2026 NRD Washington, D.C., Conference
Speaker Notes

Monday, March 30, 2026

Lane Simpson & Ellen Fogarty, Water Strategies

Water Strategies highlights that federal policy in 2026 is being shaped by a narrowly held Republican trifecta, creating momentum for regulatory reform but leaving final outcomes uncertain due to slim margins in both chambers. To date, 80 bills have been signed into law, with major focus areas including the 2026 Farm Bill, which has advanced out of the House Agriculture Committee but faces an uncertain path forward; notably, it incorporates $14 billion in previously unspent IRA climate funds into long-term conservation programs like EQIP and CSP, emphasizing stability over expansion and integrating precision agriculture practices.

In parallel, the House Natural Resources Committee has prioritized permitting and environmental review reform through measures like the SPEED Act and other bills aimed at streamlining NEPA processes, protecting private water rights, and enhancing forest resilience, though many face uncertain prospects in the Senate. The Senate Natural Resources Committee is advancing complementary legislation focused on aquifer recharge, wildfire prevention, and urban water infrastructure management.

Broader legislative efforts, including the "One Big Beautiful Bill," bundle energy, tax, and land management priorities—extending clean energy tax credits, supporting hydropower, and increasing timber production.

At the regulatory level, proposed changes to the Endangered Species Act would narrow the definition of "harm" to direct killing, reducing regulatory burden but raising concerns about weakened habitat protections and potential long-term impacts on species conservation.

Jeremy Peters, National Association of Resources Districts

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) emphasizes continued strong federal support for conservation, with technical assistance identified as a top priority and NACD playing a leading role in advancing conservation operations and support. A key focus moving forward is strengthening engagement with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to better evaluate how conservation programs are working at the local level and to identify barriers to implementation—particularly challenges related to cultural resource assessments under NEPA.

NACD is also expanding partnerships with nontraditional federal agencies, including a new memorandum of understanding with the Bureau of Land Management and ongoing

discussions with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, where there is opportunity for conservation districts to help address project delivery and stakeholder engagement challenges.

From a funding perspective, NACD continues to advocate for programs like EPA Section 319 Nonpoint Source Program, which effectively leverage state and local dollars but require greater awareness in Washington, D.C., as well as the State Revolving Fund, which offers potential for financing agricultural conservation practices despite current capacity limitations.

Overall, NACD notes that recent rapid policy changes in Washington have strained operational capacity, but conditions are stabilizing, with an ongoing need for clear communication, policy advancement, and sustained advocacy to support conservation delivery on the ground.

Lisa Barkovic, National Special Districts Association

The association was newly formed in 2025, representing over 10,000 special districts nationwide. Its creation was driven by a gap identified during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. While the CARES Act provided federal relief, it did not adequately recognize or include special districts, leaving many ineligible for funding. This highlighted the need for a unified national voice to represent and advocate for special districts across sectors.
The organization works to advocate at the federal level on behalf of special districts, provide access to critical grant and financial resources, and facilitate collaboration through the sharing of best practices. It also aims to increase awareness of the role and importance of special districts as essential local public service providers.

A key objective is to strengthen the national voice of more than 40,000 cross-sector special districts while empowering state associations and district leaders. The goal is to ensure special districts are recognized, valued, and treated equitably in terms of federal funding access and policy considerations.

A top priority for 2026 is passage of the Special District Definition Act (H.R. 2766 / S. 214), which would formally define special districts in federal law and ensure their eligibility for federal funding across programs.

The National Special Districts Association (NSDA) has partnered with the Ferguson Group to provide members with access to grant resources, webinars, and additional support services.

Natural Resources Districts (NRDs) are the first members from Nebraska to join NSDA.

Courtney Briggs, American Farm Bureau

There have been significant developments related to Waters of the United States (WOTUS) over the past 12 months. Much of the current framework stems from the *Rapanos v. United States* Supreme Court decision, which introduced the concept of "relatively permanent" waters but ultimately created more questions than clarity regarding federal jurisdiction. As a result, two primary tests emerged from *Rapanos*: the "significant nexus" test and the "relatively permanent" test.

