
State Quality Assurance Plan

For the State of Maine
Fiscal Year 2010

INTRODUCTION

State Conservationists are responsible for development of a "State Quality Assurance Plan" and organizing and conducting State quality reviews. Specific actions and responsibilities for quality assurance are found in General Manual 340.404.C – Subpart C – Quality Assurance.

This Quality Assurance Plan has been developed in accordance to the policy and current guidance of the USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service. Completion of the actions contained in this plan will provide us assurance of the quality of our efforts. Any further corrective actions will be incorporated into the State Business Plan.



_____, State Conservationist

Purpose

Quality Assurance activities are conducted continuously to assure an appropriate emphasis on accountability and results. These activities help NRCS identify the need for changes in its operations and policies and when necessary, integrate changes to optimize the use of human, financial and other resources. Our oversight activities are used to ensure that all agency activities are conducted in accordance with rules and regulations of the agency's programs and the laws and executive orders on which the rules and regulations are based.

Review activities incorporate the following principles:

- Maintaining a high level of technical quality
- Efficient and equitable use of agency resources
- Working within legal authorities
- Maintaining a high level of customer satisfaction

Reviews recognize achievement and identify deficiencies. NRCS line officers at all levels are expected to incorporate quality control processes in their work and to assimilate review findings and take action to improve performance outcomes.

Risk Areas in FY 2010

Maine will integrate the following risk areas into quality assurance activities:

- Compliance with ESA consultation requirements.
- FB Program Delivery – Ranking and associated plans/contracts address resource concerns
- MO Agreements comply with agency policies and procedures. Deliverables support expenditures.

Quality Assurance control activities

A. State Quality Reviews

Field Office Quality Reviews will be conducted in two focus areas every 3-5 years by various disciplines. The areas include: 1) **Technology and Conservation planning** – Team Leader: State Resource Conservationist; 2) **Program Management and Contracting & Operations and Civil Rights**– Team Leader: ASTC for Operations. The purpose of the reviews is to give each discipline staff the opportunity to visit field offices to

receive an update of field office operations, conduct a review from the viewpoint of their discipline, determine needs of the office, recognize and share successes, identify deficiencies, correct on site, if possible; and, otherwise identify timeframe to correct deficiencies.

In FY 2010, the Technology review will continue to involve a smaller interdisciplinary team with a peer reviewer (DC or SC) who will serve as an integral part of the review team. The review will primarily occur in the field with a focus on conservation planning. Key questions include: Were all natural resource concerns identified? What were the presented RMS alternatives? Were these appropriate? What were the barriers to selling the RMS? Were planned practices appropriate for the concerns? Did applied practices address the concerns? Are the practices being properly maintained? Were conservation tools (CPA-52, HEP,....) properly utilized?

Team leaders will annually review and update guides as necessary and post on Maine NRCS Intranet site. Team leaders will distribute review guides prior to the reviews.

The attached schedule has been developed to assure that each discipline staff has visited field offices each 3-5 years.

The team leader will summarize the commendations, recommendations and actions through a close out with the District Conservationist or RC&D Coordinator, the immediate supervisor and the State Conservationist. A final written report of the findings and recommendations for corrective actions will be provided within 30 working days of the review. Actions and follow up efforts will be recorded on Action Register on State Office Shared Drive.

The District Conservationist or RC&D Coordinator and immediate supervisor will prepare and agree to a plan for corrective action within 30 working days of receipt of the review findings.

B. Spot Checks of Completed Installations by NRCS Personnel

The annual spot check process will be the means through which conservation planning, application and program compliance will be monitored in accordance with Maine policy. The Assistant State Conservationist for Operations has primary responsibility for spot checking in Maine. The ASTC for Operations is identify spot check needs by discipline and inform DCs and SRC of need to schedule spot checks. The spot checks will include a review of 5% of the practices reported in the state plus all cost shared practices installed on land where NRCS employees are enrolled as program participants in programs administered by NRCS. Some offices may not be required to conduct spot checks in particular discipline areas since the 5% sample is based on state wide practice counts. PRS or IDEA will be used to generate the list of applied practices within the state. The spot checks may be incorporated into other field visits to the office. The technical staff will review their findings with the District Conservationist prior to submission of report to the ASTC for Operations. If deficiencies are found, the DC's supervisor and the DC will prepare and agree to a plan for corrective actions with schedule and provisions for periodic reports. All necessary spot checks will be completed and corrective actions implemented, where appropriate, by December 31 of the calendar year in which the fiscal year ends.

