



E A R T H T E A M

# Handbook

*Revised 2003*



 **NRCS** Natural Resources Conservation Service  
United States Department of Agriculture

# Introduction

**Effective** volunteer support does not begin with the volunteer. It begins by recognizing the potential of volunteers to help the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) meet established goals and objectives. When these goals and objectives are reviewed, it is apparent that to accomplish them, certain jobs need to be done. Volunteers can do many of these jobs. Volunteer support is an ideal way to help NRCS achieve its organizational goals.

Government alone cannot accomplish the job of conserving America's renewable resources. The collective talents and energies of private individuals and groups are also needed.

Volunteering has always been a cornerstone of the soil and water conservation movement. It began with the organization of conservation districts in 1937. In recognition of the interest and skills many Americans have in conservation, congress in 1981 passed legislation (Section 1526 of PL97-98, Food and Agriculture Act) permitting the Soil Conservation Service, now the Natural Resources Conservation Service, to use volunteers in its programs. This is how the Earth Team, the volunteer arm of NRCS, was initiated.

The primary purpose of the Earth Team is to expand NRCS services by using volunteer

time, talent and energy to help accomplish the NRCS mission. To better understand how the volunteer fits into the structure of NRCS, consider the following objectives of the program:

- To increase "conservation of the land" by using volunteers to assist with the technical aspects of applying conservation practices;
- To increase the level of support services available for conservation-related activities by utilizing volunteers in NRCS offices;

- To increase interest in, and acceptance of, resource management systems that conserve soil, water and related natural resources;
- To establish a successful, long-range volunteer program;
- To utilize the Earth Team as an outreach effort to diversify the workforce;

There has never been a better time for Earth Team volunteers. The energy, excitement, dedication and skills they bring to the

*It shall be the mission of the Earth Team to provide leadership for a volunteer workforce that conserves, protects and sustains our natural resources.*

- To work with volunteers to increase public awareness through information and education.
- To identify potential career employees;
- To use volunteer contacts to improve networking with other agencies and organizations in support of soil and water conservation objectives;

job are vital to help NRCS and conservation districts respond to the needs of our customers.

Interested people provide volunteer services as individuals as well as through community groups and organizations. The challenge before us is to determine how to match available volunteer contributions to the jobs NRCS needs to have done...and then go out and recruit volunteers to join the Earth Team.

# Planning For Success

**Volunteers** can help achieve success in the NRCS workplace at all levels of operations – field office, area office, state office, regional office and national headquarters.

Volunteering is one of the most dynamic activities in American society. Nearly 80 percent of American adults regularly becomes involved in some sort of volunteer activity during the course of the year. This amounts to millions of people donating millions of hours a year.

The recipients of this time include organizations working in all areas, including religion, health, education, arts, conservation and the environment.

While most volunteers work with nonprofit agencies, almost 18 percent are connected with some level of government. During the last 10 years, volunteering for government has been one of the fastest growing areas of volunteer involvement.

Volunteers come from all age groups, educational backgrounds, income levels, genders and type of employment. It is quite correct to say that in this society almost everyone can be looked upon as a potential volunteer.

Probably the biggest change that has occurred in volunteering during the last 20 years has been a shift toward volunteers who prefer shorter time commitments. It has become necessary to pay much greater attention to the needs and requirements of these volunteers, including providing assignments which require smaller commitments of time and greater flexibility in scheduling.

Volunteers become involved for a variety of reasons, depending on the individual and the cause he or she is considering. The basic motivations that are often cited include:

- Helping others;
- Interest in the work or activity;
- Wanting to learn and gain experience;
- Have a lot of free time;
- Devoted to the cause;
- Knows someone who was involved;

As you might expect, with millions of people involved, the potential reasons stretch across the entire range of human motivation.

It is particularly important in operating a volunteer program to retain a broad view of potential volunteer involvement. Do not assume that the only people who are likely to volunteer for the program are the same types of people who previously volunteered for the activity. The volunteer pool changes.

Experiences of other volunteer programs show that practically everyone can be persuaded to volunteer if the right techniques are utilized. By retaining a broad view, you will greatly expand your potential targets in volunteer recruitment.

“To make volunteers work for NRCS, two things must change – your mind and your view on work.”

-Anonymous

# Three Steps

**What's next?** Basically, some simple planning and organization.

**Step 1:** Organize yourself. Develop the proper “mindset,” and ask specifically what it is you want a volunteer to perform.

**Step 2:** Determine what volunteers can do by conducting a “needs assessment” at least once a year. An excellent time to do it is when you're developing your annual business plan. This activity should be a shared undertaking with other NRCS staff and with conservation district officials and staff. In some cases, other government and volunteer agencies may be involved.

**Step 3:** Actively recruit volunteers. Many individuals and groups will jump at the opportunity if you seek them out and say, “I need your help.” It's that simple.

## STEP 1 -

### *The Mindset*

Some logical questions are associated with Step 1, which focuses on developing the proper attitude to recruit a volunteer. When planning your volunteer program, you will need to consider the following:

- Does your office have a legitimate need for a volunteer staff?
  - Can the work be divided into jobs, some of which can be done by part-time volunteer staff?
  - Can these volunteer jobs be integrated with paid staff assignments and the plan of work?
  - Is it possible to find volunteers to do the work?
  - Can volunteers be trained to do these tasks?
  - Can the paid staff be motivated, helped, or taught to work with volunteers?
  - Is there adequate workspace for the volunteer?
  - Will NRCS commit paid staff time to the volunteer program for job definition, training and supervision of volunteers?
- With these questions in mind, you are ready to organize your volunteer program.

