conservation offices	5	30	40	25
Identification of potential farmer customer leads	7	33	42	19
More event planning capacity	8	35	40	16

Note: Some rows do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

In general, the highest need indicated by participants was for increased capacity to offer technical assistance to farmers and landowners. This aligns with 2021 survey findings that "building long-term relationships with farmers/landowners through multiple interactions over time" is, according to conservation practitioners, the most effective way to increase conservation practice adoption. There was also broad agreement that increased capacity for new employee onboarding/training and increased capacity to design practices are needed.

ENHANCING LOCAL OFFICE CAPACITY

Building on the previous set of questions, participants were asked to go into greater detail on the capacity-related needs of their office, specifically, needs related to streamlining processes, human resources, data and research, funding, and field tools (table 2). Respondents were asked, "From your perspective, how helpful would increases in the following areas be in enhancing your local office's capacity to work with farmers and landowners to plan and implement conservation practices?" and provided a four-point scale ranging from "not helpful" to "very helpful."

The questions focused on process streamlining had the highest level of agreement with "Streamlining of contracting processes" rated as "helpful" or "very helpful" by 90% of respondents (table 2).

TABLE 2

Helpfulness of increases in local office capacities to plan and implement conservation practices (by percentage).

Category	Not helpful	Slightly helpful	Helpful	Very helpful	N/A
Process Streamlining					
Streamlining of contracting processes	2	5	19	71	3
Streamlining of ranking processes	2	5	21	68	5
Streamlining of application processes	4	6	21	66	3
Human Resource Allocation and Support					
Time to spend with farmers in general	2	9	29	57	3
Time to spend with farmers discussing resource concerns	3	8	26	60	3
Funding for state-level conservation programs (e.g., cost-share)	5	8	27	59	2
Conservation engineering staff (e.g., to speed up design, approvals)	2	11	27	58	3
Field staff in general	2	11	31	52	4
Staff with engineering approval	3	10	27	56	4
Specialized field staff positions (i.e., almost always in the field)	6	13	35	45	2
Administrative support staff to help with paperwork	5	22	36	37	1
Specialized administrative support staff positions (i.e., almost always in the office doing paperwork, AUTOCAD)	6	25	38	29	2
Allowing partner staff to give engineering approval	11	18	26	40	6
Grant-writing capacity	15	27	31	18	10

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TABLE 2 (*continued*)

Category	Not helpful	Slightly helpful	Helpful	Very helpful	N/A
State staff	20	34	28	14	4
National staff	35	32	19	9	6
Data and Research					
Data on the impacts of conservation practices on water quality and quantity	3	13	39	45	1
Data on the impacts of conservation practices on soil and crop health	3	14	39	43	1
Access to data from other agencies	5	20	36	37	1
Access to research results	6	22	46	24	2
Data on the impacts of conservation practices on climate change adaptation and mitigation	8	21	34	36	1
Program Funding and Contracts					
Funding for Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)	9	9	36	43	3
Funding for Conservation Technical Assistance (CTA)	6	14	30	45	5
Funding for Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)	10	18	35	34	4
Funding for Targeted Watershed Programs (e.g., EPA 319 grants, state-level priority watershed programs)	9	18	33	35	6
Longer-term contracts (e.g., cover crops)	15	18	34	31	3
Funding for farmer-to-farmer mentorship programs	9	23	31	32	5
Mid-contract management cost-share payments	11	24	35	26	4
Funding for Climate-Smart Agriculture	13	26	36	22	3
Funding for Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)	17	20	35	22	5
Funding for Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)	23	19	34	21	3
Funding for state-level conservation certification programs (e.g., Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program, Minnesota Agricultural Water Quality Certification Program)	10	22	29	22	16
Funding for privately funded programs (e.g., Coca Cola cover crop program)	14	27	31	17	11
Funding for Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)	18	29	29	14	11
Funding for Conservation Innovation Grants (CIG)	19	31	30	12	8
Field Tools					
Updated maps and tools	3	10	35	53	1
Incorporation of LiDAR into site surveys	3	10	37	46	4
In the field online tools	5	14	37	43	1
Use of on-farm soil and water testing kits	9	23	37	30	2

Note: Some rows do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

This echoes a finding in the 2021 CPP where 90% of respondents agreed that "More user-friendly planning and contracting software" would be helpful and 85% felt that "The amount of paperwork and procedures associated with contracts is excessive." As discussed later, respondents were also asked to write in responses to the question "What do you like least about your job as a conservation practitioner?" Out of 220 responses, 23 specifically used the term "contract," noting the burdensome contracting process, while many other responses alluded to it with phrases such as "red tape," "paperwork," or "administrative duties." One respondent synthesized their frustration, stating, "I very much dislike that the majority of my time is spent in dealing with the overly complicated contracts and policies. My education and background have prepared me for conservation and a lot of the time I don't think that I am doing any actual conservation, all I am doing is writing contracts so people can get the government to give them money."

Within this set of process streamlining questions, 89% and 87% of respondents felt that "Streamlining of ranking processes" and "Streamlining of application processes" would be "helpful" or "very helpful" (table 2). When farmers or landowners submit an application for funding to the NRCS, that application is then ranked according to certain criteria, such as cost-effectiveness and environmental benefits. While ranking is a component of NRCS program applications, our findings point to it being one of the most cumbersome components of the process for both CPs and farmers. Several CPs noted it as the least favorite part of their job, with one citing "the 'red tape,' issues with our application ranking software continuously holding up application selections and timelines."

