

Connecticut's Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program *and* Conservation Planning



The USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and its conservation partners work with the Connecticut Department of Agriculture (DOAG), land trusts, and municipalities to encourage farmers **to continue good farming** practices by managing their land according to a conservation plan. Under the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP), NRCS helps farmers conduct a *resource inventory*, an *assessment*, and develop *progressive conservation plans* for farms that have applied to sell development rights. By cooperating with NRCS, Connecticut will receive additional federal funds for farmland protection (to match state funds) and more farmers will be able to participate.

Once a farm has been protected, the farmer must control erosion on Highly Erodible Land (HEL) and keep the conservation plan current. These requirements are spelled out in the *Conservation Easement*.

What is a Conservation Plan?

A *conservation plan* is a document that describes what you – the farmer – has agreed to do at the time the plan is developed. It's your plan, and you make the decisions. The plan can be a *whole farm plan* or a *progressive plan* to address some (but not all) of the concerns. It documents existing practices and decisions, and includes a schedule to address natural resource concerns. The plan can be revised at your request and **must** be revised when the farm is sold, new cropland is acquired, or when the operation changes. You may revise the plan by selecting other options, or by changing the scheduled date of a practice.

The process includes a farm resource inventory and an assessment that identify issues and opportunities associated with soil, water, air, plant, and animal resources. This process helps ensure that your needs – and those of your farm's natural resources – are met and that federal, state, and local requirements can be achieved. As part of the planning process, NRCS can help you identify federal and state programs which may provide financial assistance for needed practices.

When Do I Need to Have a Conservation Plan Completed?

Before closing on the sale of development rights, both the resource inventory and conservation plan need to be completed. It's very important to start the planning process early. The resource inventory can help you gather information needed for the application process and to identify issues associated with highly erodible cropland or other resource concerns that need attention. The sooner you identify and resolve issues, the easier it will be to receive FRPP funds.

Who Can Help Develop This Plan?

NRCS will help you develop and implement a conservation plan for free! You can also complete your own plan or hire someone to do it. However, plans must be reviewed and approved by an NRCS conservation planner and the conservation district. NRCS can also help you identify funding sources to implement the plan.

What is the Conservation Planning Process?

The planning process identifies your concerns and objectives, inventories and evaluates natural resource concerns, and presents alternative conservation systems and practices for your choosing and implementation. An NRCS planner will help you do this. You will decide which conservation practices to implement.

What About Highly Erodible Cropland?

A plan to protect highly erodible land (HEL) from erosion **must be developed and implemented prior to closing**. Highly erodible cropland must be identified and decisions to control erosion, along with an implementation schedule, documented. The level of control required is dependent up on the history of the field. A crop or hayfield must be planned to allow no more than two times the tolerable (sustainable) soil loss level (2T). Fields with no crop history, such as areas converted from woodlands, must be planned to allow no more than tolerable soil loss levels (T). NRCS will make periodic visits to your farm to monitor this part of your plan.

What if I Do Not Have Money to Implement a Planned Conservation Practice?

If you can't implement a planned conservation practice due to limited finances, NRCS will not require you to do so. Instead, NRCS will help you develop alternatives, revise the timetable, document them and help you find needed funding. This is your conservation plan. Except for practices used to control erosion on HEL, there are **no mandatory out-of-pocket expenditures**. Most practices used to control erosion are low cost. Typical practices may include adopting a corn-grass rotation or timely planting of cover crops.

If NRCS Finds a Violation on my Land, Will They Report Me to Other Agencies?

An NRCS conservationist will perform most of the inventory and planning work on farms applying for conservation easements. During the inventory, NRCS will determine if HEL or wetland conversion violations have occurred. Most HEL violations can be easily resolved by implementing the required practices. NRCS will give you one year to implement or install them. Longer term HEL violations will be referred to DOAG, or whomever manages the easement. These are

considered a breach of the terms specified in the conservation agreement. NRCS will not report wetland conversions to other agencies. However, if you desire to remain eligible for most USDA programs, you will have to resolve the wetland conversion.

Will the Land Trust or DOAG Help Me Implement or Revise the Plan?

You should work with the NRCS staff on planning and implementation. You may be contacted by the land trust or DOA during their normal stewardship visits, but land trust and DOA monitors do not have the expertise to help understand, explain or change the plan. NRCS staff will share the plan with these groups, if desired.

How will the Conservation Plan Affect My Ability to Sell My Farm?

You're free to sell the farm but the new owner must comply with the legal restrictions of the Conservation Easement. The new owner should contact NRCS to review and revise the conservation plan; especially if there will be changes to the farm operation. It's mandatory for the new owner to develop and implement a NRCS approved plan to protect cropland from erosion.

Nine Steps to Conservation Planning

Conservation Planning is a dynamic process. The time involved depends on your interest and the size of your operation. The steps include:

Identify Problems and Opportunities –

Early on in the process, the conservation planner will work with you to identify farm problems, concerns, and opportunities. As planning proceeds, other issues may be identified.

Determine Objectives – For the plan to be meaningful, the planner must have a good idea of your farm objectives. What problems and opportunities do you want to address? What land uses do you want to maintain? What are your production and business goals? Legal or program requirements? Your desires for your farm and business? Considerations identified in the process will be factored into the plan.

Inventory Resources – You and the planner will inventory your farm's natural resources. The focus will be on issues already identified and may lead to other issues. The inventory may include field land use and acreage; summary of soils and interpretations;

current farming practices; existing conservation practices; soil erosion levels; potential wetland areas; livestock types, numbers, and sizes; water resource needs and concerns; plant suitability and production concerns; wildlife habitat; and economic and social considerations.

Analyze Resource Data – Depending on the resources inventories, the planner will analyze the data with you. For instance, the planner will take the data gathered from the field and, using a soil loss equation analyze soil loss levels with the current crop rotation and method of planting the field.

Formulate Alternatives – Once the resource inventory and analysis has been completed, the planner will work with you to develop alternatives for your resource concerns. If you can't afford to address a concern, NRCS will provide at least one alternative. Except for HEL crop fields, NRCS will not force you to address all concerns.

Evaluate Alternatives – Each identified alternative will be examined and compared based on factors such as cost, effectiveness, and ease of management. This will provide you with the information necessary to make a sound decision.

Make Decisions – Only you can make the decisions and work out the schedule for your plan. NRCS will help you document those decisions.

Implement the Plan – Only you can implement the plan, but NRCS can help! If you are prevented from implementing according to the original schedule, the plan can be updated and revised to reflect your current situation.

Evaluate the Plan – If NRCS is not already working with you on implementation, they will schedule a farm visit every 2-3 years to help evaluate the plan's effectiveness and the performance of the existing conservation practices.