## Who Can Volunteer?

- NRCS volunteers, serving individually or as members of a group, must be at least 14 years old.
- Volunteers don't have to be citizens of the United States, but they should be citizens of allied countries. All international volunteers must be approved by the International Programs Division.
- Immediate family members or other relatives of NRCS employees are eligible to serve as volunteers, as are employees of other federal, state or local agencies or departments.
- NRCS employees can volunteer as well, as long as the duties they perform aren't the same type of duties for which they are paid.
- Use form NRCS-PER-001 to sign up individual volunteers.

## Earth Team Versus Student Program

NRCS has two separate volunteer programs. One is the Earth Team Volunteer Program. The lesser-known Student Volunteer Program is usually handled through Human Resources in your state office.

The major difference in these two programs is that under the Student Volunteer Program there is no minimum age limit, and students can generally receive credit for volunteer service from the learning institutions they are

attending. All that's required is a written agreement between the learning institution and NRCS before a student performs any service.

If the student is at least 14 and doesn't want any credit the Earth Team is an option.

## Group Sponsored Volunteers

Groups of people may be signed up as volunteers to work on special projects. An example is asking a group of high school students to gather water samples

from area creeks and rivers to test water quality. If the students agree to volunteer with NRCS, use the NRCS-PER-003, Agreement for Sponsored Voluntary Service, and sign them up.

The form requires only two signatures, yours and that of the group leader. Members of the group do not have to sign the form, but their leader should list their names on the reverse of the form. The social security number and date of birth of the group leader is required.

## Hosted Volunteers

Hosted Volunteers are paid from any source other than NRCS while providing their services to us. An example of this is an organization like Green Thumb. The local office or the state department of employment has paid job-training programs available to help people build or increase work skills and knowledge. If you provide a training location, invite the trainee to sign up as a volunteer for NRCS.

## STEP 2 -

# *The Needs Assessment*

Step 2, the needs assessment, is relatively easy. List the jobs that must be done but you would prefer not to do because of other priorities. List those jobs you'd like to do, but don't have time to do because of other pressing commitments. Then, put those jobs on your "professional wish list." These are jobs you would do if you had unlimited time and resources. By now, your list should be rather extensive. And guess what? Volunteers can do any or all of the jobs on your list.

A typical example of a field office needs inventory showed the following job needs:

### EXAMPLE 1: *Job Needs*

#### *General Office*

Newsletters  
Computer Entries  
Filing  
Office Mailings  
Typing

#### *Technical Assistance*

Grassland Development  
Application Review  
Status Reviews  
Field Surveying  
Equipment Management  
Construction Checks

#### *Info/Education*

Photography  
Fair Booths  
Schools  
Tours/Field Days  
Radio & TV  
Workshops  
Conservation Education  
Displays/Signs  
Demonstrations

Following a needs assessment, prioritize the needs and focus on specific jobs and tasks to be performed. This helps in recruiting and matching talent to task.

Example 2 shows a worksheet that can help you become more “task specific.”

EXAMPLE 2:

## *Job Needs Volunteer Project Definition*

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Project/Job Description:

Estimated Time Required: \_\_\_\_\_ hours \_\_\_\_\_ days  
\_\_\_\_\_ months \_\_\_\_\_ ongoing

Dates of Service: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ (Day, Month, Year)

Required Availability:

Weekdays: From \_\_\_\_\_ a.m. to \_\_\_\_\_ p.m.  
with \_\_\_\_\_ hours minimum per day/week.

Evenings: \_\_\_\_\_

Weekends: \_\_\_\_\_

Training Provided:

Qualifications Needed:

District Conservationist: \_\_\_\_\_

County: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Another Look at Needs Assessments

- 1: Discuss with your staff how volunteers can be used to expand services in your office. It's important to involve the entire staff because individuals view their jobs differently, and each person may see different opportunities for the use of volunteers.

Use a flip chart and divide a page into four columns labeled "Activities That Must Be Accomplished," "Activities Not Being Accomplished," "Activities We'd Like to Accomplish" (the staff wish list), and "Activities that Volunteers Can Accomplish."

- 2: With your staff, make a list of activities that your office must accomplish (refer to business plan, district long-range plan, etc.). Write these activities in Column 1 (Activities that Must Be Accomplished).
- 3: After completing the first column, begin listing activities that aren't being accomplished. Write these activities in Column 2 (Activities Not Being Accomplished). Some of the activities listed in Column 1 may also be included in this list.

- 4: Column 3 is your wish list. Write down activities that you and your staff would like to accomplish if you had ample time and staff. Write these activities in Column 3 (Activities We'd Like to Accomplish).

- 5: Now that you have completed the first three columns, you are ready to identify those tasks that a volunteer could do. Begin by reviewing Column 1. Transfer any activity that you feel a volunteer could accomplish from Column 1 to Column 4 (Activities that Volunteers Can Accomplish). Complete this same process for columns 2 and 3. You may want to break down larger jobs into specific tasks that volunteers can perform.

At this point, the assessment should have activities in all four columns. If you think you may have trouble finding work space for volunteers, take the assessment process one more step forward and identify which tasks volunteers can do outside the office.

This process now prepares you to develop volunteer job descriptions, a requirement for all volunteers.

## Reviewing the Basics

**Before** writing volunteer job descriptions, take time to review the basics of the program and what volunteers can and can't do.

Earth Team volunteers are considered employees just like any paid NRCS employee. They should not be asked to perform any jobs that would be inappropriate for a paid NRCS employee to perform. This restriction

also applies to NRCS employees who sign up as volunteers. If you're not sure you've assigned the right task, ask yourself this question: "Is this something I would do?" If the answer is "yes," it's probably okay for the volunteer to do it.

Volunteers should support the work of NRCS employees, not replace them. The legislation

authorizing the use of volunteers specifically prohibits their use to replace NRCS employees.