Questions focused on human resources allocation and support were also rated highly on the potential helpfulness scale (table 2). Strong majorities of CPs indicated that more capacity to work directly with farmers to achieve conservation implementation would be helpful, with 86% of respondents stating that "Time to spend with farmers in general" and "Time to spend with farmers discussing resource concerns" would be "helpful" or "very helpful." This continues to be an important theme of the CPP; CPs consistently express that spending time with farmers is the most impactful and enjoyable part of their job. Within the human resources question set, several other needs rose to the top, including increases in "Funding for state-level conservation programs (e.g., cost-share)," where 86% of respondents felt it would be "helpful" or "very helpful." Increases in "Conservation engineering staff (e.g., to speed up design, approvals)," "Staff with engineering approval," and "Field staff in general" also ranked highly with 85%, 83%, and 83%, respectively, stating it would be "helpful" or "very helpful." These results align with findings in the question set on capacity building, where conservation practitioners identified the highest level of need being technical assistance and design capacity.

The survey also considered the potential helpfulness of increases in access to data, research, and tools. There was strong consensus, with 84% and 82% of respondents expressing that more "Data on the impacts of conservation practices on water quality and quantity" and "Data on the impacts of conservation practices on soil and crop health" would be "helpful" or "very helpful" (table 2).

One of the highest-rated items in this question set was the need for "Updated maps and tools." Almost 9 in 10 (88%) of respondents felt that this would be "helpful" or "very helpful" (table 2). There are many ways to interpret this response and to understand where the highest need is. However, CP responses to the open-ended question on the least favorite part of their job provide some clues. Several respondents noted the difficulty of working with current federal cost-share software. One respondent summed up their frustration, stating, "The tools and processes that we use for implementing cost-share are outdated. Software such as Conservation Desktop, CART, CD, and RUSLE2 are often not functioning or need to be recreated to make them more efficient. . . . As field staff we should spend less time battling issues with tools and program rules and more time actually implementing conservation and following up on conservation practices." Many respondents also noted the need for field-level tools such as "Incorporation of LiDAR into site surveys" and "In the field online tools," with 83% and 80%, respectively, stating that increases in these resources would be "helpful" or "very helpful."

There was less agreement on the helpfulness of increases in funding for specific conservation programs. Conservation practitioners were asked about programs ranging from federal to private as well as adaptions of current funding models such as longer-term contracts. The program that had the highest level of agreement that increased funding would be "helpful" or "very helpful" was the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (79%), followed by Conservation Technical Assistance (75%), the Conservation Reserve Program (69%) and targeted watershed programs such as EPA 319 grants (68%) (table 2). The program with the lowest number of responses indicating that increased funding would be "helpful" or "very helpful" was the Conservation Stewardship Program (55%). Perhaps increases in program funding were less popular because many CPs feel that they spend much of their time on cost-share applications, ranking, and contracts rather than conservation implementation, as several noted when asked about the least favorite part of their job. As one respondent summarized, "When I started with the SWCD, the field staff made many decisions at the local level. We educated landowners about conservation practices in the field. The driving force today is [to] see how much money you can spend and meet impossible goals."

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development is a perennially important aspect of CPs' careers. The 2021 CPP asked participants about their areas of relevant background training, their interest in participating in professional certification programs, and their level of interest in obtaining professional development in specific subject areas (e.g., wildlife habitat management, precision conservation, project management). The 2024 CPP further explored this theme by asking CPs several questions regarding the support they receive from their organizations to attend conferences, obtain on-the-job training, and pursue their professional development.

To address these topics, the 2024 survey asked the participants to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements related to professional development (table 3). Respondents selected a

TABLE 3

Agreement with statements related to professional development (by percentage).

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree
My organization provides financial support for me to attend conferences.	3	9	15	51	22
My organization makes it easy for me to attend conferences.	4	10	13	54	18
My organization provides timely approval for me to attend conferences.	5	10	14	50	21
My organization provides the necessary authorization or approval for me to pursue professional development.	5	11	18	52	15
My organization allows adequate on-the-job time for my professional development.	6	16	18	48	13
My organization gives me sufficient training in the tools needed to perform my job well (e.g., Web Soil Survey, CART).	7	18	17	47	11
My organization offers adequate guidance for pursuing my professional development.	5	19	20	45	10

Note: Some rows do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

rating on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The majority of CPs indicated receiving support from their organizations to attend conferences, with 73% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement “My organization provides financial support for me to attend conferences.” Seventy-three percent of practitioners agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “My organization makes it easy for me to attend conferences,” and 71% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “My organization provides timely approval for me to attend conferences.”

There were slightly lower levels of agreement on support related to authorization and time for CPs to pursue professional development, with 67% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement “My organization provides the necessary authorization or approval for me to pursue professional development,” and 61% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement “My organization allows adequate on-the-job time for my professional development” (table 3). Although a majority of CPs agreed with statements about guidance on pursuing professional development and sufficient training related to job tools, these statements had the lowest levels of agreement. Fifty-eight percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “My organization gives me sufficient training in the tools needed to perform my job well (e.g., Web Soil Survey, CART),” and 55% of participants indicated agreement or strong agreement with the statement “My organization offers adequate guidance for pursuing my professional development.”