The current regulatory approach places greater emphasis on the "relatively permanent" test, with the Trump Administration advancing efforts to further define and clarify its application. Following *Rapanos*, EPA guidance suggested that streams flowing for at least 90 days could be considered relatively permanent. More recent proposed rulemaking refines this definition, describing a relatively permanent tributary as a river or stream that flows continuously during a wet season.

This raises additional questions around what constitutes a "wet season," generally understood as a period when precipitation exceeds evapotranspiration, resulting in sustained, day-to-day surface flow. Under this framework, jurisdictional wetlands are defined as those with a continuous surface connection to a jurisdictional water, meaning they must have surface water during the wet season and directly abut (i.e., physically touch) such waters.

If finalized, this approach could present implementation challenges, particularly in consistently defining and applying terms like "wet season" and "continuous flow." Notably, the framework represents a shift away from traditional classifications of perennial, intermittent, and ephemeral streams toward the "relatively permanent" standard. Another key change is the shift in burden of proof. Under the proposed approach, the federal government would bear the responsibility of demonstrating that a waterbody qualifies as WOTUS, whereas previously landowners often had to prove the absence of jurisdiction.

The rule also maintains several longstanding exemptions, including those for certain agricultural features such as farm ditches and prior converted cropland.

There remains ongoing debate regarding the scope of WOTUS. Some stakeholders believe federal jurisdiction has not gone far enough, while others are concerned about overreach. As a result, it is likely that any final rule will face legal challenges, particularly regarding statutory interpretation.

From a policy perspective, there is strong interest in establishing a legally durable definition of WOTUS that provides clarity and stability, rather than requiring stakeholders to adjust to shifting regulatory interpretations every 4–8 years. At the same time, attempts to remove the term "navigable waters" from the Clean Water Act would likely face significant legal

hurdles. Historically, states have played a primary role in protecting and managing water resources within their boundaries.

Jay Ivey & Abby Simmons, CropLife America

CropLife America, founded in 1933, is the leading trade association representing the pesticide industry, with members spanning manufacturers, distributors, legal firms, and food and beverage companies. Pesticides are regulated at both the state and federal level under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act and by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which requires all products to undergo a rigorous, science-based registration process before entering the market. This process can involve up to 150 studies, includes public comment, and ensures products pose no unreasonable risk to human health or the environment. Registrations are re-evaluated every 15 years, and the cost to develop a new pesticide now exceeds $300 million, largely due to extensive toxicological and environmental testing requirements.

For 2026, CLA's policy priorities focus on reauthorizing the Pesticide Registration Improvement Act (PRIA 6), securing adequate appropriations for EPA's Office of Pesticide Programs, advancing trade policy, and supporting key provisions in the Farm Bill. PRIA 6 is critical to maintaining predictable, timely pesticide reviews through a user-fee system, while full funding (approximately $166 million) for EPA's pesticide program is necessary to avoid delays that could hinder innovation, reduce farmer options, and increase food costs. Trade policy remains a central issue, particularly around science-based Maximum Residue Levels and international standards under the World Trade Organization, where U.S. engagement is essential to maintaining influence in global food safety decisions. Farm Bill priorities include reaffirming EPA's authority over pesticide labeling to ensure national consistency, extending the FIFRA registration review timeline, and strengthening interagency coordination on Endangered Species Act compliance.

CLA is also actively engaged in the "Make America Healthy Again" (MAHA) initiative, working to educate policymakers on the rigor of pesticide regulation and the complexity of the food system. Their advocacy strategy centers on reinforcing that pesticides are essential to producing abundant, affordable food, while engaging and activating industry allies to counter misinformation. From a sustainability perspective, modern pesticides have become more targeted, require lower application rates, and have reduced environmental persistence. Without them, yields for major crops like corn, cotton, and soybeans could decline by up to 70%, requiring significantly more land, water, energy, and resulting in higher greenhouse gas emissions—underscoring the critical role pesticides play in both agricultural productivity and environmental efficiency.

