

Subpart B – Oversight and Evaluation

ME 404.13 Quality Assurance

ME404.13(b)(1)

(a) Introduction

(1) Quality assurance is a process used to ensure that all Agency conservation planning and application and program implementation and delivery activities are conducted according to Agency policies, procedures, and guidelines. It outlines a process for systematic evaluation of products and services provided by the Agency to ensure that standards of quality are met. The processes used to ensure quality within a State are identified in the State Quality Assurance Plan.

(2) Quality assurance involves high quality training, ongoing guidance, and review of accomplishments. Spot-checking of completed conservation practices as well as a variety of quality reviews is part of quality assurance.

(3) Quality assurance reviews are used to:

- Assure conservation planning and application, program implementation and delivery meet Agency quality standards.
- Provide information concerning general trends in the quality of NRCS work and projects.
- Identify training needs.

(4) To maintain a high level of quality work, employees need to know and understand the policy and procedures related to their day-to-day work. Employees are encouraged to seek guidance when questions or unique situations arise.

(5) Quality assurance should be completed in an atmosphere of helpfulness and cooperation. The goal of quality assurance is to ensure that NRCS employees have the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to provide high quality products and services.

(6) Quality assurance should be an opportunity to promote sharing of knowledge and information among employees.

(b) Policy

(1) District Conservationists (DCs) are responsible for quality assurance within their field offices. DC's are granted significant latitude in the establishment of procedures to complete quality assurance. DC's should involve their staff in the development of these procedures and share the results with the entire staff. The following items should be considered when developing the procedures:

ME404-4(1)

(340-GM, Amendment ME-1, July 2006)

ME404.13(b)(1)(a)

Part 404 – Evaluating

- (a) Quality assurance is most efficient and effective when incorporated into normal field office operations. Quality assurance may be accomplished as program activities are being applied, or as the layout and design of practices are completed. Mistakes, errors, or problems can be corrected as the work progresses, rather than waiting for completion. DCs may choose to complete a portion of quality assurance upon completion of the program activity/practice installation.
 - (b) Quality assurance should be viewed as an opportune time for the interchange of ideas for processes and procedures. Therefore, quality assurance activities should be designed to invite cooperation and participation.
 - (c) The DCs are responsible for quality assurance activities related to producer program compliance. Status reviews of contracts will be conducted according to Conservation Program Manual guidance specific to the programs.
 - (d) The DCs are responsible for carrying out status reviews related to FSA/FACTA Quality Assurance.
 - (e) The DCs are responsible for assuring that quality assurance is conducted for technical service providers serving their areas.
 - (f) DCs are responsible for promptly addressing deficiencies found during quality assurance.
 - (g) State Office specialists will provide assistance to DCs with local quality assurance activities as requested.
- (2) The Assistant State Conservationist for Operations (ASTC-O) is responsible for quality assurance in Maine with assistance provided by the Quality Assurance Team and by Program Managers, State Office and other specialists.
- (a) The Assistant State Conservationist for Operations will coordinate the development and implementation of a Quality Assurance Plan by November 30 for the fiscal year. A final report for the previous fiscal year will be completed by October 30 of each year.
 - (b) A Quality Assurance Team will be established as a standing committee to provide guidance and recommendations to the ASTC-O and Program Managers including reviewing checklists, guides, consolidated findings and trends, and making recommendations to improve quality control or assurance processes.

(340-GM, Amendment ME-1, July 2006)

ME404-4(2)

Subpart B – Oversight and Evaluation

ME404.13(c)(1)(b)

- (c) State Quality Reviews will be conducted for each office in Maine in three focus areas every 3-5 years by various disciplines. The areas include: 1) Technology and Conservation Planning – Team Leader: State Resource Conservationist. The Technology and Planning Review also involves participation of the State Soil Scientist and the State Conservation Engineer. 2) Program Management and Contracting – Team Leader: ASTC for Programs; and 3) Operations, Civil Rights and Outreach – Team Leader: ASTC-Operations. The Operations and Civil Rights/Outreach review includes public affairs, administration and human resources, and information technology.
- (d) 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 ASTC for Operations has primary responsibility for spot checks in Maine.
- (e) The State Resource Conservationist has primary responsibility for recommending procedures for quality assurance activities related to technical service providers for inclusion in the State Quality Assurance Plan.
- (f) National Food Security Act Quality Assurance activities will be conducted under the guidance of the State Resource Conservationist in order to ensure that NRCS responsibilities for FSA/FACTA are carried out according to the National Food Security Act Manual. State Office specialists under the State Resource Conservationist will conduct FSA/FACTA quality reviews.
- (g) State leaders or managers will carry out independent quality assurance reviews in coordination with DCs, as necessary, to assure statewide quality assurance.
- (h) State Office specialists will complete quality assurance reviews as identified by or requested by State leaders or managers.

(c) Guidelines

(1) Quality Assurance

- (a) Quality assurance will address adherence to NRCS policies, principles, rules, and regulations. Through this process, NRCS work products will be assessed in terms of quality, accountability, efficiency, and consistency, policies and procedures. Employees are encouraged to utilize checklists as an ongoing training and implementation aid.
- (b) Quality Assurance Review checklists will be the primary tool utilized to achieve this purpose and will be developed for the current year Quality Assurance Plan. Checklists are available at <http://www.me.nrcs.usda.gov/intranet/>. The Maine Field Office Appraisal Guides for Operations, Technology and Planning and Programs as well as the Civil Rights Compliance Review Guide and RC&D Assessment Guide will be followed to evaluate compliance with agency policies and procedures.