PERSONAL SAFETY

Personal safety was a new category in the 2024 CPP in response to suggestions from CPs. Respondents were given the following prompt: “Conservation practitioners encounter many situations when they are in the field, and some of them can be unpleasant or even dangerous. Based on your experience, in general how concerned are you about the following issues that you might encounter in the field?” Respondents were then presented with a list of situations to rate on a five-point concern scale from “no concern” to “very high concern” (table 4).

Most CPs expressed low levels of concern on the personal safety items. “Lack of cell phone signal in isolated rural areas” was the top concern, with 22% of participants rating this situation as a “high” or “very high concern,” followed by “Verbal harassment or abuse from clients or others you meet in the course of field visits,” with 13% and 9% of participants, respectively, rating this as a high or very high concern (table 4). Eight percent of CPs rated “Physical danger during site visits (e.g., stepping in holes, aggressive dogs, livestock)” as a high or very high concern, and 8% rated “Dangerous weather (e.g., excessive heat, lightning, tornadoes)” as a high or very high concern. “Discrimination based on your identity (e.g., race, gender)” was rated as a high or very high concern by 7% of CPs, and “Meeting alone with clients” was a high or very high concern for 7%. Six percent of CPs rated “Rural road and traffic safety” as a high or very high concern, and 5% rated “Physical threats from clients or others you meet in the course of field visits” as a high or very high concern. “Potential for sexual harassment or assault” was rated as a high concern by 3% of CPs, and no CPs rated this item as a very high concern.

Although the levels of concern across the full sample tended to be low or moderate, when the personal safety responses were analyzed, comparing by gender, we found significant differences between males and females for 4 of the 10 items (table 5). For instance, 11% of female CPs rated “Discrimination based on your identity (e.g., race, gender)” as a high or very high concern, with no male CPs rating this item as a very high concern and only 4% rating it as a high concern. Even larger differences existed for the moderate concern category, with 20% of females rating this item as a moderate concern compared to 4% of males. Similarly, 9% of females rated “Meeting alone with clients” as a high or very high concern, and 29% of females rated this item as a moderate concern, while only 6% of males rated this item as a high or very high concern, and 8% rated it as a moderate concern. While no respondents in either gender rated “Potential for sexual harassment or assault” as a very high concern, 4% of females rated this item as a high concern compared to 1% of males. Additionally, 13% percent of females rated this item as a moderate concern compared to 5% of males.

TABLE 4

Levels of concern with personal safety situations (by percentage).

Situation	No concern	Low concern	Moderate concern	High concern	Very high concern
Lack of cell phone signal in isolated rural areas	14	39	26	14	8
Exposure to agricultural chemicals (e.g., insecticides, herbicides, fungicides)	20	47	20	9	4
Verbal harassment or abuse from clients or others you meet in the course of field visits	15	50	27	7	2
Physical danger during site visits (e.g., stepping in holes, aggressive dogs, livestock)	20	40	33	6	2
Dangerous weather (e.g., excessive heat, lightning, tornadoes)	30	48	15	7	1
Discrimination based on your identity (e.g., race, gender)	48	35	10	6	1
Meeting alone with clients	30	47	17	6	1
Rural road and traffic safety	34	45	15	4	2
Physical threats from clients or others you meet in the course of field visits	29	52	16	4	1
Potential for sexual harassment or assault	47	43	8	3	0

Note: Some rows do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 5

Levels of concern with personal safety situations by gender (by percentage).

Situation	Gender	No concern	Low concern	Moderate concern	High concern	Very high concern
Discrimination based on your identity (e.g., race, gender)	Male	65	27	4	4	0
	Female***	27	47	21	9	3
Meeting alone with clients	Male	36	50	8	5	1
	Female***	20	42	29	8	1
Potential for sexual harassment or assault	Male	60	34	5	1	0
	Female***	31	52	13	4	0
Lack of cell phone signal in isolated rural areas	Male	16	44	24	9	6
	Female**	12	32	27	21	8

Notes: Mann-Whitney U Significance Tests; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$. Some rows do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Finally, “Lack of cell phone signal in isolated rural areas” was rated as a high or very high concern by 29% of females compared to 15% of males. Ratings of moderate concern were more similar between genders for this item, with 27% of females and 24% of males rating it as a moderate concern.

SERVING HISTORICALLY UNDERSERVED PRODUCERS AND GROUPS

USDA defines four groups of farmers or ranchers as historically underserved (HU), within which is an ongoing focus on racial/ethnic diversity: those who are (1) beginning in the field, (2) socially disadvantaged, (3) veterans, and/or (4) limited in resources (USDA NRCS n.d.). In recent years, a number of conservation agencies and organizations have made efforts to reduce barriers and expand participation in USDA programs by HU producers and groups. These efforts include revised policies, technical and financial support, and dedicated staff, commissions, and goals focused on better serving HU communities, among other initiatives (Hatchett et al. 2024).

Survey participants were asked to consider various ideas aimed at enhancing CPs’ capacity to effectively engage HU farmers. The question set was preceded by the text, “The following are some ideas that could help to improve conservation practitioners’ capacity to work with HUs. For each item, please select the response that best reflects your opinion.” For each item, respondents selected a response on a four-point scale ranging from “no need” to “high need.” The results are shown in table 6.

