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# NRCS Strategic Plan – Overarching Strategies – Watershed Approach

**Section Overview: After this learning unit, you will be able to recognize the benefits of a watershed approach to conservation, learn about Rapid Watershed Assessments, and become familiar with a few resources with which to consider a watershed approach in your local service area.**

***Watershed Approach***

Often conservation is planned and applied in a piece meal fashion. Conservation planning and application may be a random process primarily dependent upon who comes into our offices requesting services. A watershed approach has the potential to provide Field Offices employees and partners with a focused approach to conservation leading to positive cumulative impacts to the resource base. The definition of watershed may be broad – it may indeed be a watershed with defined hydrologic parameters (HUC) or it may be a stretch of impaired waters, or a group of farmers addressing a common issue, or a defined focus area. The Strategic Plan describes watersheds as "universal, well-defined areas that provide a common basis for discussion of water, related resources and landscape processes."

Activity: Read the "Watershed Approach" section of the NRCS Strategic Plan
http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/about/strategicplan/stratplan_vis_3_16.pdf

There are many examples of successful watershed based initiatives that NRCS is involved in. These include:

Chesapeake Bay: http://www.md.nrcs.usda.gov/chesapeake_bay/index.html

Lake Champlain Basin Program: http://www.lcbp.org

New York City Watershed: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/feature/buffers/ny3skan.html

There are also numerous examples of smaller scale watershed or area wide initiatives. In Addison County, Vermont, local citizens conducted monitoring of the county's water resources. The local conservation district and DC reviewed the data obtained from these citizen monitors

and prioritized various reaches of the priority tributaries to conduct outreach, planning and application. Because the efforts were focused on specific tributaries, the farmers with the help of NRCS, were able to successfully improve water quality. With before and after water quality data, the DC was able to share impressive success stories to participants of the annual conservation tours.

This former DC wrote in a recent email: “In 1994 and 1995 the XXXX River, river watch testing identified a stretch of the river with a bacteria reading as high as 28700 colonies/100 ml. After excluding the dairy cattle that were responsible the same stretch of river many years meets or is close to the state standard of 77. (We used state BMP funding and early Partners for Wildlife funding to solve this problem).

In 1995 thru 1997 a stretch of XXX Creek below a farm with dairy animals had readings in the 8000 range. Today that same testing site has similar readings near or at the state water quality standard. Here fencing and a bridge were installed for a cattle crossing. (This was a Partners for Wildlife and EQIP program agreement).

We also addressed another problem downstream a little farther on XXX Creek and a site on XXX Creek using the same data to help us make the landowners more aware of the impacts they were having on water quality. (CRP and CREP for these two).”

This DC and District Board were fortunate to have had water quality data on which to base their targeting. However, even without extensive water quality monitoring data,most District Board members and Staff and local work group members and other local partners have a good knowledge of resource concerns in their area and could engage in conversation about targeting some time and funding to priority areas and concerns.

Another Vermont project focused on a reach of the Mad River using EPA 319 funds to install riparian buffers along commodity crop fields. The collaboration between NRCS, the Winooski Natural Resources Conservation District, and The Friends of the Mad River resulted in eight landowners installed riparian buffers on nearly 6 miles of tributary. This project also led to a similar effort in a neighboring watershed and also led to a new project in the same watershed to promote cover cropping. This was not a large project but focused effort on a resource concern with an area wide or watershed approach allowed for leveraging of partners, resources, energy and enthusiasm resulting in conservation on the ground with cumulative positive impacts to the tributary. (Mad River Summary Narrative and Bullets of Results)

As the Strategic Plan indicates, “Decisions about the use and management of natural resources are best made by focusing on the natural systems within a landscape.” With a watershed approach, the work on each piece (farm, field, area) is intentionally linked to the whole. There is also a higher probability that people, time and financial resources can be leveraged to address concerns. You will not be alone but will be part of a community of people making decisions and taking action to improve the health of the watershed.

