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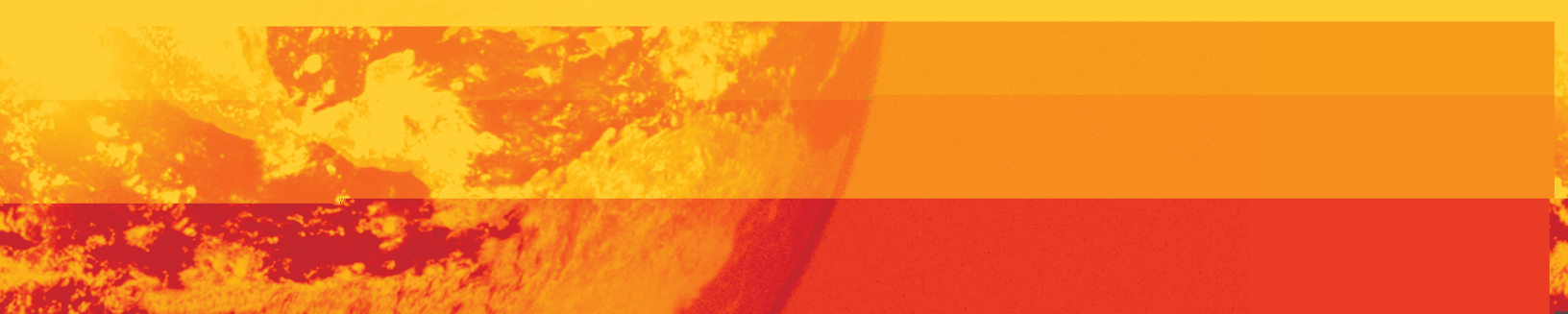

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Who Can Volunteer for the Earth Team? 2

Three Steps 3
- Step 1: The Needs Assessment
- Step 2: Volunteer Job Description
- Step 3: Recruiting

Interviewing And Placing 8

Placing An Earth Team Volunteer 10

Orientation 11

Training 12

Directing the Program 12

Motivating With Recognition 13

Earth Team Awards 14

Alternatives to 'Firing' A Volunteer 15

Evaluating The Program 16

Volunteer Coordinators - Their Role 17

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 goals and objectives. When these goals and objectives are reviewed, it is apparent that to accomplish them, there are certain jobs that need to be done. Volunteers can do many of these jobs.

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. Volunteer support is an ideal way to help NRCS achieve its organizational goals.

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 fts into the structure of NRCS, consider the following objectives of the program:

- To increase natural resources conservation 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 placing volunteers in NRCS offices.
- 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 natural resources conservation objectives.
- 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 be part of NRCS's outreach effort to help diversify the workforce.

Who Can Volunteer for the Earth Team?

- 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 an allied country. All international volunteers must complete the NRCS-PER-002, Volunteer Interest and Placement Summary Form. The form should be forwarded to the International Programs Division for approval, prior to beginning work as an Earth Team volunteer.

- 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.

Earth Team Volunteer Versus Student Volunteer

NRCS has two separate volunteer programs: The Earth Team Volunteer program and the lesser-known Student Volunteer Program, which 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 school they are attending. All that's required is a written agreement between the school and NRCS before a student performs any service. Students 14 years old or older can be enrolled in the Earth Team.

Individual Volunteer

An individual volunteer is one who is not associated with a group. This type of volunteer must complete Optional Form 301A, Volunteer Services Agreement for Natural Resources Agencies. Once this form is completed and signed by both the volunteer and the volunteer supervisor, the individual may begin service. The Parental Permission Section of the form must be completed if the volunteer is under the age of 18.

Volunteer Group

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 take water samples from area creeks and rivers to test water quality. If the students agree to volunteer with NRCS, use the OF-301A, Volunteer Services Agreement for Natural Resources Agencies form to sign them up.

The form requires only two signatures, the volunteer supervisor's and that of the group leader. If the members of the group are under the age of 18, the Parental Permission Section on the form must be completed also. Members of the group do not have to sign the form, but their names must be listed on a separate sheet of paper and attached to the OF-301A form. All members of the group must be at least 14 years old.

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 called 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.

Three Steps

There are three essential steps to planning your volunteer program. They are: the needs assessment, the volunteer job description and recruiting.

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?

With these questions in mind, you are ready to begin the three steps!