The ideas that were rated highest on the need scale were training related to more diverse crops (65% of respondents indicated medium or high need), training on how to conduct outreach with farmers from HU groups (56% of respondents indicated medium or high need), and contact lists of farmers from HU groups (48% of respondents indicated medium or high need). Ideas at the other end of the need spectrum were the hiring of HU specialists (69% of respondents indicated low or

TABLE 6

Needs for better serving historically underserved producers and groups (by percentage).

Need	No need	Low need	Medium need	High need
Training related to more diverse crops (e.g., horticultural, fruit, and vegetable)	9	26	37	28
Training on how to conduct outreach with farmers from HU groups	11	34	41	15
Contact lists of farmers from HU groups	17	35	34	14
Higher cost-share incentives for farmers from HU groups	16	37	35	12
Different pools for ranking applications from farmers from HU groups	23	40	26	11
DEI training	23	39	28	10
Multilanguage promotional materials	19	48	25	9
Hiring of HU outreach specialists	26	43	22	9
Highlight CPs who work with farmers from HU groups	19	40	34	8
Access to staff with DEI expertise	23	43	27	7
Additional funding for DEI projects and programs	24	42	28	7

Notes: CP = conservation practitioner; DEI = diversity, equity, and inclusion; HU = historically underserved. Some rows do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

no need), multilanguage promotional materials (67% of respondents indicated low or no need), and additional funding for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) projects and programs (66% of respondents indicated low or no need). Considered together, the results show that most CPs perceive at least some need for multiple kinds of support that could help improve their capacity to work with HUs.

"Seeing and quantifying our practices into real world results and impacts. Being able to reach out to specific communities of ag producers that have historically not participated in our practices, to now slowly interacting with us and participating in our cost share."

JOB SATISFACTION

Job satisfaction is a critically important concept because it is a determinant of both individual well-being and happiness and of organizational effectiveness (Spector 1997). The 2021 CPP examined several factors that can impact conservation practitioners' job satisfaction and effectiveness. The 2024 CPP delved further into this theme by asking CPs to rate their job satisfaction and then explain what they like most and least about their jobs. This section presents their ratings and an analysis of their open-ended text responses.

Job satisfaction was rated through the question "How much of the time do you feel satisfied with your job as a conservation practitioner?" Respondents selected a response on a five-point scale ranging from "all of the time" to "practically never." Results indicate that CPs were generally satisfied with their jobs, with almost 10% selecting "all the time" and 47% selecting "most of the time" (table 7). An additional 25% indicated that they were satisfied about half of the time. That said, the proportion of CPs who shared that they were satisfied with their jobs only occasionally (18%) and almost never (1%) was substantial at almost 20%.

TABLE 7

The proportion of time that conservation practitioners feel satisfied with their jobs.

Proportion of time	Percentage of respondents
All of the time	9
Most of the time	47
About half of the time	25
Occasionally	18
Practically never	1





WHAT DO CONSERVATION PRACTITIONERS LIKE MOST ABOUT THEIR JOBS?

The survey posed the open-ended question, "In a few words, what do you like most about your job as a conservation practitioner?" and provided respondents with space to write their responses. Analysis of the 221 responses to the prompt identified several major contributors to CPs' feelings of job satisfaction. Four primary themes emerged:

- Helping farmers and landowners to reach their conservation goals
- Observing positive impacts of their work on soil, water, habitat, and other environmental outcomes
- Participating in collaborations and teamwork
- Making positive impacts on the community

The following paragraphs provide more information about each theme as well as selected quotes that communicate the aspects of their jobs that contribute to CPs' job satisfaction.

A major theme that emerged was that CPs derive great satisfaction from ***helping farmers and landowners to reach their conservation goals*** by assisting them with the planning and implementation of conservation practices. The following quotes from different individuals exemplify responses in this category.

"Working one-on-one with landowners and operators on the farm."

"Educating people that are genuinely interested in learning how to do better conservation for the soil and community, helping farmers take care of their farms and make more money keeping it more viable to stay farming."

"I enjoy the on-site work. . . . I believe the one-on-one interactions this job offers is critical to getting conservation implemented."

"I enjoy working with farmers and landowners who are just as passionate about their land as I would be, and I enjoy doing educational outreach especially to youth."

"I like to interact with farmers helping them to solve issues on their land and try new innovative practices to improve their operations and soil health."

"Building lasting relationships with the landowners and farmers in the county and providing help to our nation's backbone (farmers)."

"I appreciate being able to spend most of my time in the field: collecting data, troubleshooting equipment, and building relationships with farmers, landowners, and other agriculture partners."

"I like working with people and helping them by providing information/resources and options for best management practices on their land. I like creating those relationships, so landowners feel comfortable coming back to me in the future to discuss other concerns they have."

"I love getting to work with enthusiastic landowners and farmers to implement conservation practices. I love having conversations with people, and seeing practices get put on the ground."

These and other similar quotes that were shared demonstrate that CPs derive great satisfaction and happiness from building relationships with their farmer/landowner partners as they work with them to solve conservation issues.

A second major category was satisfaction derived from ***observing the positive impacts of their work on soil, water, habitat, and other environmental outcomes*** that result from the implementation of conservation practices and systems. The following quotes from different CPs are just a few examples expanding on this area of job satisfaction.

