

# SCNRCD NEWSLETTER

## Spring, 2026

### VIEWES FROM THE WATERSHED

SCNRCD, 97 Old Ruby Rd, Nogales, AZ 85621 Questions email Chris Postel, clerk.scnr cd@gmail.com

#### Chairman's Column by Stephen Williams

#### IF 77 PERCENT OF YOUNG MEN ARE UNFIT TO SERVE, WHO WILL WORK THE LAND?

Curious about the title? It is from an article written by Mollie Engelhart, who is a regenerative farmer. She was previously a vegan chef before beginning her journey into agriculture as a hands in the dirt farmer. She is now squarely facing the reality of what it now takes to make a living farming in America. She is concerned about labor – real bodies, real endurance, real work – the kind of things that cannot be fixed with investors, product branding, or better spreadsheets.

A recent announcement citing a Pentagon figure stopped her cold: 77 percent of young Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 are not eligible for military service without a waiver. The reasons vary – physical health, weight, drug use, mental health, and behavioral issues – but the conclusion is the same. Only about 23 percent of young men meet the basic standards to serve. That number is often framed as a recruiting problem, but is not. It is a human capacity problem.

If 77 percent of them can't fight, then they can't farm either. Mollie points out that we are living through an inverted population curve – more people are leaving the workforce than entering it. Birth rates are down. Retirements are accelerating. The pipeline of young workers is narrowing at the exact moment we need it to widen. This is not just a farming issue. It is a society wide issue.

We are racing toward automation, robotics and artificial intelligence. Not because it's exciting or innovative, but because we don't have enough capable human beings. Machines are being positioned as the solution to labor shortages because the labor itself is disappearing. We shouldn't have to leave the country to find willing, capable workers. Labor is one resource you can't fix with money according to Mollie. You need healthy bodies, present minds, and willing spirits – and those are increasingly hard to find. This isn't just a health crisis. It's also an education crisis.

We have raised a generation prepared to be cogs in a corporate machine – trained to sit still, comply, and regurgitate information – but not to think critically, solve real world problems, or take responsibility when things break. Farming demands

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exactly what modern education had neglected: observation, adaptability, initiative, and resilience. Farming requires intuition, patience, observation, and physical work. If the people capable of that work disappear, no technology will save us.

During World War II, the draft revealed that roughly 10 to 15 percent of men were rejected due to undernutrition or being underweight. That was enough to alarm military leaders and policymakers, leading to the creation of the National School Lunch Program in 1946, grounded in the belief that feeding children well was a matter of national security. Obesity, metabolic disease, addiction, anxiety, and physical fragility have replaced hunger. Nearly four out of five young men are now unfit to serve – not because they lack calories, but because they lack health.

Throughout history the farmer and the warrior have often been the same man. The one who could defend the land was the one who worked it. Even today, many soldiers return home carrying things they will never speak of, and some find their only peace back in the soil – working with life instead of death. We can build machines to harvest crops and deploy software to optimize systems, but we cannot automate courage. We cannot outsource responsibility. And we cannot program wisdom, discernment, or moral clarity.

Farming is incredibly hard. It takes desire, love for the land, and a willingness to fight for what is right and for a future that may never thank you. If we want food security, real resilience, and a society capable of defending itself, we might begin telling the truth about where we are – and what we are losing. Because 77 percent of our young men cannot fight, and they can't farm, the question is not whether we need more technology – it is whether we are willing to rebuild the kind of humans no machine can replace.

## Endangered Species Lawsuits Backfire: Here is a Solution by Richard Collins

The Center for Biological Diversity has recently filed a lawsuit against Coronado National Forest and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service alleging the agencies have failed to protect endangered species against harmful effects of cattle grazing on Coronado National Forest lands as required by the Endangered Species Act. This is the Center's latest installment to force their narrow perspectives on land management and conservation of public lands. What is new, or at least not considered, are the deleterious effects of the Center's actions on the lands they claim to protect. Also, that the public unknowingly pays the Center's legal expenses using a little-known law called "Equal Access to Justice Act." In effect, the law requires the government to pay the Center to sue its own agencies. The federal treasury using our tax dollars must pay their lawyers, often whether the Center wins or loses the case in court. That's the public folks, you and me.

Lowell E. Baier, legal scholar, conservationist and historian, recently published the comprehensive analysis: *Equal Access to the Law Act: Environmental Litigation and the Crippling Battle over America's Lands, Endangered Species, and Critical Habitats*. Attorney Baier asserts that the original purpose of the Act was to offer a day in court for individuals and entities lacking the financial means to pursue legitimate claims, including small businesses, veterans, farmers, Social Security beneficiaries, and Indigenous peoples. His research exposed how environmental litigation by non-profit organizations like CBD and others can paralyze America's natural resource agencies. CBD lawsuits often focus on procedural issues, such as data requests and missed deadlines, and opinions presented by their own petitioners. Regardless, the law requires agencies to respond straightaway, and their more important field work often gets delayed or not done. This prevents them from monitoring firsthand the multitude of ongoing activities on public lands, including that by grazing permittees, recreationists, and the public at large. Egregious examples include the prolific growth of All Terrain Vehicles cutting new roads and tearing up the land, campers trashing campsites, and increasing fire danger with ongoing climate change. As Congress has cut agency budgets, qualified personnel available for field work has diminished. Often, they are glued to their desks mining data from public records to fulfill what are frequently inconsequential Freedom of Information Act requests.