Examples of work that NRCS volunteers should NOT do include setting district policy, handling district money, participating in certain political activities, and operating equipment that NRCS does not own.

*Is this something I would do?*

## Developing Job Descriptions

**From your master list**, select the tasks that you can realistically expect to accomplish with volunteer help and prepare a job description for each one. Don't forget that job descriptions must also be developed for group activities or projects.

Job descriptions are tools to help volunteers understand the results to be accomplished, what tasks are involved, what skills are required, and other important details about the job.

It won't take you long to find out that well-developed job descriptions become the building blocks of your volunteer program. Recruiting, interviewing, placing, supervising, and evaluating will all be based on the information contained in them.

There is a blank volunteer position description on the back of the NRCS PER-001 form. Use this form and the following guidelines to help you develop position descriptions.

## Guide for Developing Job Descriptions

### *Job Title*

Make the title clear and dignified; informative but interesting.

### *Location:*

List your office location and phone number.

### *Overall Goal:*

Provide a short, concise statement reflecting the ultimate goal of the job.

### *Major Results:*

Volunteers are anxious to see results of their contributions. So, as specifically as possible, list the main measurable results

expected from the volunteer's work and any deadlines to meet. Try to quantify the results expected, such as "deliver 20 environmental education packets to five schools."

### *Suggest Activities:*

Describe how the job can be achieved in sequence or step-by-step.

### *Knowledge and Skills Required:*

List skills and knowledge necessary to effectively perform the job (technical, managerial, human relations, education, experience).

### *Orientation and Training:*

Look for the most qualified volunteer you can find to do the job. If the job is high priority and you need to provide training, develop an appropriate training plan. The supervisor should make sure the new volunteer receives orientation to the NRCS role in the community as soon as possible.

### *Time Requirements:*

Stay flexible on both the minimum time requirements and the actual schedule until you have the opportunity to interview interested volunteers. Then negotiate the time with the volunteer you select. Volunteers don't need to work within established office hours. Also, don't overlook the possibility for using more than one volunteer to fill a position that requires a major time commitment.

### *Supervision:*

List the supervisor's name and his/her position. Remember, anyone can have responsibility for supervising a volunteer - even another volunteer. Describe the level of independence and supervision the volunteer should have.

Now, if you have achieved a positive "mindset," (Step 1), and gone through a general and task specific needs assessment (Step 2), you are ready to begin recruiting (Step 3).

STEP 3 -

## Recruiting

No matter what level of NRCS/SWCD operation you are involved in, and no matter where you are located, there are potential volunteers. And yes, the rural office stands the same chance of recruiting volunteers as the urban office.

Recruitment techniques fall into  
*3 categories:*

*A:* Word of mouth, or “grapevine.”

*B:* Advertisements, news releases, posters, TV, radio, etc.

*C:* Personal contact.

*A:* Word of mouth or “grapevine” recruiting begins when you put the word out at coffee shops, with NRCS staff, and SWCD people, to family and friends. It can also be more formal, such as when you express your needs during a public speaking engagement with civic or agricultural groups. Once you have volunteers, their grapevine brings in new volunteers - if they have a good volunteer experience.

*B:* Advertisements, news releases, posters, TV, radio, etc., are traditional means of communications, and may help you reach broader audiences. However, you have no control over these

methods, and you can become frustrated by following up on leads with people who are ultimately not interested.

*C:* Personal contact recruiting starts when you take the time to match specific jobs to specific individuals or groups. An example would be to recruit a retired writer for an information support job or an unemployed typist for a clerical job. Once tasks and individuals are identified, phone the candidates. Or better yet, visit them. Explain what is needed, determine their interest level, and ask if they are willing to help. Be honest and sincere, and the results are generally rewarding.

When  
**ASKED,**  
over  
**80%**  
of adults  
say  
**YES**  
to  
**volunteering.**

## Recruitment Strategies that Work

### *Ask 'Em - the person-to-person approach:*

First, think of all the “insiders” you know who have some stake in the Natural Resources Conservation Service. These can include your present volunteers, staff, district officials, friendly or associated groups, customers, and their families. Then ask each of these individuals to recruit, or at least suggest, a likely new volunteer prospect or two.

The “Ask ‘Em” strategy has these advantages:

- These insiders know you and your needs. They also know their own friends’ strengths. Therefore, insider-suggested candidates are more likely to prove appropriate than random recruits.
- Instead of one or a few people trying to do all of the recruiting, this network approach spreads the recruiting responsibility around, and leaves the volunteer program leader more time for other things.
- For the same reason, this tactic reduces the likelihood of unconscious blind spots or bias in selecting volunteers because more than one person is doing the recruiting.
- This approach gives more people a direct stake in the program.

### *Using Local Media to Effectively Recruit Volunteers:*

Many volunteer recruiters have had great success in using the local media to “sell” the Earth Team. Press coverage can range from a radio or newspaper interview with a district conservationist stressing the importance of volunteers, to a local TV station covering a special volunteer-assisted event. Newsworthy information is in competition for publication or airtime, but a well-planned marketing program and strong media contacts will almost guarantee results. Don’t forget classified ads. They, too, can work as a recruiting tool.

Never underestimate the power of the local press. By contacting key people at local newspapers, advertising shoppers, school newspapers, radio stations, local magazines and TV stations, you can receive an enormous amount of news coverage at little or no cost.