“The NRCS planning process provides the structure for local partners to take a comprehensive approach to protecting water quality and quantity that focuses on natural resource solutions for the whole watershed. Developing the plan involves a number of activities, including: targeting priority resource problems in a watershed; promoting involvement by local partners; developing solutions to problems through the use of the expertise and collaboration of multiple agencies and organizations; and measuring success.” (Former Chief Bruce Knight’s testimony to US House of Representative Committee on Agriculture, December 2005) The skill set needed for a watershed approach includes conservation planning expertise but also skills in area wide inventory and analysis, collaboration, conflict management, negotiation, communication, consensus building, analysis, team building, project planning, meeting management and marketing. As you can see from this list, the people skills become much more important – more people are on the train with you and want a say in the action, a piece of the pie,…

**Now is the time to test your current understanding of a watershed approach to conservation treatment. Please answer and complete the following questions and activities.**

1. Are you currently using a watershed approach in your field office? If so, what are the pros and cons of such an approach?

2. Talk to a DC in your state that is effectively using a watershed approach and get their opinions of the benefits.

3. Visit your State Office Water Resources Staff or SRC and learn how your state has historically used and now uses a watershed approach. Are there success stories?

4. What technical support would you need to implement a watershed approach in your local field office area?

5. Share your thinking of the watershed approach with your supervisor. What opportunities exist in your field office area?

6. What skill sets do you need to develop to be effective in implementing a watershed approach in your office.

**Rapid Watershed Assessments**

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is encouraging the development of rapid watershed assessments in order to increase the speed and efficiency generating information to guide conservation implementation, as well as the speed and efficiency of putting it into the hands of local decision makers.

**Fact Sheet**

April 2007 RWA Fact Sheet (2.25 MB)

**Background Information**

Rapid watershed assessments provide initial estimates of where conservation investments would best address the concerns of landowners, conservation districts, and other community organizations and stakeholders. These assessments help land-owners and local leaders set priorities and determine the best actions to achieve their goals.

These assessments are conducted by watershed planning teams traveling through each watershed, meeting with landowners and conservation groups, inventorying agricultural areas, identifying conservation opportunities and current levels of resource management, and estimating impacts of these opportunities on the local priority resource concerns.

**Benefits of These Activities**

While these rapid assessments provide less detail and analysis than full-blown studies and plans, they do provide the benefits of NRCS locally-led planning in less time and at a reduced cost. The benefits include:

- Quick and inexpensive plans for setting priorities and taking action
- Providing a level of detail that is sufficient for identifying actions that can be taken with no further watershed-level studies or analyses
- Actions to be taken may require further Federal or State permits or ESA or NEPA analysis but these activities are part of standard requirements for use of best management practices (BMPs) and conservation systems
- Identifying where further detailed analyses or watershed studies are needed
- Plans address multiple objectives and concerns of landowners and communities
- Plans are based on established partnerships at the local and state levels

- Plans enable landowners and communities to decide on the best mix of NRCS programs that will meet their goals
- Plans include the full array of conservation program tools (i.e. cost-share practices, easements, technical assistance)

Additional information on Rapid Watershed Assessments can be found at:
http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/rwa/

**What about Rapid Watershed Assessments in your state? Expand your thinking and answer the following questions:**

Has your state developed any Rapid Watershed Assessments? If so, how is the data being used in your state? If not, review another state's RWA at the following link: http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/rwa/rwa_statelinks.html How do you think RWAs could be used locally?

**Summary: Now that you have completed this section, you should have an appreciation of the value of a watershed approach to conservation and have identified resources to begin to develop the skill set needed to implement the approach in your local field office. Do seek the help of your state or area technical specialists as well as the expertise of partners.**

**Optional Training Consideration:**

NEDC – NRCS Course in Ag Area Wide Planning Course – 00092.

Obtain Area Wide Planning Certification

Area Wide Planning Process – Optional Self Study Documents

**Other Resources:**

Area Wide Planning Sections of the NRCS National Planning Procedures Handbook

EPA's Web page for watershed planning related topics: http://www.epa.gov/owow/

EPA Watershed Planning Handbook:
http://www.epa.gov/owow/nps/watershed_handbook/factsheet.html
http://www.epa.gov/owow/nps/watershed_handbook/

EPA Watershed Planning web based module:
http://www.epa.gov/owow/watershed/wacademy/acad2000/planning/

**Section Completed**

_____ **Date**_____

**District Conservationist Initials**

_____ **Date**_____

**Supervisor Initials**