The discipline specialists who conduct spot checks will also utilize the appropriate section of "Guide for Appraising Technology in Field Office Operations in Maine."

Within 15 working days of the completion of the set of FO spot checks (Agronomy, Biology, Forestry and Engineering), a report will be provided to the STC by the ASTC for Operations.

C. Spot Checks of Completed Installations by Technical Service Providers:

Technical Service Providers will become increasingly more crucial in the delivery of technical services to NRCs clients. In order to assure technical quality, NRCs has prepared a quality assurance strategy targeted at TSPs. This strategy includes:

- (1) Spot checking will be conducted on a fiscal-year basis. A spot check sample of each Technical Service Provider's work will be developed at the State level by the SRC. The sample will be drawn from all practice installations or from conservation practice components completed within the State the preceding 12 months, as reported in the Performance Results System. The spot check sample may involve one or more individual field offices. The SRC will ensure that the sample of an individual Technical Service Provider's work is a representative cross section by geographic area, size of projects, and complexity of projects.
- (2) For the first 3 years after certification (excluding renewals) or recertification of the Technical Service Provider, a spot check will be performed by the assigned technical specialist for at least 10 percent of the conservation practice and practice components. For a Technical Service Provider where the number of installations of a conservation practice or practice component exceeds 50 in a given year, only 5 are required to have a spot check.
- (3) After the first 3 years of certification or recertification of the Technical Service Provider, a spot check will be performed by the assigned technical specialist on at least 5 percent of the conservation practice or practice components. For a Technical Service Provider where the number of installations of a particular type of conservation practice or practice components exceeds 100 in a given year, only 5 are required to have a spot check.
- (4) The person performing the spot check may expand the sample as necessary to determine the scope of any problems or deficiencies. The expanded sample may be extended to include installations completed in previous years.
- (5) The completed spot checks will be submitted to SRC and ASTC for Operations. If the spot check identifies deficiencies, the person performing the spot check will notify the District Conservationist and the State Technical Service Provider Coordinator of the findings and any recommendations for corrective action. The State Technical Service Provider Coordinator will determine if further management or administrative actions will be taken in accordance with Technical Service Provider policy. Within 15 working days of completing the spot check of the Technical Service Provider's work, a report will be sent to the State Conservationist and the appropriate line officer(s).
- (6) If in the course of conducting a spot check where waste, fraud, or abuse is suspected, the spot check for that practice will be suspended immediately and the incident reported promptly (same day or next business day)(See GM-360, Part 413).
- (7) Additional information on documentation, certification, and spot checking is found in GM-450, Part 407.

D. Program Reviews

The Management Controls in place with ASTC for Programs and Budget Officer assure that payments have been made properly.

E. Program Compliance – Contract Reviews

Status Reviews of Contracts will be conducted according to CPM 512.55 and guidance specific to program.

F. Soil Survey Program

To review the quality of soil survey mapping, classification, correlation and digitizing a number of actions will be carried out as outlined in the National Soil Survey Handbook (609 01), reviewable at: <http://soils.usda.gov/technical/handbook/subjectindex.html>, under "Quality Assurance". In brief, this entails regular and rigorous quality assurance reviews by QA staff from MLRA Office 12 in Amherst, Massachusetts.

G. Conservation Planning Review

Conservation Planning Quality Assurance is conducted through various means: 5% spot checks, Field Office Technology and Conservation Planning Reviews and through the Conservation Planning Certification Process. At least one conservation plan prepared by each employee doing conservation planning will be reviewed every three years. The State Resource Conservationist is responsible for Quality Assurance for Conservation Planning.

H. Food Security Act

PURPOSE: To provide for a quality assessment of highly erodible land and wetland determinations, conservation planning, practice implementation and status reviews. This assessment will provide the basis for developing actions to improve the overall quality of FSA/FACTA activities.

Quality Assurance control activities concerning FSA/FACTA cover several areas of activity. They are:

I. STATUS REVIEWS

- 1) Status reviews of farmer compliance with conservation plans. These are conducted by field office staff on randomly selected tracts by the national office. (NE/SAM Part 518)
- 2) Status reviews on NRCS employee-owned and/or operated tracts. The ASTC-Programs and the District Conservationist (DC) will develop a list of NRCS employees who own, operate or have interest in tracts and receive USDA Program Benefits. A list of employees requiring a status review will be distributed to offices by July 1st of each year. No NRCS employee will conduct a status review on tracts that they, family members or their supervisor own or operate.
- 3) Status reviews of tracts requiring status reviews as per NE/SAM 518.02. These include: Farm Service Agency – Ag Credit Borrowers, tracts which are subject to a complaint or have been referred to NRCS by another agency for possible violation, tracts of person(s) requesting reinstatement, and tracts which had been determined to have been in compliance the previous year because of a variance.
- 4) A schedule of planned status review activities will be sent to the ASTC-O by July 1st of each year. Status reviews will be completed by November 1st. All status reviews will be documented in field offices using current guidance provided by national and state office.