### *Media Tips:*

- Contact key media people in your area with personal visits or telephone calls. Maintain a positive rapport with your contacts. They can be key to your public image through favorable editorials, spot interviews and other news coverage.
- Give them as much information as you can about the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Earth Team and its volunteers. Be specific. Provide statistics, names, accomplishments - any facts that would entice a reporter to write a feature story or cover the event.
- Send out information (usually in the form of a press release or fact sheet) about two to three weeks before an event. Emphasize times, places, people, and an overall goal or summary. Make follow-up contacts in the week prior to the event to remind the media of any happenings and to clarify questions or last-minute changes.
- As a courtesy, always inform the media of any cancellations or major changes.
- Stretch your media coverage. Clip news articles or features and tape all radio and TV spots and send

*(Media Tips continued)*

them to community action groups that may potentially volunteer. Better yet, ask for a spot on the agenda at their next club meeting, and take along clippings and tapes as handouts or visual aids in your recruitment presentation.

- Lend credibility to speeches with volunteer success stories, entertaining anecdotes, quotes from other offices, and compiled statistics. Your state volunteer coordinator should have a lot of this information.
- When using radio public service announcements

(PSAs), remember that public service directors are primarily concerned about local information. The more you can target the radio spots to important community problems and opportunities, the greater the likelihood your spot will be announced.

Don't be afraid to ask your radio contacts if they used the announcements. Most stations keep a log of when and how often they use PSAs, and will generally provide you with that information. If they haven't used the material, ask why.

- Always send a thank you for coverage, and be sure to include media contacts in awards ceremonies when you recognize volunteer efforts.
- Recruit a volunteer to handle media services. Use a present volunteer to sign up new recruits. Your successful volunteers can be good sources for recruitment.
- Ask local media people to become Earth Team Volunteers!
- Use a variety of recruitment techniques and look for new sources of advertising.

## Relatively Inexpensive Advertising Mediums:

Personal Contact  
(the absolute best)

Envelope stuffers/  
direct mail pieces

Fliers, newspaper  
articles, ads

Professional bulletins

Radio and TV PSAs

High school sports  
calendars/fliers

Feature stories

Magazines, Sunday  
supplements

Local school  
newspapers/yearbooks

Special events

Place mats at area  
restaurants

Posters

Church missalettes

Community bulletin  
boards

Milk cartons

Displays

Street pennants

Special interest groups

The internet

Newsletters (be as  
detailed and complete  
as possible)

Include your "stuffer" in  
another organization's  
newsletter

## *Tapping High Potential Pools – The Group Approach:*

Random, “shotgun” recruiting can leave you trying to convince too many people who are at square one - or square zero - in their readiness to volunteer. It is far more efficient to begin by identifying pools of people who:

- are ready to volunteer, or at least semi-ready;
- have participatory interests which run parallel to the needs of NRCS;
- can be reached as a group.

No one can identify these people reservoirs for you. The following list is just a reminder of options that might be worth checking out if they exist in your community or area.

**1:** Volunteer Centers  
Sometimes called “Volunteer Clearinghouses” or “Bureaus.” There are about 400-450 of these in the United States. If you’re not sure you have one, check the phone book under “volunteer” or “voluntary,” United Way, city or county government, The Junior League, Voluntary Action Centers, etc. Volunteer centers will usually have lists of people organized according to their abilities and interests.

**2:** Retired Senior Volunteer Program (R.S.V.P.)  
Essentially, these are clearinghouses for people 55 years of age and older. They also provide some in-kind support for their volunteers (such as transportation). There are about 800 R.S.V.P.s in the United States. They might be listed under United Way, local government, or senior citizens/aging, as well as under R.S.V.P.

**3:** Local Associations  
These have people with career or other serious interests in working with volunteers. The words “association,” “society,” “coordinator,” or “director” are likely to be in their title. “DOVIA” (directors of volunteers in agencies) is a frequent one. Help in locating your local association (there are about 600 of them in the United States) can come from your local volunteer center or from someone in the volunteer department of your local hospital or Red Cross. Find key people who represent these groups in the community. Entry is often obtained by involving a single key person. Such associations are often quite informal. Nevertheless, their members are usually willing to share information about where the relevant pools of volunteers are. They may have a few extra volunteers themselves and be willing to give you their names in return for the same kind of favor from you someday.

## **4:** Other Single Organization Clearinghouses

Actually mini volunteer centers are most likely to be found within individual:

- Churches;
- Corporations;
- Minority organizations;
- Colleges and universities;
- City or county governments;
- Junior/senior high schools (student volunteer programs);
- Newcomer groups;
- Welcome Wagon;
- Senior citizen groups;
- Junior League;
- Cooperative extension services;
- Governors office on volunteerism;
- 4-H groups;
- Boy/Girl Scouts and other youth groups;
- Retired teachers associations;
- Corporate Partners and Environmental groups;

The person or unit responsible for such a clearinghouse won’t always be easy to identify. But somewhere in their title, if they have one, are likely to be words such as “volunteer,” “volunteer coordinator,” “community service,” etc.

**5:** Friendly Groups  
These are organizations whose interest and purposes overlap those of the NRCS Earth Team Program, i.e. Telephone Pioneers, garden clubs, state conservation associations, National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), auxiliary groups, etc. There are several such friendly groups for each interest area within your volunteer



*(Friendly groups continued)*

program, and careful research is often needed to identify all such groups.

NRCS has current agreements with several groups, such as Ruritan, CCC, National Council of Catholic Women and the General Federation of Women's Clubs.

Seek the commitment of volunteers prior to their retirement. The best predictor of volunteering in later life is previous experience.

The hope is that groups comprised of people who already share your interests and commitment will be fertile recruiting ground for your program. On the other hand, the "friendly" group might well prefer to keep its members' time to itself. It might actually be competing with you for recruits. If that's the case, maybe your best bet is to look for projects that have a common goal, then promote joint sponsorship.