The stated goal of CBD is removal of cattle entirely from southern Arizona watersheds without regard to the damage that will cause. Here is another often overlooked example. Western ranchers rely on a mixture of deeded and public lands for grazing. If they lose public land pastures, the ranch becomes unprofitable. The alternative is to sell and subdivide their deeded property. These lands, often homesteaded by pioneers, are often the best watered, most scenic, fertile, and productive. They also provide high-grade habitat for wildlife and birds, native plants, and scenic values. When the intact homesteads become ranchettes, homesites, mines, wineries and farms, the wildness disappears, including habitat for the endangered species the enviros seek to protect. Look around southern Arizona today and see what's happened to our once wild lands: Sonoita and Elgin, Tubac and Nogales, Altar Valley, Patagonia and Canelo. Ranching and large open spaces are also important to our western heritage. Many present-day ranchers are good land stewards and should not suffer for the sins of a few. Grazing should be monitored and controlled by the agencies charged with that responsibility, not private entities with their own axe to grind.

Having pointed out unappreciated problems with these lawsuits, here is a solution. Eliminate the environmental non-profits from getting their legal fees paid by our tax dollars: Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds, Audubon Society, and others. If there is a use of our public lands they wish to challenge, they can still file a lawsuit against it. But they must pay their own legal fees. Such a requirement has the added benefit of unclogging our courts and freeing agency personnel to monitor all users of public lands for harmful acts, including over-grazing. Pay-as-you-go legal action ensures fairness, encourages thorough examination of the particular situation, reduces court congestion, and allows agency staff to focus on their fieldwork. It could also promote collaborative conservation, instead of Combat Biology in the courts. Elimination of CBD's Legal Cash Cow is good for public lands and wildlife.

## **HARD TRUTH ABOUT RANCHING: YOU DON'T MAKE MONEY, YOU'RE MAKING A LIFE** **By Stephen Williams**

Callie Surber, a graduate student at the University of Wyoming (UW), interviewed 38 ranchers across Fremont County, Wyoming for a UW Extension Report on the pressures reshaping Wyoming's ranching industry. The resulting study, entitled "Rancher Perspective on Social and Ecological Change in Wyoming's Wind River Basin" was released in December, 2025. People were generally emotional around things related to land prices, Serber said. "I wouldn't say anyone talked about imminently losing the ranch. But there was a lot of concern about losing the lifestyle. It's more than a lifestyle. It's a way these people are living."

More than half of the ranchers interviewed depend on ranch income for their livelihoods. More than half expressed alarm about a trend reshaping the landscape around them: wealthy outsiders buying up agricultural land. These "amenity ranchers", as researchers call them, are typically absentee owners who buy up land for recreation, scenic value and wildlife, rather than production. The trend drives up property values and taxes, shrinks local agricultural output and blocks the next generation from entering the business. Despite property values that would make them millionaires overnight, most have no interest in selling. One young rancher's sentiment was "You don't make money, you're making a life."

Another recent study by the Western Landowners Alliance (WLA) puts survey data behind what Wind River ranchers described. The WLA report, based on a survey of 649 landowners across 11 western states, found that private landowners invested at least \$407.5 million of their own money in conservation practices in 2024. That figure outpaced contributions from federal programs, including the excise taxes on firearms and fishing equipment that fund state wildlife agencies. Louis Wertz, communications director for WLA, said "We know anecdotally from working with western landowners that people are putting a lot of their own money into conservation on private land. It's not reported, so we wanted to fill in that picture."

The study also found that 59% of western landowners intentionally passed up income generating opportunities to benefit conservation – declining offers for residential development, agricultural expansion, or recreational access fees. Wertz was most surprised by the foregone opportunity. "That's pretty remarkable. But for a lot of people who own these lands, that's something they understand very clearly. They bought the place to keep it out of development. Offers come all the time to subdivide it."

Wertz said the UW Extension qualitative study resonated with WLA's quantitative findings. The WLA study also documented costs ranchers absorb from wildlife - \$101 million in crops, forage, water and livestock losses across the West in 2024, plus \$37.6 million in repairs. Only 16% of landowners received any compensation, covering just 20% of their losses.

A separate 2024 survey of more than 4,500 Wyoming landowners cited in the WLA report found 87% experienced fencing damage from wildlife and 53% reported crop losses – yet 83% said it was not at all likely they would subdivide their property. Some ranchers are turning to conservation easements as a strategy to combat rising property taxes and prevent fragmentation. But easements are not for everyone. The WLA study found 65% of western landowners cite cost as a barrier to government programs, 50% worry about losing control of their land, and 43% point to regulatory disincentives.

If environmental challenges test ranchers' adaptability, bureaucratic obstacles test their patience. Making changes – changing grazing timing, altering fences, installing solar equipment on wells – requires agency approval. In nearly every interview with researchers, frustration with multi-year wait time emerged as a major theme.