Step 2: Volunteer Job Description

Job descriptions, also referred to as position descriptions, are a tool to help volunteers understand the results to be accomplished, what tasks are involved, what skills are required, and other important details about the job.

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.

Several "sample" volunteer position descriptions are available on the National Earth Team Web page. These may be modified to meet your specific need. If one of the sample position descriptions does not fit your situation, it will be necessary for you to develop your own.

Job descriptions can be from 1-2 lines outlining the specific tasks to a page in length, describing several tasks or projects.

Once you have completed a Needs Assessment (Step 1), and developed a Job Description (Step 2), you are ready to begin Recruiting (Step 3).

Step 3: Recruiting

No matter what level of NRCS operation you are involved in and no matter where you are located there are potential volunteers. Recruitment techniques fall into one of three categories: Word of mouth or grapevine, Advertisement, and Personal Contact.

Word of Mouth or Grapevine Recruiting

This method begins when you put the word out at coffee shops, with NRCS staff, conservation districts, and 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 previously had a good volunteer experience.

Advertisement Recruiting

News releases, posters, TV, and radio are traditional means of communication, and may help you reach broader audiences. However, you have no control over these methods and you may have to follow up on several leads.

Publicity - 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 publicity program and strong media contacts will almost guarantee results. Don’t forget classified ads. They, too, can work as a recruiting tool.

The more specific your recruitment technique, the more successful you're recruiting will be.

Inexpensive Advertising Mediums: (Any funding for advertising must come out of your State's budget)

- Personal contact (the absolute best)
- Envelope stuffers/direct mail pieces
- Flyers, newspaper articles, ads
- Professional bulletins
- Radio and TV public service announcements
- High school sports calendars/flyers
- Feature stories, magazines, Sunday supplements
- Local school newspapers/yearbooks
- Special events
- Placemats at area restaurants
- Posters
- Community bulletin boards
- Milk cartons
- Displays
- Internet
- Special interest groups
- Newsletters - be as detailed and complete as possible

Personal Contact Recruiting

When ASKED, over 80 percent of adults said yes to volunteering. 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 them to recruit or at least suggest a likely new volunteer prospect or two.

When using this method you should take the time to match specific job tasks to a specific individual or group. 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.

Tapping High Potential Pools – The Group Approach:

(1) Volunteer Centers
Sometimes called Volunteer Clearing Houses or Bureaus
There are 400-450 of these in North America. 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 clearing houses for people 55 years of age and older. They also provide some in-kind support for their volunteers (such as transportation).

(3) Other Single-Organization Clearing Houses
Mini-volunteer centers are most likely to be found within individual:

- Churches
- Professional organizations
- City or County government agencies
- Junior/senior high schools
- Welcome Wagons
- Junior Leagues
- Governors' offices on volunteerism
- Boy/Girl Scouts and other youth groups
- Corporate partners
- Corporations
- Colleges and universities (student volunteer programs)
- Newcomer groups
- Senior citizen groups
- Cooperative Extension Service office
- 4-H groups
- Retired Teachers Associations
- Environmental Groups

(4) Friendly Groups
These include organizations whose interest and purposes overlap those of the Natural Resources Conservation Service Earth Team program; e.g., Telephone Pioneers, garden clubs, State conservation associations, National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), auxiliary groups, etc.

(5) Alternative Service or Community Service Programs
Such programs are usually conducted either by a probation department, the district attorney's office, the local court system, or the local volunteer center. In these programs, minor or first offenders are usually offered a choice between a certain number of hours of community service and fine or jail.

(6) Internship or In-Service Learning
Internships are often offered at colleges, universities, and junior and senior high schools. Look for departments which parallel 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.

Interviewing

Even though volunteers are recruited for a specific task or position, 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.

The Purpose of Interviewing:

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 skill level 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 positively and/or negatively by volunteers. Our customers do not distinguish between paid and unpaid help.
- The morale of paid staff and other volunteers declines when inappropriate or poor volunteer placements occur.
- The volunteer suffers when misplaced.

How to Ask Questions:

One type of interview uses the non-direct approach. 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?
- Describe what you would consider to be an ideal job for you, and tell me why.

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.