## **6:** Alternative Service or Community Service Programs

These are usually conducted either by a probation department, the district attorney's office, the local court system,

or the local volunteer center. Minor or first offenders are sometimes offered a choice between a certain number of hours of community service and fine or jail. Sometimes, the "sentence" also includes the latter options. The better organized community service programs will usually have a good idea on the interest and abilities of their offenders, and will allow their offenders a reasonable choice of work site options.

## **7:** Internship or In-Service Learning

Internships are often offered at colleges, universities, and junior and senior high schools. Look for departments which parallel the Earth Team interests. Sometimes, however, one person or office is responsible for all internship programs in an educational institution. Some offer academic credit for volunteer service that is documented and supervised. The Earth Team has a great deal to offer these students.

## *Recruitment Tips*

- Have plenty of jobs available before beginning recruitment.
- Be specific. Set clear expectations.
- Begin with small, manageable tasks.
- Encourage creative solutions and new ways to do a job.
- Be fun.
- Begin with placements that guarantee success.
- Be professional.
- Don't expect all jobs to be filled immediately.
- Be patient.
- Be persistent.
- Try to create a job for a particularly eager or talented volunteer.

## Interviewing and Placing

Even though volunteers are recruited for specific tasks or positions, and even when the need for volunteers is great and few volunteers are available, selection and placement must be given careful consideration. If the agency is to benefit from the volunteer's service, and if the volunteer is to achieve satisfaction, the volunteer and the job must be well matched.

### *Interviewing: The Purpose*

A personal interview is the only effective means of getting acquainted with volunteers to find out what interests them, what they are suited for, and to plan with them for a particular job. No applicant, whether paid or volunteer, wants to be judged suitable or not for a position without a chance to discuss it face-to-face. The purpose of interviewing is to ensure suitability, appropriateness and quality control of all applicants. One must screen out those clearly unsuited for

NRCS volunteer work because:

- NRCS is a service organization, and the public must be helped, not misled by our volunteers.
- The agency's reputation is affected by volunteers who work with us.
- The morale of the paid staff and other volunteers declines when inappropriate or poor volunteer placements occur.
- The volunteer suffers when misplaced.

### *Interviewing Techniques: The Skills Needed*

The interview, therefore, plays a critical role. A skilled interviewer can pick up and interpret information from an interview to use in matching appropriate volunteers with volunteer jobs. The two most crucial skills to acquire for an interview are how to ask questions and how to listen effectively. Following are skills the interviewer should have.

- Ability to converse easily with strangers;
- Acceptance of all people;
- Skill in observing or sensing other people's reactions, attitudes, concerns and personality traits;
- Ability to listen attentively and hear accurately;
- Experience as a volunteer;
- Knowledge of the volunteer jobs and agency programs;
- Ability to speak clearly and explain things well;

### *How to Ask Questions*

One type of interview uses the non-direct approach. The interviewer serves as a skilled catalyst and prober, and the applicant becomes the director of the content of what is said. Some sample questions in a nondirective interview include:

- What do you most enjoy doing?
- What are your personal and work goals that would be important to consider in choosing a volunteer job?
- What would you consider to be an ideal job for you, and why?
- What kind of supervision do you prefer?

These questions need to be changed or adapted to your own style and needs. Interviews are of different types. The purpose of the interview will determine the appropriate format and amount of time required.

- Capacity to recognize individual strengths and potential;
- Experience in working with persons of varied racial, religious, educational and economic backgrounds;
- Ability to efficiently guide the conversation without sacrificing sensitivity or purpose.



## *Other Types of Interviews*

### In-depth interview:

More intensive and lengthy; conducted by the person to whom the volunteer will report. Personality traits, skills, likes and dislikes, goals, emotional stability, attitudes, and motivation should be explored.

**Purpose:** To obtain enough sound information and personal data to be able to determine if the volunteer is appropriate for a particular position, if the volunteer is compatible to coworkers, and most importantly, if the volunteer can work with a particular client. Two people may interview the applicant if help is needed for a particularly responsible or sensitive position. The volunteer needs to make a decision, as well as the agency, by the end of the interview. Time: 45 minutes to one hour.

### Follow-up or evaluation interview:

**Purpose:** to evaluate the volunteer's progress, identify problems and assess additional possibilities. Can be formal or informal, but must have a purpose and be productive.

### Exit interview:

**Purpose:** to obtain candid feedback when the volunteer is leaving the organization. Try to obtain constructive suggestions for the agency and its programs.

## *How to Listen Effectively*

The interviewer must learn to use silence effectively, and must be able to reflect and restate the ideas of the interviewee.

### *Aids to effective listening include:*

**Interest** - must consider the applicant important;

**Patience** - must give the applicant the time to respond with thoughtful answers;

**Linking** - having the ability to build the interview upon what has been said;

**Alertness** - always listening for key words and phrases, making sure they are understood;

**Concentration** - ability to focus on what the applicant is telling you;

**Deliberation** - ability to withhold evaluation and decision until the interview is completed;

### *Barriers to effective listening include:*

**Anticipating** what the applicant will say before anything is said;

**Becoming** mentally lazy and inattentive;

**Intolerance** towards the applicant;

**Suggesting or influencing** the applicant's answers;

**Interrupting** to interject one's own thoughts;

**Personal prejudices**

### **One Rule:**

Do not keep the interviewee dangling. Inform the candidate upon closure of the interview as to his/her status and when a decision will be made, even if it means saying "We are still conducting interviews, but we will arrive at a decision by the first of next month."

# Placing An Earth Team Volunteer

To make a good placement, the process of job designing and interviewing is essential. As a supervisor evaluates a volunteer's motivations and skills during an interview, the placement process has already begun. Placement or matching of the volunteer to the right volunteer job is the beginning of a successful volunteer program. Public opinion polls support this concept. In fact, polls cite the single most powerful factor that motivates volunteers is satisfaction with the work assignment itself.

