

## 600.10 - Overview of Conservation Planning

This section provides an overview of the process NRCS uses to assist clients (individuals, groups, and units of government) in developing, implementing, and evaluating conservation plans on agricultural lands, urban areas, or other land uses. The process is used regardless of the expected outcome, scope, size of the planning area, complexity of natural resource problems and opportunities, or source of funding to be used for implementation.

Conservation planning is a natural resource problem solving and management process. The process integrates economic, social (cultural resources are included with social), and ecological considerations to meet private and public needs. This approach, which emphasizes desired future conditions, helps improve natural resource management, minimize conflict, and address problems and opportunities.

The success of conservation planning and implementation depends on the voluntary participation of clients. While participation is voluntary, NRCS personnel must carry out outreach activities to reach underserved customers, such as minority, and small producers with limited resources, to ensure that services are offered to them on an equal basis with traditional customers. It is imperative that all customers be treated fairly and equitably, with dignity and respect.

The planning process used by NRCS is based on the premise that clients will make and implement sound decisions if they understand their resources, natural resource problems and opportunities, and the effects of their decisions.

Conservation planning helps clients, conservationists, and others view the environment as a living system of which humans are an integral part. Conservation planning enables clients and planners to analyze and work with complex natural processes in definable and measurable terms.

The conservation planning process, as described in this handbook, consists of nine steps divided into three phases. It is a process that considers people and the resources they use or manage. Conservation planning is based on a desired future condition that is developed by the client for an individual conservation plan, or by the client and stakeholders, in the case of an areawide conservation plan or assessment encompassing a watershed or other defined area.

To provide conservation planning direction and help ensure a balance of natural resource issues with economic and social needs, NRCS employees will work with conservation districts to establish objectives that reflect current resource issues in the district. The process should include meetings with stakeholders interested in resource issues. These objectives will help define some desired future condition of these resources in terms of what the local people want. To supplement data from other agencies or groups, the district and NRCS should rely on local knowledge, specific discipline input, and existing public information that relates to the local area. This public information can help identify other resource issues or human considerations that have not previously been a focus of interest in the area.

Once this data and objectives are collected and analyzed, and decisions are made, the information may be incorporated into the conservation district's long range plan or other plan as appropriate. As areawide conservation plans or assessments are developed, they should be reviewed, and if additional objectives are defined for specific portions of the district, the long range plan or other plans should be updated. These objectives are then integrated with the FOTG and can form the basis for developing additional technical guidance material. This is accomplished by ensuring that:

- New or existing quality criteria support identified objectives.
- Guidance documents reflect local resource issues.
- Management systems in the FOTG, Section III, work toward accomplishing the identified human considerations for that area.

As conservation plans are implemented, progress is made toward accomplishing the agreed-upon desired future conditions of the resources and the needs of the people.

The challenge in conservation planning is to balance the short-term demands for production of goods and services with long-term sustainability of a quality environment. Natural resource problems and opportunities are usually expressed in terms of human values. In achieving a desired natural resource condition, human values determine the scope and extent of problems and the associated corrective actions to be taken.

When providing conservation planning assistance, the planner should:

- Recognize the interconnections between the planning unit (1/), larger areas outside of or encompassing the planning unit (e.g. watersheds), and smaller areas within the planning unit (e.g. riparian corridors). For these levels consider (1) the consequences of proposed actions, (2) the cumulative effects of proposed actions and (3) the needs of each level.
- Think of the planning area in terms beyond its administrative, jurisdictional, and geographic

boundaries.

- Consider the short-term and long-term effects of actions.
- Consider the client's and society's economic needs and goals.
- Consider all of the client's enterprises and the interactions between them.
- Respect the rights and responsibilities of private landowners.
- Facilitate the creation of a desired future condition that meets individual and societal needs.
- Recognize that human welfare depends on the sustainability of natural resources.
- Base assistance on the best current knowledge, science, and technology.
- Incorporate the knowledge gained from previous planning, implementation, and evaluation efforts.
- Cooperate with others in collecting, assembling, and evaluating data.
- Utilize the resources and expertise of others.
- Identify, prevent, and mitigate, to the greatest extent practicable, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of planning assistance on minority and low-income populations.

In summary, conservation planning deals with complete systems, rather than just parts of systems. The expected physical effects of conservation systems and practices are assessed in the context of ecological, economic, and social considerations as documented locally in the FOTG. The expected impacts of those effects on natural resource quality, economic needs, and social objectives are then used to help develop and evaluate management alternatives.

1/ Refer to the NPPH, Subpart G, [Glossary](#) for a complete definition of Planning Unit. Also see the Abbreviations and Terms in the Conservation Programs Manual (CPM), [Part 502](#).