II. QUALITY ASSURANCE REVIEWS

- 1) Quality Assurance reviews will be conducted under the leadership of the State Resource Conservationist in order to ensure that NRCS responsibilities for FSA/FACTA are carried out according to NE/SAM.
- 2) FSA/FACTA quality reviews will cover in detail the performance quality of completed status reviews.
- 3) The State Office will generate a list of tracts for review. However, the reviewer may add additional tracts if deemed necessary for adequate sample.

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4) Quality reviews will begin by October 1st and will be completed by November 15th of each year. Results will be transmitted electronically according to national guidance by December 1st of each year.

III. TRAINING;

Follow up and training will be conducted with all employees responsible for FSA/FACTA implementation as needed.

I. FOLLOW UP AND TRAINING

Program Managers will review quality assurance activities and provide a summary of findings and recommendations for training or other actions to the STC through a final Quality Assurance Report by January 31st of each year. Upon approval by the STC, these findings will be submitted to OMOD division and will also be communicated to all employees via bulletin or meeting presentation. Approved follow up actions will be documented in the State Business Plan and/or Quality Assurance Plan.

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QUALITY ASSURANCE ACTIVITY	Responsible Person(s)	When	Anticipated Product/Outcome	Progress-Actual Product/Outcome
CONSERVATION PLANNING AND APPLICATION Technical Issues/Concerns				
Carry out technical review of conservation planning (including compliance plans) and application through 5% spot checks. All field offices will participate in some aspect of the spot check process.	SRC SCE ASTC Ops DCs	09/30/2010	Conservation Practices installed are serving their intended purpose and meet the needs of the resources and the objectives of the decision-maker. Sufficient documentation in Field Office Files to support reported planning and application of Conservation Systems and Practices in PRS.	
Carry out technical review of conservation planning through the certification reviews as required by policy	SRC DCs ASTC Ops	09/30/2010	Assure that certified planners maintain their skills and abilities. Assure that state certified conservation planner database is current and accurate.	
Conduct a conservation planning and application review during Technology and Conservation Planning Quality Reviews in Lewiston/Oxford Zone, Farmington, Machias and Skowhegan.	SRC SCE SSS	09/30/2010	Assure Comprehensive planning taking place with customers. Assure that plans completed by certified planners meet NRCs planning policy & follow NPPH guidelines.	
Quality Control of Conservation planning in FO's - DCs will periodically randomly select and spot check the conservation plans of their employees to be sure meet conservation planning policy. Use conservation plan checklist. This review will be documented and file under 330-19 in the NRCs directives system.	DCs	09/30/2010	Assure that plans meet NRCs policies and procedures.	
Quality Control of applied practices - As DCs are approving payments or spot checking PRS entries, he or she will randomly select practices to check for compliance with NRCs policies and procedures. This review will be documented and file under 330-19 in the NRCs directives system.	DCs	09/30/2010	Assure that documentation for practices is adequate to support payment and reporting.	
Evaluate Ecological Job Approval Authority during conservation plan certification renewal	Supervisors	09/30/2010	Assure employees are working at their level of experience and demonstrated competence.	