The supervisor must take the time during the interview to collect as much information about the volunteer's motivations, or reasons, for wanting to join the Earth Team. Understanding the motivations for volunteering is important. Supervisors **JUST NEED TO ASK**, and trust volunteers to tell you what you need to know about their work-relevant motivations.

When designing work for volunteers, listen to factors that a particular volunteer is pre-motivated to do and has the competence as well as preference to do. Volunteers may have a skill they like to do and gladly share with other people. Or a volunteer may have a desire to learn something specific. Having a way to grow or improve a skill

through a volunteer job is one of the best ways to prevent burnout and assure retention of volunteers. Don't push a volunteer to take responsibility. Some want to lead, while others prefer a more limited role.

Asking about motivating factors during the interview is a good way to avoid the situations in which volunteers are too nice to say "no" when asked to do something they detest. When saddled with undesirable tasks a second or third time, often a volunteer simply leaves.

After listening to the interview information, use it to help you match the volunteer motivations and skills to the appropriately tailored job.

When a volunteer has been interviewed and is ready to be placed, keep in mind these reasons why people volunteer.

They:

- Enjoy the work itself;
- Want social contact;
- Want a sense of accomplishment;
- Want to help others;
- Hope it leads to a paid job;
- Want social recognition;
- Believe in "the cause;"

Communication is a vital link between the volunteer and the agency. The process began dur-

ing the interview, and it will be continued throughout the volunteer appointment. As soon as the supervisor has made a decision to place a volunteer, the immediate supervisor should send a welcoming letter. Policy regarding volunteers, including application requirements, is in General Manual Section 360, Part 428.

## Placing Tips

- Match volunteer skills to the volunteer job.
- Negotiate placement terms before having the application signed.
- Complete the paperwork.
- Welcome the volunteer to the Earth Team!

## Nondiscriminatory Interviewing:

Equal Employment Opportunity laws apply to volunteers. Review General Manual Section 230, about appropriate practices for interviewing applicants.

## What's Next?

Put your volunteers to work. Orient them to the agency, the staff, their job, etc. Make sure they are a part of the team. Document your volunteer efforts in the business plan, the SWCD long-range plan and similar documents. Treat volunteers no differently than other staff members, but remember that they are not paid. Reward their efforts when appropriate, and above all, enjoy the new approach they bring to the mission of our agency.

# Orientation

A distinction should be made between “orientation” and “training.” Orientation consists of a general introduction to the agency. Training addresses those skills that will be needed to perform a specific assignment. You will want to develop a simple, individualized orientation and training plan to be given to the volunteer at the time of the job assignment.

In many cases, orientation can be used as an effective screening mechanism. During this time, some volunteers realize the situation is not what they thought it would be. Allow the volunteer an opportunity to reject the job before a large investment is made. One to two hours is considered a good time allowance for orientation. Include your paid staff and other volunteers in the orientation whenever possible. Check out the availability of NRCS videos for basic orientation to the agency.

## Format

- Overview of the organization (services, programs, etc.);
- Philosophy and goals as they relate to the use of volunteer services;
- Outline of volunteer opportunities available within the agency;
- Rights and responsibilities of volunteers;
- Importance of volunteers to the agency;
- Tour of the office and information about parking and informal office procedures;
- Outline of policies, regulations, and similar material considered important to both staff and volunteers;
- Informal social time with coffee and refreshments;
- Encourage your volunteers to ask questions;
- Maintain an open line of communication;

## Training

An objective of the Earth Team program is to locate skilled personnel to perform priority conservation jobs. There will be times when a skilled or trained volunteer is not available. You will then need to consider training a volunteer to perform the job. Training is accomplished by matching the job description with a volunteer’s skills. The skills and knowledge that are lacking are the training goals.

## Earth Team Orientation Folder

Each Earth Team member will benefit from having an orientation folder given to them at the beginning of their work assignment. Suggested contents include the state conservationist’s welcome letter, job description, time cards, co-workers names, state’s organizational chart, Earth Team brochure, employee responsibilities and conduct booklet and the Earth Team Volunteer Orientation Guide.

### *Orientation and Training Tips*

These training tips will give you a start toward a good volunteer experience.

- Minimize the amount of time necessary for training. Volunteers and staff are busy people.
- Make the presentation challenging and exciting.
- Provide practical, specific, concrete information.
- Listen to what participants say they need to know.
- After training and placement, evaluate the job often enough so that it doesn’t become stale, and to protect the volunteer from becoming stale on the job.

# Code Of Behavior

The Earth Team member will expect us to consider their needs and they must also be aware of their responsibilities.

## Volunteer Viewpoint

If you want my loyalty, interest and best efforts, remember:

- **I need** to feel that what I'm doing has real purpose or contributes to human welfare - that its value extends even beyond my personal gain, or hours.
- **I need** a **sense of belonging**, a feeling that I am honestly needed for my total self, not just for my hands, or because I take orders well.
- **I need** to share in making the rules by which together we shall live and work toward our goals.
- **I need** to know in some clear detail just what is expected of me - not only my detailed task but where I have opportunity to make personal and final decisions.
- **I need** to have a sense of sharing in planning our objectives. My need will be satisfied only when I feel that my ideas have had a fair hearing.
- **I need** to have some responsibilities that challenge, that are within range of my abilities and interests, and that contribute toward reaching my assigned goal.
- **I need** to feel that the goals and objectives are within reach and that they make sense to me.
- **I need** to be kept informed. What I'm not up on, I may be down on. Keeping me informed is one way to give me status as an individual.
- **I need** to see that progress is being made toward the goals we have set.
- **I need** to have confidence in my superiors - confidence based upon assurance of consistent fair treatment, or recognition when it is due, and trust that loyalty will bring increased security.
- **In brief**, it really doesn't matter how much sense my part in this organization makes to you; I must feel that the whole deal makes sense to me.