But Surber emphasized an important nuance: ranchers make a clear distinction between local land managers and higher level policy. Typically, the issues they are facing come from what they describe as higher up the federal level. The ranchers have a great and positive relationship with the local land managers.

**Please join us for a Local Working Group (LWG) Meeting May 6 jointly hosted by the Pima and Santa Cruz Natural Resource Conservation Districts (NRCDs).**

When: May 6, 2026

Where: Tucson Plant Materials Center, 3241 North Romero Rd. Tucson, AZ 85705

Agenda

- 9 AM Coffee & Doughnuts
- 9:30 AM LWG Start
- 12:30 PM - 1:30 PM (Optional) Producer Expo & Lunch provided, see below.

The purpose and goals of the LWG process is to provide recommendations to the Natural Resources Conservation Service on conservation priorities and funding needs within your district. Input from this meeting helps ensure that conservation program funding priorities reflect local conditions, local resource concerns, and the needs of producers on the ground.

LWGs are composed of Conservation District supervisors and cooperators, producers, tribal representatives, state and federal agencies, nonprofit organizations, and other natural resource stakeholders. Coordination with partners helps identify priority natural resource concerns and leverage multiple funding sources to address them, allowing projects to combine resources in ways that produce greater outcomes than any single investment could achieve alone. These resource concern areas and partner programs will be captured in the ConserveAZ portal.

The ConserveAZ portal was developed by the Arizona Association of Conservation Districts (AACD) in partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to support the work of Arizona's Conservation Districts and their partners. The portal provides a centralized mapping platform where District Supervisors and NRCS staff can access diverse conservation data to conduct resource needs assessments, identify priority areas, track conservation practices, and support the development of conservation plans.

The portal also helps districts coordinate with local, state, and federal partners by allowing users to visualize resource priorities and conservation investments across Arizona. This shared information supports collaboration, aligns projects, and helps leverage multiple funding sources to achieve greater conservation gains on working lands. Access to the portal is restricted. Members of the public interested in learning more about their local Conservation District are encouraged to contact AACD staff.

**12:30 PM - 1:30 PM (Optional) Producer Expo & Lunch (Provided).**

AACD will be hosting a Producer Expo & Lunch. The Producer Expo is your chance to meet directly with agencies and organizations offering funding opportunities, cost-share programs, or technical assistance. It's a one-stop opportunity for producers to learn about resources that can support their operations and conservation goals, so you can use your time efficiently. Please stick around to hear about, sign up for programs, and make lasting relationships.

Information about which of the following items would help you as a District Cooperator. Rank your top 5 choices with 1 being most important. Final rankings will help determine funding availability for future conservation projects.

- \_\_\_ Prescribed burning
- \_\_\_ Rangeland monitoring
- \_\_\_ Brush control \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Plant identification
- \_\_\_ Soil erosion control \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Livestock water developments
- \_\_\_ Funding Sources
- \_\_\_ Irrigation: flood, sprinkler, drip \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Fencing: barbed wire, electric, virtual \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Other (describe) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_ Grazing management planning
- \_\_\_ Managing small acreage horse properties
- \_\_\_ Seeding
- \_\_\_ Conservation easements
- \_\_\_ Soil health
- \_\_\_ Creation of wildlife habitat
- \_\_\_ Grant writing

When completed, please email to: [admin.santacruz@nrcb.az.gov](mailto:admin.santacruz@nrcb.az.gov) or mail to address below:

Cooperator: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

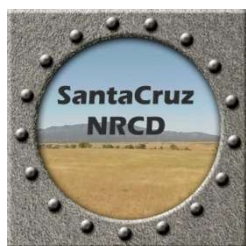
Santa Cruz NRCD  
 97 Old Ruby Rd  
 Nogales, AZ 85621

**Local Work Group Meeting on May 6, 2026**

No one knows more about a community's natural resource problems than the people who live and work there. That's why it's so important to give local landowners and partners a voice in how best to prioritize and address these issues through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Local Working Groups (LWG). The LWG is led by your local Natural Resource Conservation Districts (NRCDS) and is the foundation of NRCS' conservation program delivery process. It supports locally led conservation efforts by coordinating USDA programs with other landowner stake holders such as federal, state, and local conservation programs to provide an integrated solution to addressing natural resource concerns. Please complete the Cooperator Questionnaire and email to the Santa Cruz District clerk. Your responses will be used for the LWG meeting. [admin.santacruz@nrcb.az.gov](mailto:admin.santacruz@nrcb.az.gov)

**Calendar of Activities/Events**

- Local Work Group Meeting at 9 AM on May 6 for the Santa Cruz, & Pima NRCDS Districts. Location: Tucson Plant Materials Center (Training Room), 3241 N Romero Rd, Tucson, AZ
- Santa Fe Ranch Days, May 8.
- Nogales Water Festival (Project WET), May (day TBD) at Nogales High School
- Santa Cruz Quarterly meeting on May 27, 2026 at Wild Horse Restaurant, Patagonia, AZ.



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