Other Types of Interviews:

- In-depth interview: More intensive and longer; conducted by the person to whom the volunteer will report to. Such things as personality traits, skills, likes and dislikes, goals and 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 with co-workers, and most important, 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. Time: Minimum 45 minutes to one hour.
- Follow-up or evaluation interview: Purpose: To evaluate the volunteer's progress, identify problems and assess capacity to assume additional responsibilities. 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 and to be sure and thank them. Try to obtain constructive suggestions for the agency and its programs.

Remember: Equal Employment Opportunity laws apply to volunteers too. Review General Manual Section 230, on appropriate practices for interviewing applicants.

Placing an Earth Team Volunteer

The supervisor must take the time during the interview to collect as much information as possible about the volunteer's motivations, or reasons, for wanting to join the Earth Team. Understanding the motivations for volunteering is important, and volunteers will normally share their reasons if asked. 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, a volunteer often simply leaves.

When designing work for volunteers, listen to what activities a particular volunteer says they are willing to do, are pre-motivated to do and have the competence as well as preference to do. Volunteers may have a skill they like to do and will gladly share with other people. Or a volunteer may have a desire to learn something specifc. 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.

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 to help others
- Want social recognition
- Want to learn a new skill
- Seek to diminish guilt
- Want a sense of accomplishment
- Hope it leads to a paid job
- Believe in the cause

Communication is a vital link between the volunteer and the agency. The communication process begins during the interview and should be continued throughout the volunteer appointment. As soon as the supervisor has made a decision to place a volunteer, they should send a welcome letter. Policy regarding volunteers, including application requirements, is found in the General Manual Section 360, Part 428.

Placing Tips:

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

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 district 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.

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 Natural Resources Conservation Service videos for basic orientation to the agency.

Orientation 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, etc., considered important to staff and volunteers
- Informal social time with coffee and refreshments
- Encourage your volunteers to ask questions and maintain an open line of communication

Earth Team Orientation Folder

Each Earth Team member will benefit from having an orientation folder provided at the beginning of his or her work assignment. Suggested contents include: State Conservationist's welcome letter, job description, time cards, co-workers' names, State's organizational chart, Volunteer Orientation Guide, and the Earth Team brochure.

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.

Directing the Program

Supervision:

Volunteers need supervision, too. Among 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."

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. Also, it's important that they understand how their work makes a difference and fits into the big picture.

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.

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

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. Remember, any qualified person can provide volunteer supervision - including other volunteers.

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. A 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.

Visible items, such as name tags, pins, and shirts 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
- 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 newsletter

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. Formal recognition may also be included in the annual accomplishment 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

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, which is to add to and reinforce the appreciation you show volunteers every day. There are a variety of awards you can give volunteers. Any funding for awards will need to be approved by your State Conservationist and come out of your State's budget.

Some suggested volunteer recognition awards include:

- 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, Section 360, Part 428, Subpart G, and pertinent State policy for information on 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.

Alternatives to 'Firing' a Volunteer

Despite everyone's best efforts, sometimes volunteers just don't work out.

If a volunteer's performance is defcient, the frst thing to do is to talk to the volunteer about the defciency and see what can be done to improve the situation.

These are among the options you can consider:

- Re-analyze. Who is really at fault and why?
- Reassign. May have put the right person in the wrong spot.
- Retrain.
- Revitalize/rotate. Person may be burned out or need a rest or a change of duties.
- Refer the person to someone else for a better ft.
- Retire them with honor. Give the volunteer a graceful way out.
- Terminate at end of term, end of project, or some other milestone.
- Use a short-term appointment. When this appointment is ended, mutually decide whether to extend the appointment.

If you need to fre a volunteer, you should review:

1. Were policies violated?
2. Is there proof? Are people willing to testify to what happened?
3. Record the problem.
4. Listen carefully to the explanation. See if there are extenuating circumstances.
5. Consider the impacts on your staff, your volunteer, and offce operation if the volunteer job is changed or terminated.

If you have to fre a volunteer after exhausting all other avenues, be honest and make it quick and to the point; 'You are no longer a volunteer with us.' Don't debate.

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 consider redesigning.

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 Role

Volunteer Coordinators help manage and guide the Earth Team program at all levels of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The National Volunteer Coordinator and National Volunteer Liaison direct the National Earth Team Office. 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 their organizational level.

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 National Coordinator. They're here to help you build and maintain a dynamic, productive Earth Team!

www.nrcs.usda.gov

Helping People Help the Land