# Responsibilities of an Earth Team Volunteer

The success of soil and water conservation activities depends on public acceptance, understanding, and support. Therefore, volunteers, as representatives of NRCS, are expected to perform their duties in a way which will represent our efforts in a favorable manner.

## A Volunteer Has a Right to:

- Be treated as a coworker;
- Receive training for the job;
- Be given a suitable assignment;
- Know as much about the organization as possible;
- Receive continuing education for the job;
- Have regular performance evaluations;
- Be given sound guidance and direction;
- Be given “promotions” and a variety of experiences;
- Be heard;
- Be recognized;
- Receive enabling funds when needed for official travel;

## A Volunteer Has the Responsibility to:

- Be sincere in the offer of service and to receive training for the job;
- Believe in the value of the job to be done;
- Be loyal to the agency;
- Maintain the dignity and integrity of the agency;
- Carry out duties promptly and reliably;
- Accept the guidance and decisions of the supervisor;
- Be willing to learn by participating in orientation, training programs, and meetings, and to continue to learn on the job;
- Understand the function of the paid staff, maintain a smooth working relationship with them, and stay within the bounds of volunteer responsibility and agency policy;

In light of these considerations and in view of possible safety hazards, the following activities are prohibited by NRCS policy:

1. Personal use of government vehicles, property, tools, equipment or telephones;
2. Possession or use of any and all forms of addictive or hallucinatory drugs, including, but not limited to amphetamines, barbiturates, cocaine, marijuana, etc.;
3. Consumption of, or being under the influence of, intoxicating beverages on or in government-owned or leased property/vehicles, or transportation of such beverages in government vehicles;
4. Use of abusive, vulgar and discriminatory language, including verbal/sexual harassment toward staff, supervisors or fellow volunteers;
5. Destruction of government or personal property;
6. Failure to comply with a supervisor’s instructions, unless these instructions are clearly illegal or unsafe;
7. Violation of any state or federal laws and regulations;
8. Transportation of family members, pets, or any unauthorized personnel in government vehicles;

Violation of any of the above prohibitions may constitute grounds for dismissal or other disciplinary actions.

## Equal Opportunity:

See General Manual Section 360, Part 428

## Other Considerations

Think about these different options for a job: Can the work be done in a totally flexible schedule at the discretion of the volunteer? Can the work be done on evenings or weekends? Must the work be done at the office, or is it something that a volunteer can do at home?

# Directing The Program

## Supervision

Volunteers need supervision, too. The most common reasons that volunteers give for leaving an organization is “I didn’t have any supervision,” and “I didn’t know what I was supposed to do.”

Volunteer “paychecks” are the satisfaction volunteers receive from being told they are performing a needed, worthwhile job. It’s the supervisor’s duty to provide the “paycheck.”

An essential ingredient in supervising volunteers is to remember that they have the same needs for supervision, sometimes more, than paid employees. Supervisors must ensure that volunteers do their jobs well, that volunteers exercise responsible work habits, and that volunteers do not create more work than they contribute.

In a well-managed program with adequate training and sound placement decisions, the amount of staff time needed to provide adequate and successful supervision is minimal. And remember, any qualified person can provide volunteer supervision, including other volunteers.

## Family Members and the Earth Team

Family members of NRCS employees have proven to be excellent Earth Team members, and recruiting more of them is encouraged. There is one caution, however: Use good judgment in placing them and in assigning supervision of them. Try to avoid situations that could result in public perception of conflict of interest or favoritism (GM 360, Part 428).

### *Supervisors:*

- Provide job assistance;
- Solve problems;
- Keep records;
- Provide recognition and support;
- Evaluate performance;
- Provide on-the-job training;
- Monitor activities;



# Motivating With Recognition

**Recognition** is critical to successful retention of volunteers. The type of recognition should be matched to the individual's motive for volunteering. Volunteers are motivated to donate their services for many different reasons. Volunteers' "pay," to a large extent, is recognition and assurance that they are equal partners of the NRCS team and that their input is valuable and accepted.

<i>If a volunteer is motivated by . . .</i>	<i>You might recognize appropriately by . . .</i>
Achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Letters of appreciation</li> </ul>
Challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involving the volunteer in problem-solving</li> </ul>
Creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inviting ideas</li> </ul>
Independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing opportunities to work without close supervision</li> </ul>
Interest and cause	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoiding routine task assignments</li> </ul>
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asking to help train other volunteers</li> </ul>
Self expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using unique talents and interests</li> </ul>
Socialization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inviting to office social functions</li> </ul>
Variety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making sure job changes are an option</li> </ul>
Recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Submitting name for community-wide volunteer award</li> </ul>
Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning carefully - have all task materials ready</li> </ul>
Skill development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Promoting" to a position of greater challenge</li> </ul>

Visible items, such as name tags, pins, and hats for volunteers to wear while on duty will provide status and make the individual feel like a vital member of the team.

You might also try:

- A note of thanks after a difficult day;
- A birthday card;
- Public recognition in newsletters and bulletins;
- News releases featuring volunteer operations with pictures of volunteers at work;
- Pictures of these activities on the agency's bulletin boards for all to see;
- A surprise ice-cream treat;
- Positive feedback from the clients ("Tom says you helped him understand the benefits of no till");
- Coffee breaks with staff;
- Giving credit for the success of a project at staff or committee meetings;
- Inclusion at staff meetings;
- A Volunteer of the Month/Year award;
- A brief write-up of volunteer success stories in your state's Current Developments.