"I love the outcomes that I am able to provide. I don't think there is another job where I would feel as satisfied. I believe this work is making some sort of meaningful impact, and it is fantastic that I get to do it across a large area as opposed to just my own personal property. I also enjoy being able to help people who are doing good things—conserving their resources."

"I love that I work in a field that is striving to make a positive impact on the ecosystem."

"I am on board with the mission of my organization and my role in delivering conservation outcomes, which are vital to the future of our natural and agricultural systems."

"I love working with my clients and getting conservation on the ground, seeing the success, seeing them succeed. Seeing the improvements made."

"The greatest part of the day is when a producer comes in and is satisfied with the work that has been completed or results from trying a new practice, such as cover crops, is seen."

"Seeing the hard work that goes into a project from before and after. Realizing you made a difference on improving the environment with practices. Improving water quality, stopping erosion, and meeting the goals of landowners and farmers."

"I cherish the fact that every day that I go to work, I am making a tangible difference in the world. I love that I contribute to change that is visible. Every day brings something new and very different, and I am faced with challenges that I can methodically work through."

A third theme that we identified centered on ***collaboration and teamwork***. A number of CPs shared that aspects of their jobs such as working with their colleagues to pursue shared conservation goals gave them great satisfaction. The following quotes explain these dynamics.

"I also like working with the really great staff in the field office."

"The people make the job! Whether working with staff, partner agencies, or farmers/producers—it's the people that make conservation happen!"

"I work with a great group of people in office and regionally. I have a good board and they support staff and conservation."

"I love my co-workers who share my passion for conservation."

A fourth important theme that arose from analysis of the open-ended text responses related to ***impacts on the community***. Conservation professionals explained that they appreciate that the impacts of their work can extend beyond the individual farms to the communities in which they live and work. The following quotes from different CPs focus on varied dimensions of satisfaction flowing from community-level interactions and impacts.

> **"I'm making a difference in the community [where] I live."**
>
> **"Knowing that what I am doing is helping the community and our environment."**
>
> **"I can see the difference I have made over the years of my career as I drive around the area. I work with people who have the same conservation focus as I do. Being able to work outside and seeing new areas of our community."**

As may be noted from the quotes, these four themes have substantial overlap, and a major throughline is a passion for relationship-building that leads to positive impacts on people and the land. It is important to recognize that many CPs view the impacts of their work in a holistic way. The relationships they build lead to practices on farms, which lead to aggregate impacts on local environments and communities. When interactions with farmers and landowners evolve into trusting relationships over time, the impacts are multiplied as new practices and systems are implemented and landscape- and community-level benefits increase and spread.

WHAT DO CONSERVATION PRACTITIONERS LIKE LEAST ABOUT THEIR JOBS?

The survey next posed the question, "In a few words, what do you like least about your job as a conservation practitioner?" and provided respondents with space to write their responses. Analysis of the 221 open-ended responses to this prompt identified several aspects that CPs do not like about their jobs. Three major themes emerged:

- Excessive paperwork and complexity of processes
- Human and financial resource limitations
- Ineffectiveness of programs and lack of progress

The following paragraphs expand on each theme and provide selected quotes that communicate the aspects of work that contribute to CPs' job dissatisfaction.

The theme of ***excessive paperwork and the complexity of processes*** was characterized by responses on issues that make the planning and implementation of conservation practices with landowners difficult. Major areas that were reported were excessive and burdensome paperwork and inefficient and clunky planning and reporting software. Many respondents emphasized the complexity of contracts as difficult for both them and their clients. Examples are shared in the following quotes.

> **"I very much dislike that the majority of my time is spent in dealing with the overly complicated contracts and policies. My education and background have prepared me for conservation and a lot of the time I don't think that I am doing any actual conservation, all I am doing is writing contracts so people can get the government to give them money. Conservation should be simple, 'Do this practice for this scientific reason, get financial and technical assistance, be done.' With as complicated as the contracts are, I have a**

lot of people that just opt to do it on their own, which is often implemented incorrectly and fails so they decide that they won't do any conservation work. Also, Conservation Desktop is a horrible program that I often spend hours a week fighting."

"Red tape. The bureaucracy of getting involved with a long-term contract with feds or state is too much for farmers to think about. Should be easier, simplified, and streamlined at this point."

"The tools and processes that we use for implementing cost-share are outdated. Software such as Conservation Desktop, CART, CD, and RUSLE2 are often not functioning. . . . Complex rules set at the state or national level . . . create friction for conservation adoption. . . . As field staff we should spend less time battling issues with tools and program rules and more time actually implementing conservation and following up on conservation practices."

"Our Agency has increased the required documentation for our programs to the point of the field office failing to do what they should be doing. The lack of capacity on our computer software and wasting time not being able use the computer tools. Hours are wasted and frustration is high in our computer systems."

"There is a lot of red tape involved to get applications to contracts. Layers of rules, eligibility and policy. It takes too long to move from an application to contract. Most folks are waiting months to maybe be funded. The application deadline is in the Fall. Some folks contact us right after the deadline or in the Spring of the year. They are out for funding consideration until the next sign up. There is no guarantee on funding. So they wait a year to MAYBE be selected for a contract and funding. Many landowners jump ship."

"The thing I like least about being a conservation practitioner is the paperwork. It's overwhelming."