Jared Mullendore & Justin Shultz, Renewable Fuels Association

Renewable Fuels Association, founded in 1981, represents U.S. ethanol producers and related industries, with a mission to expand sustainable renewable fuels and bioproducts. Ethanol continues to play a significant role in the U.S. fuel supply, with blend rates

increasing from 9.83% to 10.4%, and production led by Iowa and Nebraska. In 2024, the ethanol industry generated $53 billion in GDP, supported over 55,000 direct jobs and more than 258,000 indirect jobs, boosted household income by $28.3 billion, and contributed $10.3 billion in tax revenue—demonstrating a substantial economic impact, including a workforce with 16% veterans. Ethanol also delivers environmental benefits, achieving 40–50% greenhouse gas reductions, though policy and regulatory barriers have limited growth, resulting in flat corn use for ethanol despite increased overall corn production.

Key federal priorities focus on expanding market access and strengthening policy support. Year-round E15 remains the top priority, with ongoing legislative efforts and support from the Trump administration. The 2025 biofuels package extended the 45Z tax credit through 2029, maintained credit transferability, limited feedstock eligibility to North America, and adjusted incentives for sustainable aviation fuel (SAF). The industry is also advancing the American Biofuels Maritime Initiative, aiming to expand biofuel use in shipping, influence international standards through the International Maritime Organization, and protect U.S. access to global markets. Looking ahead, growth in the aviation sector presents a major opportunity: U.S. jet fuel demand is projected to reach 30 billion gallons by 2035 and 35 billion by 2050. SAF—typically blended 50/50 with conventional jet fuel—requires significant ethanol inputs, with approximately 2.4 billion gallons needed to meet half of the 2030 SAF production target, positioning ethanol as a key contributor to future low-carbon fuel solutions.

John Dawes, The Commons

The Conservation Concierge concept focuses on using AI to simplify and accelerate landowner engagement in conservation by making it easier for producers to understand, access, and implement conservation practices. The idea emerged from on-the-ground experience working with a local conservation district, where strong technical expertise existed but the process to deliver solutions was slow and difficult for landowners to navigate—highlighting a broader gap in access to federal and state programs. The AI-driven tool addresses this by evaluating properties for restoration potential, matching producers with relevant programs and resources, and identifying high-priority areas for conservation. It can conduct site-level and spatial assessments, generate detailed recommendations, and provide cost-benefit analyses of conservation practices. A live demonstration showed its ability to scale assessments and integrate multiple data layers, with future development aimed at automating conservation planning, program matchmaking, and tools like ACPF. The platform operates on a SaaS model, with a base cost of approximately $270 per month and options for integration into local systems, positioning it as a scalable solution to streamline conservation delivery and decision-making.

Andrew Brandt, U.S. Grain Council

The trade policy update highlights a long-term decline in U.S. tariff rates from their peak in the 1930s, stabilizing in recent decades before rising again under recent policy actions. The primary issue driving current tariff strategy is the persistent U.S. trade deficit, which has

existed since 1974 and has grown alongside the economy, particularly since the mid-2000s. While U.S. agricultural trade has historically been a net positive, imports—especially high-value horticultural products like wine—are now outpacing exports, contributing to the broader deficit. Key export markets remain China, Mexico, and Canada.

Recent trade policy has largely continued across administrations, with tariffs initiated under Section 232 (steel and aluminum) and Section 301 (China) during the Trump administration largely maintained under President Biden. More recent actions have further increased tariffs—raising the average rate from approximately 5.5% to 18%—including broad-based tariffs on imports and targeted increases on major trading partners. The administration has also used authorities such as the International Emergency Economic Powers Act to justify tariff actions, alongside ongoing investigations into unfair trade practices. Trade negotiations remain active and iterative, with only a few countries (United Kingdom, Japan, and China) reaching finalized implementation stages, reflecting a continued, evolving strategy to address trade imbalances while maintaining existing tariff structures.

Sydney Mucha (online) and Coralie Pierre, Field to Market

This membership-based organization brings together nearly 200 stakeholders across five sectors—growers, agribusiness, civil society, affiliates, and brands/retail—to advance sustainability in food, feed, fiber, and fuel production across North America. Its core value lies in convening partners, fostering collaboration across the agricultural value chain, and developing tools that help farmers measure and improve their sustainability outcomes. Through biannual meetings, cross-sector dialogue, webinars, and events like the Sustainable Ag Summit, the organization works to educate and align stakeholders while delivering practical solutions.