Formal recognition can be made at an NRCS or district annual meeting or in front of peers at a meeting of a club or organization of which the volunteer is a member. Other forms of formal recognition can be made in the annual report, at a reception, or during a special ceremony. Meaningful, appropriate awards of any kind are welcomed, because they show how NRCS values the volunteer's work.

# Earth Team Awards

National policy states that hours donated cannot be the sole criteria for giving an award. Volunteers should be recognized for a completed project or task, for longevity and dedication, creativity, and other special services volunteers provide.

Awards have a purpose - adding to and reinforcing the appreciation you show volunteers every day. There are a variety of awards you can give volunteers. Some suggested volunteer recognition awards include:

- NRCS Earth Team patch;
- Belt buckle;
- Cap;
- T-Shirt;
- Sweatshirt;
- Golf shirt;
- Jacket;
- Buttons;
- Coffee cup;
- Earth Team pens;
- Certificate of Appreciation;

Check your state policy on Earth Team awards, and work with your state volunteer coordinator.

## National Awards

See the General Manual and pertinent state policy for information about the Earth Team National Awards Program.

Nomination forms are available on the Earth Team web page or from your state volunteer coordinator. Be sure to follow the instructions on the forms, or you may forfeit your nomination.

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# Alternatives To “Firing” A Volunteer

If a volunteer’s performance is deficient, the first thing to do is to talk to the volunteer about the deficiency and about what can be done to improve the situation. These things should be considered:

- Reanalyze. Who is really at fault and why?
- Re-supervise. When you say “don’t,” the volunteer might test you.
- Re-assign. You may have put the right person in the wrong spot.
- Retrain.
- Revitalize or rotate. The person may be burned out or need a rest or change of duties.
- Refer the person to someone else.
- Retire them with honor. Give the volunteer a graceful way out.
- Terminate at end of term, if the end of term date is soon enough.
- Use a short-term appointment. When this appointment is ended, mutually decide whether to extend the appointment.

If you have to fire, be honest and make it quick and to the point; “You are no longer a volunteer with us.” Don’t debate. You should give forewarning. You can suspend someone instantly, but you shouldn’t fire them on the spot.

## Review

- Were policies in fact violated?
- Is there proof? Are people willing to testify to what happened?
- Record the problem.
- Is there another side? Are there extenuating circumstances?
- Consider the impacts on your staff, your volunteer, and office operation if the volunteer job is changed or terminated.

## Key Control Question:

Is anyone going to be shocked? If yes, go back to square one.

# Evaluating The Program

**Annual evaluation** of the volunteer program should be planned and conducted to measure progress and to suggest what is to be accomplished in the coming year. Evaluations will also help identify problem areas before they jeopardize the program.

Evaluations need not be difficult or time-consuming, but they should be detailed enough to evaluate the volunteers, the supervisors, and the overall program.

Generally, evaluations have three steps. The first step is to establish standards. The second step is to measure performance against those standards. The last step is to correct deviations from standards and plans. Evaluations benefit everyone involved in the volunteer program. NRCS gets valuable input that allows it to tailor the program to particular needs.

The volunteers are given the opportunity to express their opinions and to ensure that their volunteer time is used wisely. Lastly, evaluations help supervisors manage office operations.

Evaluations may be formal or informal. The best evaluations usually contain elements from both styles. Informal evaluations involve good listening techniques to obtain feedback

from volunteers and staff. They are made on a continual basis and occur during training, coffee breaks and meetings. This type of evaluation is usually non-threatening. Good supervisors often use this technique to determine training needs, staff and volunteer attitudes, and other important information.

Early detection allows the supervisor to prevent minor problems from becoming major ones.

Some formal evaluation tools are the annual business plan, position descriptions, performance appraisal worksheets and progress reports. Check state policy for guidelines for formal evaluations in your state. The volunteer should take an active part in the evaluation.

If the volunteer program is successful, there is normally a measurable improvement in office production. If this is not evident, the supervisor should redesign the volunteer program.

## *Key points to appraise are:*

- Are the volunteers working on specific items?
- Is the volunteer suited to the volunteer position?
- Has the volunteer received adequate training to do the job?
- Are paid staff members committed to the volunteer program?

# Volunteer Coordinators – Their Roles



**Volunteer coordinators** help manage and guide the Earth Team program at all levels of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The national volunteer coordinator directs the Volunteer Services Office. Regional volunteer coordinators advise the states in their region. Each state has a state volunteer coordinator, and some states have area volunteer coordinators. The duties of all of these coordinators are basically the same. However, the scope of their responsibilities differs depending on the organizational level they share.

## Volunteer Coordinators:

- Serve as advisors and provide training to the employees in the organizational level they serve;
- Interpret national and state Earth Team program policy;
- Network with agencies and organizations outside NRCS to promote the Earth Team;

Whenever you have questions or suggestions concerning the Earth Team, contact your area, state or regional volunteer coordinator. They are there to help you build and maintain a dynamic, productive Earth Team!

## Earth Team Steering Committees:

Every NRCS office has a potential need for specific volunteers. But it takes a professional approach and a well-thought-out plan to establish a volunteer component that provides services to the agency and is not a drain on a manager's time.

You may want to consider forming an Earth Team steering committee to assist with planning, to provide ideas on long-range directions for the program, and to assist in promotion and recruitment. Who should be a member of the committee? Certainly, paid NRCS staff and district officials should be a part of the effort.

In addition to this core group, you can reach out to the volunteer community for valuable advice. And don't forget to tap the information available in other agencies and organizations with long standing volunteer programs such as Voluntary Action Center (VAC), hospitals, schools and Retired Senior Volunteer Programs (R.S.V.P.).

Involving volunteers and other community representatives as you plan for and build the Earth Team creates a vested interest, develops "ownership," enhances networking, builds image and credibility, and encourages innovative approaches.