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QUALITY ASSURANCE ACTIVITY	Responsible Person(s)	When	Anticipated Product/Outcome	Progress-Actual Product/Outcome
Annually evaluate engineering job approval authority of employees.	SCE or designee	09/30/2010	Assure employees are working at their level of experience and demonstrated competence.	
Field Office Technical Guide will reflect changes in technology and programs				
Review and update selected conservation practice standards in accordance with NP schedule	SRC SCE	09/30/2010	Current science based technology reflected in conservation plans and application.	
Review FOTG to assure material is updated or reviewed for adequacy every three years.	SRC SCE SSS	09/30/2010	Assures policy requirements are met.	
Review neighboring state's draft FOTG update material to insure content is reasonably consistent across state lines and within similar natural resource settings	SRC SCE SSS/MO Leader	09/30/2010	Assures reasonable consistency within adjoining states and across natural resource area (MLRA) boundaries.	
ENVIRONMENTAL COMPLIANCE				
Conduct environmental compliance quality control reviews as a portion of all field office spot checks and field office technology and planning quality reviews	SRC	09/30/2010	Assure environmental compliance requirements are being met.	
HELC/MC COMPLIANCE				
Complete FY 2009 Compliance Plan Status Reviews of NHQ randomly selected tract numbers as well as others required by policy.	DCs SRC ASTC Ops	11/1/09	Determination of percentage of producers actively applying their plans.	Complete 11/3/09
Complete FY 2009 Quality Assurance review of Compliance Plan Status Reviews	SRC ASTC Ops	11/15/09	Quality Assurance of Field conducted status reviews	Complete 11/3/09
Complete status reviews for NRCs employees in accordance with the NFSAM 518.12	DCs SRC ASTC Ops	11/1/09	Assure NRCs employees meet FSA compliance requirements.	Complete 11/3/09

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EQIP, WHIP, CSP, GRP, and AMA				
Conduct Program Quality Reviews in, Houlton, Scarborough, Fort Kent, Mid Coast Zone .	ASTC - P	09/30/2010	Assure contracts meet requirements	
Complete Contract reviews of EQIP, WHIP, AMA and GRP Contracts according to procedures.	DC's ASTC Ops	09/30/2010	Determine if the producers are following their Cons. Plans.	
Complete spot checks of payment processing procedures in all FOs to assure compliance with procedures and management controls.	ASTC-P, Budget Officer Contracting Officer	09/30/2010	Assure fiscal integrity in processing payments.	
Conduct QA process of payment processing at second level review to determine benchmark of accuracy of payments	Budget Officer ASTC Ops	09/30/2010	Assure fiscal integrity in processing payments.	
CONSERVATION TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (CTA)				
Conduct quality assurance of CTA planning and application through 5% spot checks, Technology & Planning Quality Reviews and Certification Reviews as outlined above.	SRC	09/30/2010	Ensure technical quality and proper technical approvals for work performed by NRCS, and where applicable, other State or local unit of government employees	
WATERSHED PLANNING AND OPERATIONS PL-566				
Review and insure implementation of the state plan assuring all project dams have satisfactory O&M.	SCE	09/30/2010	Assures proper O&M on dams and compliance with O&M Management Action Plan.	
CRP				
Conduct status reviews on 10% of practices as selected by FSA.	DC's	09/30/2010	Ensure practices are being appropriately maintained.	
EWP				
Review a representative sample of completed projects to determine effectiveness of the activity	SCE	09/30/2010	Recommendations on methods and procedures that could be used to improve NRCS response to Disasters.	
WRP				
Complete inspections on easement property. Verify ownership and potential violations annually. Sites will be visited annually until practices are successfully established. After establishment sites will be monitored annually	DC's	09/30/2010	Ensure compliance with 514.46 of the WRP Handbook	

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with an onsite visit or remote sensing. Onsite visits will occur at least once every three years.						
SOIL SURVEY						
Soil Survey Progress Review	Soil Survey	MO	09/30/2010	To ensure that NCSS standards are met.		
Area 621-Western Aroostook County	Office/Kimble/Jenkins					
Mapping Review with each Project Leader	SSS/Jenkins		09/30/2010	To ensure that NCSS standards are met.		
Mapping Review of each Soil Scientist	Jenkins/SSPLs		09/30/2010	To ensure that NCSS standards are met.		
Progress Review	Soil Survey Area 620-Northern Piscataquis County	MO Office/Jenkins	09/30/2010	To ensure that NCSS standards are met.		
NATURAL RESOURCES INVENTORY						
Conduct annual NRI Quality Assurance as required. Review data for accuracy and consistency. SRC conducts annual NRI Quality Assurance as required. Review data for accuracy and consistency.		SRC	9/30/2008	Ensure that data collection methods are accurate and that data accurately reflect current conditions.		
RC&D						
Review RC&D Annual Plans for correlation with the area's plan goals and objectives.		SRC	11/15/09	Ensure that Annual Plans meet Manual requirements and achieve area plan goals		
Review RC&D Area Plans for compliance with agency guidance		SRC	09/30/2010	Threshold to Maine Area Plan meets Agency requirements		
Complete quality assurance program review for Time & Tide RC&D.		SRC	09/30/2010	Ensure that Time and Tide RC&D meets program requirements and addresses Area Plan needs.		
CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM						
Conduct Status Reviews on at least 10% of contracts requested by FSA.		DCs	09/30/2010	Ensure that NRCS is completing requirements of MOU.		
CIVIL RIGHTS & OUTREACH REVIEWS						
Carry out Civil Rights and Outreach reviews according to Civil Rights Review Guide in Time & Tide RC&D, Houlton, Scarborough and Fort Kent FOs, Mid Coast Zone.		Civil Rights Advisory Committee, ASTC Ops	09/30/2010	Ensure that Offices meet Civil Rights requirements		
Carry out Accessibility Review with USDA Agencies in shared space		ASTC Ops with CRAC member	09/30/2010	Ensure that office space meets ADA Standards		
OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT REVIEWS						
Carry out Operations Management Quality Reviews which will include IT, Public Affairs, Safety, Administrative issues in Time & Tide RC&D Office, Houlton, Scarborough and Fort Kent FOs, Mid Coast Zone Offices		ASTC Ops SAO PAS SRC	09/30/2010	Ensure that Operations of offices lead to efficient and productive environments.		