A second major theme encompassed ***human and financial resource limitations***. Responses under this theme tended to highlight lack of sufficient staff or staff with the right training for office needs. The subcategory of insufficient funding tended to focus on lack of funding in general or difficulty getting funding to landowners in a timely way due to bureaucracy. The subcategory of human resources tended to center on mismatches between conservation planning and implementation needs and staffing realities. The following quotes highlight how these resource limitations decrease job satisfaction.

"We simply have more landowners coming into the local office requesting assistance with programs than is possible to assist without cutting corners with a soil and water district staff of two and USDA staff of two."

"The fact that even with 70% or more cost-share, we have a tough time implementing projects due to lack of financial stability for landowners. They have a tough time coming up with their 30% of the project and we oftentimes don't find that out until time is spent planning and designing the project."

"The hiring process makes it almost impossible to get the right person in the job, the hiring officials have no idea of what the real knowledge/skills/abilities are needed for jobs, they are just sorting applications to pass on. The hiring process is so tight small mistakes can make better candidates ineligible for positions."

"The lack of quality training and ability to improve my self-knowledge through conferences, outreach events, official time to attend SWCS meetings and acting opportunities in areas of interest to me."

"More direction and training would be helpful to help feeling more comfortable."

"Tied to a desk all the time. Need of a technician to help farmers."

"Underpaid, understaffed. Excessive workload. Unqualified/non-performing supervisor. Undertrained for job tasks. State and national office personnel do not understand Field Office demands and workloads. Excessive bureaucracy requirements at state and national level."

A third key theme identified through analysis of responses was the ***ineffectiveness of programs and lack of progress on conservation***. Responses in this area included many expressions of frustration regarding landscape-level challenges that seem insurmountable given current conservation approaches and rate of progress, as shared in the following quotes.

"We hardly ever see real results of conservation across the county/landscape. We essentially are a federal money laundering scheme for the rural community . . . and as such, throw money out to certain participants who jump through a few hoops . . . but most of which don't actually want to improve the conservation of all resource concerns on their farms."

"Working on [Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)], it's a subsidy program pretending to be a conservation program."

"Working on [Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)], in general I think it is a huge waste of taxpayer money. In some cases, it is money well spent, but with the current funds it is a free for all and we are spending copious amounts of money for almost no return. 0.5 acres of monarch habitat covers 2,000 acres of crop ground. That is not conservation."

"Districts just throwing money out the door and stacking extra money on top of practices only for certain people. The functionality of the programs are terrible."

"I do not enjoy watching the profit margins of farms shrink or become more negative year over year, and not have the financial literacy or resources to change course. It is becoming difficult to move farmers off of paths that are unsustainable, highly debt-leveraged farm models, or simply going under. The consolidation of individual farms into ever shrinking numbers of larger farms that may or may not bother to take advantage of conservation programs is concerning."

"It's an uphill battle . . . the pace of conservation is glacial compared to the environmental impacts of erosion, excess nutrient loadings, and climate change."

"Are we really moving the needle? All of these programs are great, but there needs to be more emphasis away from animal agriculture and towards perennial ag."

"Everything else besides soil conservation. NRCS has too much money. We are actively making the world worse by giving millions of dollars to CAFOs, agribusiness, and monoculture row croppers. Imagine giving somebody a million dollars to buy a new corn dryer, to burn propane, to dry corn, to make ethanol—and then acting like you've made the world a better place. We should stick to soil erosion and soil health. The rest of our money is just damaging the planet and the farm economy."

"That the only thing we are looking at for the success of a program is how much money is being spent in them rather than how much 'conservation' is being accomplished. More of one of those pieces doesn't always cause more of the other."

It is important to recognize that the quotes presented above are from individuals and are not generalizable to the whole population of CPs. In other words, not all CPs would agree with the sentiments expressed in all of the quotes. However, the quotes do reflect the feelings and experiences, both positive and negative, of subsets of CPs. As such, they represent important data that can inform efforts to improve individual and organizational effectiveness.

CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURE

The USDA has recently invested several billions of dollars into programs and projects focused on climate change adaptation and mitigation in agriculture. These efforts include the Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities effort that is funding projects across the United States and territories with a major emphasis on "climate-smart" conservation practices (USDA n.d.). That said, research on farmers and climate change has found that many farmers have beliefs about climate change that do not align with the scientific consensus that climate change is happening and is caused primarily by human activity (CSCAP 2012). The concept has become politically and socially sensitive, requiring agricultural and conservation professionals who work with farmers and landowners on climate-smart agriculture to consider these sensitivities in their communications and outreach strategies (Wright Morton et al. 2016).

The 2024 CPP contained questions about climate-smart agriculture to gauge CPs' perspectives on working with farmers and landowners through climate-smart programs and projects. These questions were preceded by the following introductory text: "There has been increasing discussion of climate and agriculture, and funding for climate-smart agriculture programs and projects continues to increase. Please answer the following questions about climate change and working with farmers."

Several of the questions referred directly or indirectly to communicating and working with farmers and landowners, in particular how the use of the term "climate change" might impact their work. In response to the question, "Does discussion of climate change help engage farmers/landowners in conservation?" just 20% responded affirmatively (table 8). Similarly, just 18% indicated that discussion of climate change helped "get conservation on the ground." Only 17% believed that farmers know what climate-smart agriculture means. A higher proportion (42%) affirmed that use of the term "climate smart" is more effective than use of "climate change" when working with farmers. Similarly, 70% indicated that they tend to use terms such as "extreme weather" rather than climate change so as not to alienate the farmers they work with.