(340-GM, Amendment ME-1, July 2006)

ME404-4(3)

Part 404 – Evaluating

ME404.13(c)(1)(c)

(c) The Quality Assurance Team will coordinate an annual review of Quality Assurance Review checklists with the programs and planning staffs to ensure that checklists are current and adequate to achieve desired results.

(2) Quality assurance will include the technical quality of the program activities and practice installations. This will include: adequacy of practice to address resource concern(s), accuracy and adequacy of design, quality of installation, accuracy of measurements and computations, adequacy of supporting records, adequacy of planning to address indirect or direct impacts of practice installation, and the need and feasibility of the practice.

(3) Quality assurance will encompass three areas:

(a) Technology and Planning

(i) Conservation plans and systems including erosion calculations.

(ii) Conservation practices – design, computations, layout, checkout, etc. All applied practices (cost share and non-cost share) are subject to quality assurance.

(iii) Highly erodible land compliance (HELIC) and wetland compliance (WC).

(iv) Job Approval Authority and Certifications,

(v) Reviews of the Field Office Technical Guide, National Planning Procedures Handbook, and other handbooks and manuals maintained in field offices to assure currency and consistency with National and State guidelines.

(vi) Soil Survey Program – Use of soils information for conservation planning and application.

(b) Programs and Contracting

(i) Conservation programs – eligibility determinations, contracting procedures, status reviews, cost share, processing of payments, etc.

(c) Operations and Civil Rights

(i) Operations including accountability tools, workload management, fund management, and partner relationships.

(ii) Operations Review will also incorporate public affairs, administration, human resources, and information technology

(340-GM, Amendment ME-1, July 2006)

ME404-4(4)

Subpart B – Oversight and Evaluation

ME404.13(c)(6)(a)

- (iii) Civil Rights including outreach, program delivery, data collection, EEO considerations.
 - (iv) Other items that management determines are critical to the overall mission of NRCS.
- (4) Extent of quality assurance
- (a) Quality assurance should include a minimum of 5 percent of each type of program activity or practice installation. However, it should not be necessary to check more than three to five examples of a program activity or practice installation to determine the level of quality work.
 - (b) If less than five such occurrences of an individual program activity or practice installation are completed during the year, quality assurance may not be necessary for that program activity or practice installation if prior year reviews indicated high quality of those practices. However, each program activity or practice installation should be reviewed at least every three years.
 - (c) If deficiencies are found in a given program activity or practice installation, additional quality assurance will be completed until the true quality can be determined.
 - (d) State leaders, program managers, and DCs may randomly conduct quality assurance reviews.
 - (e) Program managers may direct specific quality assurance reviews.
- (5) Selection of the program, activity, or practice installation to be reviewed.
- (a) The kind and number of program activities or practice installations installed in the calendar year will be determined from field office records. Field office databases such as PRS, Customer Service Toolkit, and ProTracts should be used to obtain this information.
 - (b) The work of each staff member should be reviewed annually through spot checks or other quality assurance process identified by supervisors.
 - (c) Quality assurance of technical service providers or checkout will be incorporated into the quality assurance process.
 - (d) Quality assurance will be conducted for all program activities and practices on all land in which NRCS employees have a vested interest.
- (6) Personnel
- (a) DCs will ensure that quality assurance is completed within their area of responsibility.

Part 404 – Evaluating

ME404.13(c)(6)(b)

(b) The ASTC-Operations is accountable for coordinating the development and implementation of the quality assurance plan. Each State leader is responsible for outlining and implementing quality assurance procedures for their areas of responsibility. This will include maintaining criteria and checklists for quality assurance as well as directly participating in quality assurance and/or assigning discipline specialists to assist with review activities.

(c) Employees will not provide quality assurance on land in which they have a vested interest.

(7) Timelines

(a) Quality assurance will be completed on a fiscal year basis. Reviews will be scheduled throughout the year.

(b) Schedule of Appraisals shall be incorporated into the Quality Assurance Plan and will be distributed annually through a bulletin.

(8) Reporting

(a) Records of reviewed program activities/practices shall be provided to the ASTC-O and to DCs (or coordinators) as soon as possible after the review but no later than 30 calendar days after the review.

(b) Case files will be established based on the calendar year under MGT (330) for quality assurance information and reports.

(c) As quality assurance is completed, it will be documented on approved forms and worksheets. Utilize most current version of checklists, or other appropriate forms.

(d) Within 30 days of receiving review findings, DCs will send a letter to ASTC-O with a plan and schedule to address deficiencies as well as training or information needed. DCs will provide quarterly updates to the ASTC-O.

(e) The ASTC-O and Quality Assurance Team will convene an annual meeting with the reviewers to develop a summary of findings in order to identify common deficiencies or concerns that may warrant additional training, guidance, or other help as well as areas of superior achievement in order to provide feedback and recommendations to the Full Leadership Team.