A central initiative is the Fieldprint Project, a science-based framework that translates sustainability metrics into actionable insights at the farm level. The program supports transparency, collective action, and credible reporting, while offering benefits such as whole-farm planning, improved environmental outcomes, peer networking, and alignment with market demands. Projects operate across three pathways—incubation (education), insight (data-driven analysis), and innovation (technical support). The Fieldprint Platform enables farmers to track performance using eight key indicators, including greenhouse gas emissions, soil carbon, water use, and biodiversity, with recent updates enhancing usability and adding multi-year data tracking. To date, the initiative includes 62 partners, 10,000 growers, and 6.4 million acres across 32 states. In Nebraska alone, 13 Fieldprint Projects span over 562,000 acres. Compared the eight key indicators with the 12 NRD responsibilities, demonstrating strong alignment with NRD priorities and existing conservation efforts.

Jesse Womack, National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

Current Farm Bill discussions highlight both policy uncertainty and evolving conservation priorities. The Farm Bill—traditionally reauthorized every five years—has instead been extended twice since 2018 with no major updates. It remains heavily weighted toward nutrition programs (76%), followed by crop insurance (9%), commodities (7%), conservation (7%), and other programs (1%). Recent reconciliation actions shifted funding by reducing nutrition spending and strengthening the baseline for conservation programs, including CSP, EQIP, ACEP, and RCPP, though program authorizations now have inconsistent timelines. With ongoing pressure from the agricultural economy, the most likely path forward is another extension, while full reauthorization remains unlikely.

On the conservation side, key updates focus on expanding flexibility, increasing support for precision agriculture, and integrating climate and soil health priorities. Programs like EQIP and CSP now emphasize greenhouse gas reductions, higher cost-share opportunities (including up to 90% for precision ag), increased payment limits, and extended authorizations through 2031.

New initiatives include a State Assistance for Soil Health program—though its placement raises concerns—and a Regenerative Agriculture Pilot that prioritizes soil health testing, multi-year contracts, and targeted conservation practices. However, the pilot relies on existing funding rather than new investments and underscores ongoing challenges, particularly the lack of support for technical assistance (CTA). Overall, the direction of Farm Bill conservation policy reflects a growing emphasis on soil health, climate outcomes, and precision agriculture, while also highlighting structural and funding challenges that remain unresolved.

Cody Cornell, USDA-NRCS

Agency top priorities include: (1) preserving and protecting agricultural land; (2) modernizing NRCS infrastructure and technology—aimed at eliminating inefficiencies and advancing a “One Farmer, One File” approach; (3) refocusing on field engagement and technical assistance; (4) strengthening partnerships through streamlined processes and improved accountability; and (5) shifting toward outcomes-based conservation with clear reporting for producers.

The Office of the Assistant Chief is prioritizing a return of regional leadership to field locations rather than Washington, D.C. Additionally, the Regenerative Pilot Program emphasizes advancing sustainable agriculture through improved soil health, whole-farm planning instead of piecemeal approaches, and expanded access to outcome-based reporting for producers.

Alison Souders & Karen Sughrue, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

The Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds (SRFs) are federal–state partnership programs that provide financing for a wide range of drinking water and water quality improvement projects. These programs offer flexible assistance options, including below-market interest rate loans with terms of up to 30 years, refinancing of existing local debt, and support through bond insurance or guarantees. Additional subsidization may also be available for eligible projects. SRFs have broad project eligibility and can fund agricultural best management practices. Each state develops an Intended Use Plan (IUP), which outlines priority projects for funding. In addition, linked deposit programs partner with local lending institutions to offer low-interest loans, further expanding access to financing for eligible borrowers.

Handouts from EPA

- Get To Know Your Clean Water State Revolving Fund
- Nebraska Clean Water State Revolving Fund
- Nebraska Drinking Water State Revolving Fund
- CWSRF and DWSRF one-page overviews
- CWSRF Funding Agricultural BMPs Factsheet and Webinar
- EPA How's My Waterway Tool