Three questions centered on technical assistance-related themes. A majority (62%) of respondents indicated that they are comfortable offering technical assistance about climate-smart agriculture (table 8). A higher percentage (69%) agreed that they would be interested in receiving training and information about climate-smart agriculture. In other words, most CPs are comfortable with working with farmers and landowners on the subject, and they are interested in learning more. Finally, 42% agreed that climate change should be considered a "resource concern."

Several of the questions asked in 2024 were also asked in the 2021 CPP. For the most part, responses were similar in the two surveys. In 2021, 19% of CPs agreed that discussion of climate change could help with engagement, compared to 20% in 2024 (table 9). As in 2021, in 2024 only 18% selected "yes" to the question about whether discussion of climate change can help to engage farmers and landowners. The proportion of CPs interested in receiving training and information about

TABLE 8

Conservation practitioners' perspectives on climate-smart agriculture and working with farmers (by percentage).

Question	Yes	No	Don't know
Does discussion of climate change help engage farmers/landowners in conservation?	20	58	22
Does discussion of climate change help get conservation on the ground?	18	59	23
Do farmers know what climate-smart agriculture means?	17	54	30
Does the use of the term "climate-smart" work better than "climate change" when communicating with farmers?	42	27	30
Do you tend to use terms such as "extreme weather" to refer to climate change to avoid alienating farmers?	70	21	9
Are you comfortable offering technical assistance about climate-smart agriculture?	62	28	11
Would you like to receive training and information about climate-smart agriculture?	69	24	7
Should climate change be made a resource concern?	42	36	21

Note: Some rows do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 9

Perspectives on selected climate-smart agriculture questions over time.

	Percent "Yes"	
Question	2021	2024
Does discussion of climate change help engage farmers/landowners in conservation?	19	20
Does discussion of climate change help get conservation on the ground?	18	18
Are you comfortable offering technical assistance about climate-smart agriculture?	37	62
Would you like to receive training and information about climate-smart agriculture?	68	69

climate-smart agriculture also remained steady, rising very slightly from 68% to 69%. Responses to the question about comfort-level regarding the provision of technical assistance with climate-smart agriculture increased precipitously, however, from 37% in 2021 to 62% in 2024.

Immediately following these climate-smart agriculture questions, the survey posed an open-ended question, "Do you employ other language to communicate about climate change?" A text box was provided for responses. Sixty-eight respondents replied to the question.

Two main themes emerged from the responses. The first theme was avoidance of the term "climate change." Many CPs described concerns about political sensitivity, perceived that there is climate change skepticism among farmers and landowners, and expressed a desire to avoid alienating clients. A second theme encompassed communication strategies that employ alternative terminology for both "climate change" and "adaptation," with CPs explaining that they tend to focus on specific weather-related threats to agriculture and ways to address them, using terms like "extreme weather," "weather resiliency," "drought protection," and "building resilience." Importantly, many of the responses contained both themes, explaining the rationale for avoiding the term "climate change" as well as outlining alternative communication strategies. The following quotes from the survey demonstrate these predominant, related themes.

"I normally do not directly refer to climate change as climate change, rather I tend to discuss the changing weather, severe weather events, droughts, higher temperatures, etc. Breaking it down into more digestible topics for farmers and landowners. Like it or not, climate change is a political topic and if you want to make efforts to combat it you need to navigate people's views on the topic."

"I just talk about more severe weather patterns and use the term weather. I don't like to use broad terms like climate. Climate is a contentious word and may lose your audience, but everyone talks about the weather."

"I just talk in real-life terms about how practices will impact their operation/resource concerns. If I say anything related to climate with most of my clientele, they will not take me seriously because they don't believe in climate change or climate smart."

"We discuss the concern at hand and don't get into the climate. I think farmers want to find a way to not keep having gullies and erosion, uncertainty with crops."

"Climate change discussions in many cases will immediately throw barriers up when talking with clients . . . weather extremes are a better approach . . . even better just keep it all under the 'umbrella' of soil health and you will avoid alienating folks."

"I tend to use words that the farmers use and hear from the meteorologist like drought, derechos, heavy rain events, and record high heat. This way I am letting them know what we are safeguarding their land against. Not just an all-encompassing phrase like 'climate change.'"

"I steer away from anything with the word 'climate' in it when talking to farmers about weather resiliency. Discussion of past extreme weather and how various conservation practices can help mitigate effects has been successful for me. Unfortunately, anything with 'climate' is seen as political."

"I tend to focus on local soil, water, and wildlife issues. Climate change is an extremely important topic and concern to me, but I have found that landowners can feel like you are blaming them for the world's issues. If we can focus on what they can do better on their farm, to improve their local resources, hopefully over time we can create a wide-reaching impact."

As these quotes show, recognizing that the terms “climate change” and “climate-smart” have been politicized and are potentially divisive, CPs employ communication strategies that facilitate conservation work without alienating farmers and landowner audiences. These include starting with a discussion of threats from weather extremes and related issues, then turning the conversation to adaptive conservation practices that can increase resilience to those threats.