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OTHER				
Perform annual vehicle inspections. Reviews will be conducted by qualified mechanics at commercial garages and operators will complete an ADS-12, Vehicle Preventive Maintenance Checklist.	Operators of Gov Vehicles	09/30/2010	Ensure Safe vehicles	
Annual conduct fire and safety inspection in offices (GM-360, Subpart G, part 420.62)	Local NRC's F.A.C representative	09/30/2010	Ensure safe work environment	
Certify that all unpaid obligations are valid	Budget Officer, STC, SAO	09/30/2010	Fiscal Integrity	
Complete property inventory	SAO	09/30/2010	Fiscal Integrity	
Complete 25% spot check of travel vouchers for accuracy	SAO	09/30/2010	Fiscal Integrity	
Document and implement procedures to discourage and inhibit financial fraud.	SAO, Budget Officer	09/30/2010	Fiscal Integrity	
Ensure proper security controls are in place and utilized for new employees, district employees, volunteers and contract personnel.	SAO	09/30/2010	Protection of PII data	
Secure all private/sensitive information. PII not needed will be deleted if in electronic format or properly disposed of using a cross-cut shredder.	All employees	09/30/2010	Protection of PII data	
Data Quality in PRS – review PRS reports. Data output that looks erroneous will be verified for accuracy	ASTC Ops and users of PRS	09/30/2010: quarterly	Quality PRS Data	
WebTAS – Monitor time charges of employees to be sure time reported to appropriate programs.	ASTC Ops, Supervisors	09/30/2010	Quality WebTAS data – time charged does not exceed funds appropriated	
Government purchase cards – Monitor purchase card transactions on a monthly basis, Quarterly completed transaction reviews	SAO	09/30/2010	Fiscal Integrity	
Assure authorized purchases and current reconciliations are completed within required time frames.	Approvers	09/30/2010	Fiscal Integrity	
Monitor the use of government credit cards for possible misuse	SAO	09/30/2010	Fiscal Integrity	
Develop Customer Feedback postcards to offer clients	Tremble	09/30/2010	Help NRC's identify customer service needs and opportunities	
Conduct internal review of Maine's MO Agreements	Contracting Officer SAO	01/30/2010	Assure fiscal and program integrity in contracts and agreements	

APPENDIX A

PROCEDURE TO CONDUCT STATUS REVIEWS

NFSAM, Third Edition, PART 518

PROCEDURES TO CONDUCT QUALITY REVIEWS

NFSAM Subpart D, 519.40-519.42

PROCEDURE TO ASSURE THAT "NOT ACTIVELY APPLYING" DETERMINATIONS MADE DURING QUALITY REVIEWS HAVE FSA-560 ISSUED

NFSAM 518.30-518.31

GUIDANCE ON DELEGATION AND USE OF STATUS REVIEW VARIANCES

NFSAM Part 520 Subpart B

GUIDANCE ON FOIA/PRIVACY ACT

GENERAL MANUAL 120 ADS PART 408

GUIDANCE ON SERVING APPEALS, COMPLAINTS, AND POSSIBLE VIOLATIONS

NFSAM Part 521

ANNUALLY UPDATED LIST OF EMPLOYEES WHO OWN OR OPERATE FARMS SUBJECT TO 1985 ACT AS AMENDED

NFSAM 523.40

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Guide for Appraising Field Office Operations in Maine – Operations Management

Guide for Appraising Field Office Operations in Maine – Technology and Planning

Civil Rights Compliance Review Guide

RC&D Quality Assurance Guide

National Soil Survey Handbook