SELECTED RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Survey respondents ranged in age from 23 to 77 years old with an average age of 44. Fifty-four percent of respondents identified as male (table 10), and 40% identified as female. No respondents identified as nonbinary, and 6% preferred not to answer the gender question. The majority of respondents (63%) reported having obtained a bachelor’s degree (table 11), and 18% reported having obtained a graduate or professional degree. Four percent reported having attended some college, while 7% had attended some graduate school. Three percent had earned a high school diploma or equivalent.

TABLE 10

Respondent gender.

Gender	Percentage of respondents
Male	54
Female	40
Nonbinary	0
Prefer not to answer	6

TABLE 11

Respondent education level.

Education level	Percentage of respondents
Less than high school	0
High school graduate (or equivalent)	3
Some college, no degree	4
Associate degree	6
Bachelor’s degree	63
Some graduate school	7
Graduate or professional degree	18



SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The 2024 CPP provided numerous insights into conservation practitioners' perspectives on their work with farmers and landowners. Conservation practitioners from across the Upper Mississippi Watershed shared their thoughts about different kinds of support that would help CPs to increase the effectiveness of their conservation work with farmers and landowners. Survey sections centered on human and other resource needs; ways that processes, procedures and systems might be improved; and professional development needs. The survey also examined job satisfaction and specific factors that CPs like and dislike about their jobs. Other focus areas were personal safety concerns, capacity to conduct outreach with historically underserved populations, and climate-smart agriculture. This concluding section highlights and summarizes key findings and outlines next steps for the CPP.

Key finding #1: Conservation practitioners have many needs at the local office level, but technical assistance capacity remains foremost. CPs were asked about local office needs for additional internal or external support. Of the 22 capacities that were listed, the majority of CPs felt there was a medium or high need for additional capacity in *all* categories. However, respondents indicated that the highest level of need was "More capacity to provide farmers/landowners with technical assistance." This conclusion reinforces the 2021 CPP's finding that "building long-term relationships with farmers/ landowners through multiple interactions over time" is the most effective method of implementing conservation practices.

Key finding #2: Conservation practitioners want the cost-share process streamlined. CPs rated the streamlining of applications, ranking, and contracting as the most helpful way to increase their capacity to work with farmers and landowners. This echoes a key finding in the 2021 CPP that administrative components of programs are limiting CPs' ability to interface with farmers and landowners.

Key finding #3: A majority of CPs are satisfied with their jobs most or all of the time. Responses to an open-ended question about what they like best about their job highlighted several aspects: working directly with farmers and landowners to help them reach their conservation goals; observing the positive impacts of their work on soil, water, habitat, and other environmental outcomes; participating in collaboration and teamwork with great colleagues and clients; and making positive impacts on the communities where they live and work.

Key finding #4: There are some parts of the job that are less enjoyable. Responses to an open-ended question about what CPs like *least* about their job identified important downsides. One theme was human and resource limitations, mostly lack of sufficient staff or lack of staff with the right training for office needs. A major area of frustration was ineffectiveness of programs and lack of landscape-level progress on conservation. Several responses in this area focused on landscape-level challenges that seem insurmountable given the rate of progress using current conservation programs and approaches. The most prevalent theme, which echoed findings from the 2021 CPP, was exasperation with excessive paperwork and process complexity that can make the job feel tedious and unproductive as well as frustrate farmers and landowners. It is clear that conservation agencies need to identify ways to simplify and streamline paperwork and processes.

Key finding #5: Effective climate-smart communication focuses on adaptation to weather extremes instead of climate change. Few CPs believed that direct communication about climate change resonates with farmers and landowners. On the contrary, many expressed that use of the terms "climate change" and "climate smart" can alienate audiences. Instead, CPs explained that effective communication strategies identify locally relevant weather events and discuss conservation pathways toward more resilient systems.



Key finding #6: CPs are becoming more comfortable working on climate-smart agriculture, but they are still interested in additional professional development. Between 2021 and 2024, the percentage of CPs who were comfortable offering climate-smart agriculture technical assistance nearly doubled from 37% to 62%. At the same time, interest in training and information about climate-smart agriculture remained high, at about 70% in both 2021 and 2024.

Key finding #7: Most CPs are satisfied with the level of support their organization provides for professional development. Most CPs reported having adequate funding and timely approval to attend conferences, although a substantial minority of CPs indicated that they could benefit from improved training on job tools (such as software programs) as well as guidance on pursuing professional development in general.

Key finding #8: For the majority of CPs, safety on the job is not a major concern, but there are significant differences by gender. Lack of cell phone service in isolated rural areas, exposure to agricultural chemicals, and verbal harassment or abuse from clients or others were the three highest concerns. Discrimination, meeting alone with clients, sexual harassment/assault, and lack of cell phone service were all rated as significantly more concerning by women compared to men.

Key finding #9. Most CPs want to enhance their ability to support historically underserved farmers. The majority of respondents expressed interest in additional professional development and tools that would increase their outreach capacity, such as training related to more diverse crops, and many indicated that access to contact lists for farmers from historically underserved groups and similar facilitating factors are needed.

The authors wish to thank the hundreds of CPs who took the time to share their perspectives through this second Conservation Practitioner Poll. We are especially grateful to the CPs across the region who joined us in discussions of potential topics and provided ideas for survey questions. Conservation practitioners are the main driver of the soil and water conservation delivery system. We are happy to present their voices, experiences, and ideas through this report to inform the ongoing effort to improve policies, programs, and soil and water conservation outcomes.

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